CHAPTER X

THE VICE PRESIDENCY

Numerous contenders sought to become the Democratic Party nominee for President in 1852. They included James Buchanan, Lewis Cass, Stephen A. Douglas, Franklin Pierce, Thomas Hart Benton, and others. William Rufus King received some mention for the place,[1] but he was a staunch backer of Buchanan, his old senatorial crony. He, however, viewed the approaching 1852 presidential election with unusual interest, for he had good prospects of receiving the Democratic vice presidential nomination. Politicians reasoned that a ticket composed of a northern man for the presidency and a southern man for the vice presidency, on a platform favoring adherence to the Compromise measures, offered the best prospect for success in November.[2] Under the circumstances King had an excellent opportunity to fulfil his vice presidential aspirations, for he was a southern senator of long standing, had long been a moderate, and had favored acquiescence in the Compromise from the beginning. In his letter to Robert G. Scott, already quoted, he had promised, without hesitation, to uphold the Compromise in all its aspects.

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1 Montgomery Advertiser & Gazette, September 11, 1851.

2 Roy Frank Nichols, The Democratic Machine, Columbia University Studies in History, Economics and Public Law, CXI (1924), 30-128; Allan Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, 2 volumes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), II, 3-4.

In July, 1851, King had deplored division in the Democratic Party and had called on northern Democrats to show more sympathy for the South. So long as a portion of the northern Democracy advocated free-soil doctrines and made common cause with the abolitionists, he said, no southern Democrats would be willing to act with them. He blamed the troubles of the country on these professing Democrats in whom the South had once reposed confidence. Apostate Democrats had been responsible for the passage of legislation unjust to the South, so unjust that some Southerners had become excited and had contemplated a disruption of the union. Had northern Democrats not abandoned their principles, abolitionism would still have been confined to a small portion of the Whig Party. He sympathized with Southerners who, "smarting under a sense of injustice and wrong inflicted on them," wished to free themselves from association with those who would unconstitutionally interfere with their dearest rights. Southerners could not unite in council with men who had not only endangered their safety but were also willing to turn their section into a second Santo Domingo by freeing the blacks. He had been a lifelong Democrat and wished that party to remain in power, but he could not consent "to owe the temporary ascendency of the Democratic party to...union with the abolitionists." Better, he said, to let the Democratic banner trail in the dust than to accept the help of the latter. King, nevertheless, agreed to support the party

candidates named by a properly chosen convention. He, with many other Southerners, preferred that a northern man be designated for the office of President, but he was prepared to support the party nominee. Although he had a personal preference for the office, he would support any of the prominent men who had been suggested for it.[3]

King apparently received assurance from moderate Democrats in the North. Late in 1851 he signed an address "to the Democracy of Alabama" informing Alabama Democrats that the cause recently threatening the integrity and unity of the Democratic Party no longer existed. Since the people of the South had chosen to acquiesce in the Compromise measures, it was the duty of every true Democrat, regardless of his personal opinions, to cease opposition to the popular decision. The address proposed a convention to choose delegates to the 1852 National Democratic Convention.[4] Critics of the address asked how King and the other signers could with consistency join in supporting a party which included Senator Salmon Portland Chase, John Van Buren and others of the free-soil hue.[5] King, nevertheless, stood by the old party for the sake of Democratic unity.

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3 King to _____, July 26, 1851, quoted in Montgomery Advertiser & Gazette, September 26, 1851, from New York Herald.

4 Montgomery Advertiser & Gazette, November 25, 1851.

5 Mobile Daily Advertiser, November 25, 1851.

King took part in reorganizing the Democratic Party in Alabama after the 1851 contest between the Southern Rights group and the Unionists. The Selma Reporter noted that he was in Montgomery in November, supposedly "to preside over the organization of the new party, to be called by the old democratic name."[6]

King kept in close touch with James Buchanan during the national pre-convention campaign, informing him of developments in Washington and advising him what steps to take for promoting his presidential aspirations. To the end he exerted his influence to keep southern convention votes lined up for Buchanan and was bitterly disappointed when his old friend failed to secure the presidential nomination.[7] His own ambition to be vice president is not revealed in existing correspondence, but it was doubtless strong.

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6 Quoted in Livingston Sumter County Whig, December 2, 1851.

7 King to Buchanan, January 16, March 6, March 24, May 17, June 12, 1852, James Buchanan Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. (Hereinafter cited as Buchanan Collection.) King was especially hostile to Stephen A. Douglas. Calling Douglas a "little whipster," King said that every vulture who wished to prey on the public carcass and every creature who wanted the reward of public office were moving heaven and earth to secure his nomination. If Douglas were elected, he had no doubt that they would be able to carry out their base project and "to thrust their dirty hands in the Treasury up to the shoulders." He felt Cass would give his aid to Buchanan in order to check the ambitions of Douglas. King to Buchanan, March 24, 1852, Buchanan Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Having served as President pro tempore of the Senate since President Zachary Taylor's death, King had been acting Vice President for almost two years at the time of the Democratic National Convention in June. As such, he had taken little part in Senate debates, but had presided over the body and had acted in the social capacity of Vice President.[8] While presiding over a dinner given Louis Kossuth by Congress in January, 1852, King declared that Americans honored those who were struggling for nationality and liberty and that Americans welcomed Kossuth with open arms.[9] King did not attend the 1852 Democratic Jackson Day Dinner, but he was toasted as a "faithful senator and accomplished gentleman."[10]

Prior to the Baltimore Convention, King's name was mentioned widely as a possible vice presidential nominee and was suggested for the presidency by several Alabama newspapers. The Montgomery Advertiser & Gazette, for example, supported him for the presidency because of his honor, honesty, and integrity, his courtesy to political opponents, and his long service in the Senate as a supporter of the

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8 Washington Daily National Intelligencer, January 2, 1852.

9 Ibid., January 8, 1852.

10 Washington Union, January 8, 1852.

Jeffersonian party.[11] Meeting on January 8, 1852, the Alabama Democratic Convention resolved that for either the presidency or the vice presidency Alabama's preference was "for its own distinguished, long tried, and ever faithful Senator, William R. King."[12] Newspapers in other states suggested King as a proper running mate for Buchanan or some other prominent contender for the presidential nomination.[13]

The National Democratic Convention met on June 1, and, after a deadlock on the more prominent candidates, chose Franklin Pierce as its presidential nominee. Though he was less well known than Cass and Buchanan, he had fewer enemies than they.[14]

A Maine delegate opened nominations for the vice presidency by declaring amidst applause that the North was willing to give the South the vice presidency and that Maine cast its vote for William Rufus King of Alabama. On the first ballot, King received 125 votes, and several other candidates, including William O. Butler, the vice

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11 Montgomery Advertiser & Gazette, September 26, 1851. The Tuscaloosa Observer and Florence Gazette agreed that King would strengthen the Democratic ticket. Quoted in ibid., October 11, 1851.

12 Montgomery Advertiser & Gazette, January 19, 1851.

13 Ibid., March 30, April 20, April 27, 1852.

14 Nichols, Democratic Machine, p. 144.

presidential candidate in 1848, David R. Atchison and Jefferson Davis, received scattered votes. On the second ballot, King received 282 votes out of 293 votes cast and was nominated.[15] King had several advantages over other candidates: his moderation well comported with the Democratic platform favoring acceptance of the Compromise measures; he was the most available Southerner, and he was a friend of Buchanan, whose supporters demanded a reward for throwing their votes to Pierce.[16] No better choice for the vice presidency could have been made by the convention. Because of King's moderation he was trusted by all except the most extreme elements of the party. He had already shown his ability as a presiding officer of the Senate and deserved to be elevated to the post of permanent presiding officer. King's record, one is inclined to suggest, gave him a far better claim to the headship of the ticket than that of Pierce.

King's nomination was generally well received by the press of the country. Probably no greater tribute was paid to him at the time than the following comment of the opposition Washington National Intelligencer:

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15 Washington Daily National Intelligencer, June 7, 1852.

16 Alfred Gilman to James Buchanan, June 6, 1852, Buchanan Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Edward Burke to Franklin Pierce, June 6, 1852, in Franklin Pierce Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

> Of the eminent gentleman...who was selected by the Convention for the Vice Presidency, no one who knows him can say aught personally in his dispraise; still less can we, who have known him from the beginning of his public career. We wonder, indeed, thinking of him as we do, that the convention did not seek relief from its dilemma by selecting one so able, experienced and unexceptionable for the first office instead of for the second.... We should have thought it more accordant with the fitness of things, as well as more politic, to have reversed the positions of the two nominees.[17]

The Washington Union praised King's high talents, his stern integrity, his pure democracy, and his ardent patriotism, and declared that even his bitterest opponents had not ventured to bring an accusation against him.[18] The Pennsylvanian said that no fitter man could have been found for the post within the limits of the republic and pointed out that he was "one of the few remaining polished links, now in public life, between the great statesmen of the past and present generations."[19] The Montgomery Advertiser & Gazette exulted at the nomination of "our own glorious King" and called him "a tower of strength" to the party.[20] The Whig press seems generally to have agreed with the Mobile Advertiser which noted that King was "a prudent and conservative

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17 June 7, 1852.

18 June 10, 1852.

19 Quoted in Washington Daily Union, June 9, 1852.

20 June 9, 1852.

politician," and that his course during the 1850 controversy had been such as to maintain the confidence of all groups within the Democratic Party.[21]

There was dissent against King's nomination, however, from extremist Southern Rights newspapers. For example, the Charleston Mercury declared: "Mr. King, the candidate for the Vice Presidency, needs no comment. In fact, he would not bear much, being formed of that flimsy, tinselly sort of stuff that is intended rather to be admired than handled. He is a good man, but not good for much."[22] Some ridiculed King's fastidious manners by speaking of his "most gracious bows," his handling the "tastiest of canes with the expertest of gloved fingers," and his wearing the "glossiest of boots." These qualifications, they said, were not enough to entitle him to the office he was seeking.[23] The Montgomery Alabama Journal called King "a very respectable and quiet, pleasant old gentleman," but professed to know of no distinguished acts of statesmanship which entitled him to high

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21 June 10, 1852.

22 Quoted in Mobile Daily Advertiser, June 11, 1852.

23 Ibid., June 24, 1852. The story was told of an answer John Randolph of Roanoke was supposed to have given a lady when she asked for his opinion of King. Randolph allegedly said: "Mr. King? Why madam, Mr. King is--is--in fact, Madam, Mr. King wears the handsomest pair of boots in Washington." Ibid.

office.[24] The Aberdeen, Mississippi, Independent charged that the State Rights Democracy had not been recognized by the national convention. King was neither State Rights nor Unionist. He had been neither for nor against the Compromise. He claimed to be a Jeffersonian Democrat but would not admit the right to secede. He said he favored acquiescence in the Compromise but supported a secessionist for Congress in Alabama in 1851. In trying to curry favor with both sides, he had shown that he had "no moral courage, nor the least particle, of a statesman's nerve." "And this wishy-washy, ninny-nanny," it concluded, "is all the State-rights democracy can claim on the ticket! Positively we despise any politician who has no unmistakable political opinions."[25] The attacks on King rankled him, but he wrote a friend that they would hurt only the authors.[26]

Individual leaders throughout the country approved King's nomination. "A purer, a better, or a sounder judging man does not live," wrote James Buchanan.[27] Howell Cobb of Georgia noted that all King's votes on the Compromise bills

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24 June 12, 1852.

25 Quoted in Livingston Sumter County Whig, July 6, 1852.

26 King to Phillip Phillips, June 26, 1852, in Phillip Phillips Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress. (Hereinafter cited as Phillips Collection.)

27 Washington Daily Union, June 18, 1852.

were recorded with those representatives from Georgia who were the friends and defenders of that settlement; he advised Union men, therefore, to support the Democratic ticket.[28] Governor Henry Stuart Foote of Mississippi declared:

> I know this gentleman well; and I take great pleasure in declaring that I do not anywhere know a more upright, high-spirited, and patriotic man. His character in private life is not only unexceptionable, but it is really so marked with all that is excellent, and good, and praiseworthy, that were I called upon to point out such of its particular traits as I should wish...to see either removed or modified, I am sure I should not know how to begin the task of specification.[29]

King spoke little during the election campaign. At the conclusion of a huge Democratic rally in Washington on June 10, however, he declared to the gathered throng that he would "ever sustain the principle of democracy," whether in the ranks or in command. Though others might have been as well received for the presidency as Pierce, he declared, Pierce was the nominee and deserved support.[30] In his letter of acceptance, he expressed similar views, and added that the platform as laid down by the convention met with

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28 Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ed., The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb, Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1911, II, 313.

29 Washington Daily Union, June 18, 1852.

30 Ibid., June 11, 1852.

his "cordial approbation."[31]

Privately, however, King expressed disgust at the convention system of nomination. He felt that conventions were mere unruly mobs and that no hope existed under the system for selecting candidates of ability and ripe experience. Eminent party leaders had to give up the prize to inferior men who could win the votes of delegates. He had preferred Buchanan for the presidency but pledged support to Pierce, who was "high minded and honorable" and was a "safe candidate."[32] As long as the Senate remained in session, King continued to occupy his post at Washington. He declined to resign his seat because it was customary for nominees to continue in offices they already held.[33] King made a major contribution during the campaign in writing numerous letters to Southerners assuring them of Pierce's trustworthiness as a candidate.[34]

As opponents of Pierce and King, the Whigs chose General Winfield Scott for the presidency and William Alexander

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31 King to Democratic Committee, June 22, 1852, quoted in Washington Daily National Intelligencer, June 28, 1852. The chief plank of the platform called for acceptance of the Compromise of 1850 as a final settlement of the slavery controversy.

32 King to Robert Tyler, June 28, 1852, King Collection, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

33 King to Phillip Phillips, June 26, 1852, Phillips Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

34 King to Buchanan, December 13, 1852, Buchanan Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Graham for the vice presidency. Graham, like King, was a native of North Carolina and, according to King, had been chosen partially to offset his own strength in that state. King wrote in June that Scott's nomination had caused great dissatisfaction in Whig ranks and that many were determined to oppose him. Graham, however, was a popular man who would add strength to the ticket. Yet King wrote optimistically: "The skies are bright, and I cannot doubt our success."[35]

Tuberculosis, which was shortly to bring his death, forced King to restrict his activities during the campaign. He declined to attend a public dinner in his old congressional district in North Carolina because of his infirmity. In September he wrote the committee in charge that he had become worn down and expected to spend some time resting.[36] He returned to his home in Dallas County, Alabama, in October, to await the outcome of the election.[37]

The result was an overwhelming victory for the Democratic ticket, but King did not long survive to enjoy the fruits of office. Bad health forced him to decline a dinner in his honor given at Selma in November.[38] Making the journey to Washington because of a sense of duty, he was present

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35 King to Phillips, June 26, 1852, Phillips Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

36 Raleigh Standard, September 8, 1852.

37 Montgomery Advertiser & Gazette, October 5, 1852.

38 Washington Daily Union, November 19, 1852.

at the first session of the Senate on December 6, but he soon presented his resignation as President pro tem of the Senate and sent his resignation from the Senate to the Governor of Alabama.[39] In doing so, he took leave of a body in which he had served with some of the greatest figures in American history for almost thirty years. Since Calhoun, Clay, and Webster had passed on to their reward and Benton had been defeated, King was the last of the old group that had served so long and so ably in the Senate.

King's letters of late 1852 show a mixture of elation and depression, elation because the Democratic Party had won the election and depression because he feared the course Pierce might follow when he came into office. In November he wrote, "I am satisfied that the triumphant success of the Democracy has not only prostrated the Whig Party, but has to a great extent annihilated freesoilism -- so that in the future we shall only have to contend against the insane movements of the abolitionists and that even they will be held in check by the power of sound public opinion in the free States themselves."[40] On the other hand, King was disappointed because of Pierce's failure to consult him

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39 Congressional Globe, XXIV, 1, 89; Henry W. Collier to Thomas Harrington, January 10, 1853, Files of the Alabama Governors, Alabama Department of Archives and History; King to Phillip Phillips, November 17, 1852, Phillips Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

40 King to Phillip Phillips, November 17, 1852, Phillips Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

during the campaign and his failure to consider Buchanan for the post of Secretary of State. King felt that Buchanan was the favorite of the South and that he should be rewarded with the best office available. He wrote Buchanan in December: "However kindly Gen[l] Pierce may speak and write concerning me, it is evident beyond all question that I am not one of those whome he takes into his confidence, for not a single line have I received from him since his nomination." Pierce, King feared, would surround himself with men in whom he, King, could place little confidence; therefore, he proposed to have "as little intercourse with him as possible." The South, said King, had helped to nominate and elect Pierce, hoping that he would protect their constitutional rights. "Let us again be deceived," he declared, "and all the powers on earth will never be able in future to secure the Southern vote for a Northern man with Southern principles."[41]

Pierce, in spite of King's misgivings, wanted the latter's advice. He wrote Buchanan that an interchange of thoughts with King would be "peculiarly pleasant and profitable," but that he feared to entrust important letters to the mails. Buchanan wrote back to Pierce, "He is among the best, purest & most consistent public men I have ever known, & is, also, a sound judging and discreet counsellor. You

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41 King to Buchanan, December 13, 1852, Buchanan Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

might rely with implicit confidence upon his information, especially in regard to the Southern States, which I know are at the present moment tremblingly alive to the importance of your Cabinet selections."[42]

Whether King would have had an influence on the Pierce administration if he had remained in Washington can never be known, for his health forced him to leave the city before Pierce had an opportunity to consult him. In November he began to suffer from a distressing cough.[43] A month later he complained that the cough had worn him to a skeleton and that he much doubted if he would ever recover. But, he concluded, "I am now an old man and in the course of nature must soon go hence, and the places that know me shall know me no more forever."[44]

Thinking that the warmer climate would restore his failing health, King left for Cuba on the U. S. S. Fulton on January 17, 1853, and arrived in Havana on February 6. He had spent several days at Key West while arrangements were

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42 Pierce to Buchanan, December 7, 1852; Buchanan to Pierce, December 11, 1852, both in John Bassett Moore, ed., The Works of James Buchanan, 12 volumes (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1908-1911), VIII, 492-496.

43 King to Phillips, November 17, 1852, Phillips Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

44 King to Buchanan, December 13, 1852, Buchanan Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

being made for his stay in Cuba.[45] By mid-February he had about given up hope of getting well.[46] A few days later, however, after he had obtained some degree of relief in the sugar refinery of a Cuban plantation owner, hope was revived for his recovery.[47] This short-lived optimism soon gave away to reports that he was again worse.[48]

In the meantime, Congress had passed special legislation permitting William Sharkey, Consul in Cuba, to swear King into office as Vice President.[49] On March 24 King took the oath of office on foreign soil, the only such instance in American history. Too feeble to stand without assistance, the old statesman was supported by George Washington Jones, a member of Congress from Tennessee, and Thomas Rodney, a consular official. One person who saw the brief ceremony wrote:

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45 Washington Daily National Intelligencer, January 20, February 7, 12, 1853; Diario de la Marino (Havana), January 26, February 7, 1853.

46 Washington Daily National Intelligencer, February 24, 1853.

47 Ibid., March 1, 1853.

48 Ibid., April 4, 1853.

49 Congressional Globe, 108 volumes (Washington: Globe Office, 1834-1873), XXVI, 787, 1020.

> The ceremony, although simple was very sad and impressive, and will never be forgotten by any who were present. To see an old man, on the very verge of the grave, clothed with honors which he cared not for, and invested with authority which he could never exercise, was truly touching. It was only by persuasion that Mr. King would go through with the ceremony, as he looked on it as an idle form, for he said he was conscious he would not live many weeks.[50]

On March 26, Sharkey wrote, "I regret to say that Mr. King's health does not seem to have been materially benefitted by his visit to this Island. He is very feeble, and there would seem to be little ground for hope for a recovery."[51]

Certain that the end was near, King returned on the Fulton to Mobile April 11, 1853, and to his home near Selma on April 17. On April 18 he died. In reaching his beloved Alabama and his home at Pine Hills, he had accomplished an earnest wish.[52] As the end neared, he requested, "Be still -- make no noise -- let me die quietly."[53]

Two brief quotations will suffice to illustrate the reaction of the country to his death, one from the National

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50 Washington Daily National Intelligencer, April 8, 1853.

51 William Sharkey to William Learned Marcy, in Department of State Consular Dispatches, Havana, March 26, 1853.

52 Washington Daily National Intelligencer, April 12, 20, 1853; Washington Daily Union, April 19, 20, 21, 1853.

53 Washington Daily Union, May 8, 1853.

Intelligencer and one from an unknown writer of Dallas County, Alabama. The Intelligencer said, "Not endowed with shining talents, though of excellent sense, his career furnished a remarkable instance of the eminent and deserved success of probity, fidelity, propriety, a gentlemanly spirit and bearing, and inflexible honor."[54] The unnamed resident of Cahawba wrote:

> As his public life had won for him the admiration of his countrymen of all sections, so his domestic virtues had endeared him to the friends who knew him in the smaller circle of private life. All mourn the statesman and patriot, but we lament the friend and man. His intimate connexion with our political history will secure for him a full measure of fame, but dearer to us are the traditions of kindness which embalm and preserve the memories excluded from history's stately page. Long shall it be before the kind-hearted and noble souled William R. King will be forgotten by Dallas. We need no stately monument to perpetuate the memory of our lamented countryman--his virtues have reared for themselves a more permanent one in our hearts....[55]

King's former colleagues in Congress eulogized him when Congress met in December, 1853. Robert Mercer Taliaferro Hunter of Virginia pointed out that King had trod the difficult paths of politics long and successfully and yet had kept his robes unsoiled by the vile mire which so often polluted those ways. King had earned recognition, not by

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54 April 20, 1853.

55 Washington Daily Union, April 27, 1853.

genius, but by sound judgment, a resolute purpose to pursue the right, and a capacity to gather wisdom from experience. He had been no great orator, yet the force of his character had given him wide influence. He had been gentle and kind in personal relationships, but he had been stern when the public interests demanded it or his personal honor required it.[56] Edward Everett of Massachusetts noted that King had been a member of the Senate longer than any other member and that he had long been the favorite presiding officer of that body. He had, said Everett, distinguished qualifications for the chair, quickness of perception, promptness of decision, urbanity of manner, and familiarity with the complicated rules of Senate proceedings. He possessed "the rare and highly important talent of controlling, with impartiality, the storm of debate, and moderating between mighty spirits, whose ardent conflicts at times seemed to threaten the stability of the Republic."[57] John Middleton Clayton of Delaware said that King had been quiet and unobtrusive in his work, but that he had been active and useful as a Senate member. Although he had seldom commanded

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56 Obituary Addresses on the Occasion of the Death of the Hon. William R. King, of Alabama, Vice-President of the United States: Delivered in the Senate and House of Representatives, and in the Supreme Court of the United States, Eighth and Ninth December, 1853 (Washington: Armstrong, 1854), pp. 6-7.

57 Ibid., pp. 11-12.

the applause of the public for his oratory and his brilliance, he had been a good business member of the body and had originated more useful legislation than some who filled the public eye with greater display. He had performed the duties of presiding officer of the Senate during much of the terms of five vice presidents and had ever been distinguished by the dignity and impartiality in which he presided. He had never indulged party feelings in the chair. "Presiding, as he did, when party spirit raged in torrents of fire," said Clayton, "all just men will admit that he could have been no common man who maintained his high character for justice and impartiality at such a period."[58] Others spoke of King's unobtrusive, gentle, and retiring manner, his modesty and deference to others, and his moderation and tolerance.[59] These speakers failed to call King great, but they gave him credit for honest and faithful performance of duties assigned to him in his public capacities. King would probably have been the first to agree that they had given a correct judgment of his career.

Nobody ever seriously questioned King's honesty either in private affairs or in public affairs. Although spiteful opponents accused him of accepting Texas bonds for voting to give part of Texas to New Mexico in 1850, this attack was an

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58 Ibid., pp. 20-21.

59 Ibid., pp. 36, 48.

outgrowth of the heat of politics and was entirely untrue. On no other occasion, so far as can be determined, was his honesty questioned. A writer of the 1870's described King's appearance and character as follows:

> In appearance, Mr. King was tall and slender. His figure was gracefully erect, and his manners were as courtly as Chesterfield's. He was affable and courteous to the humblest, and was as careful of offending, as he was prompt to repel aggression. He was lavishly hospitable, yet he was scrupulous in fulfilling pecuniary obligations.[60]

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In political life King attracted less attention than some of his contemporaries; nevertheless, he was one of the outstanding men of his generation. Because he spoke less often and at less length than some of his colleagues, many thought that his contribution was small. They failed to realize that King's great contribution was not in the field of speechmaking. Others had greater oratorical ability than he, but probably no elected representative in American history has equalled his ability as a presiding officer of the

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60 Willis Brewer, Alabama: Her History, Resources, War Record, and Public Men. From 1540 to 1872. (Montgomery: Barrett and Brown, 1872), p. 213.

Senate. King was recognized as the foremost expounder of Senate rules and was elected President pro tem on many occasions. Vice Presidents often called on him to preside during their absence from the chair. From the floor, moreover, King reminded less able presiding officers of their duties and sought to maintain decorum in the Senate. Nor was King remiss in fulfilling his other duties. He seldom missed a roll-call unless he was sick or had other good cause and faithfully performed arduous committee assignments. He seldom spoke at length but made useful contributions to debates when he chose to occupy the time of the Senate. A friend of King's aptly compared him to a star of steady magnitude shining in a firmament of flashing comets. Certainly he gave dependable, steady service throughout his career. His moderation and firmness were extremely useful in helping to quiet sectional antagonism growing out of the slavery question. Perhaps this kind of service was more useful than that of some of his more publicized contemporaries.

Throughout his political career, King maintained a firm allegiance to the party of Jefferson. He was a staunch supporter of state rights and a strong opponent of a latitudinarian construction of the constitution. Although he voted in favor of chartering the Second Bank of the United States in 1816 and advocated some degree of protection for manufactures about the same time, he turned against the principle

of protection as early as 1820 and against the Bank of the United States in 1832 after it attacked Andrew Jackson for his veto of the recharter bill. In his later years King maintained that the creation of the Bank had been a violation of the constitution and opposed efforts to secure the creation of any similar institution. He continued to oppose the principle of protection from 1820 to his death. During his entire career, King favored land policies favorable to Alabama and the West generally, including graduation, preemption, reduction of price, and cession of the lands to the states. He supported internal improvements of national importance, but opposed federal appropriations for local internal improvements. Toward the end of his life, however, he became one of the leading promoters of railroad development and advocated the donation of public lands to promote railroad construction.

King's moderation was shown on many occasions. In the 1832 tariff debates, for example, he pointed to the grievances of the South and called on the North for redress. A year later, after the North had refused to grant redress and after South Carolina had attempted nullification, he advised moderation and forbearance on both sides and supported Clay's compromise tariff proposal. He opposed nullification, but refused to vote for the Force Bill which gave President Jackson the power to force South Carolina to obey the tariff laws. In the controversy between Governor John

Gayle and the Jackson administration over Indian removal, he used his influence to calm hard feelings both in Alabama and Washington. When abolition petitions were sent to the Senate, he favored receiving them although he heartily disagreed with their anti-slavery sentiments. He did so because he did not want to deny the constitutional right of petition even to fanatics. In taking such a stand, he disagreed with some of the more ardent defenders of southern rights and subjected himself to attack for showing too much kindness toward the abolitionists. In the 1850 controversy, he tried to act as a moderating influence between extremists on both sides and voted for some features of the plan which were opposed by many Southerners. After the Compromise was adopted, he advised the South to acquiesce in its terms and refused to join in the agitation against it which developed in Alabama. He remained loyal to the Democratic Party and helped to organize it for the 1852 campaign. He was rewarded for his long party services by being chosen the vice presidential nominee of the Democratic Party.

During his early career, King performed his duties capably and gradually rose to party leadership. In the House of Representatives he supported measures to strengthen the military power of the United States, and generally approved the administration's conduct of the War of 1812. At the conclusion of the War of 1812, King joined other young political figures in supporting the nationalistic program

suggested by President James Madison, but he resigned from the House of Representatives before he had an opportunity to exert his full influence on the Madisonian program. After a brief sojourn in Europe, he moved from North Carolina to Alabama in 1818 and was one of the most influential leaders of the conservative forces in the Alabama constitutional convention of 1819. Elected to the United States Senate in 1819, King became a leader in the fight for generous land legislation and a consistent opponent of a high tariff. King was a powerful influence in securing passage of the Land Act of 1820 and relinquishment laws for the benefit of western farmers who had overbought government lands. By joining with others who held similar views, he helped to defeat the Tariff bill of 1820 and to secure concessions favorable to the South in the Tariff of 1824.

A leader of Democratic forces in the Senate during the Jacksonian period, King ably fought against a high tariff, distribution, and the Bank of the United States. Less easily aroused than some Jackson supporters, King was generally ready to defend party policy. His 1832 report from the Committee on Public Lands in opposition to distribution failed to prevent passage of a distribution bill by the Senate in that year, but it was subsequently used as a source book by foes of distribution and protection and thereby performed a valuable service for the friends of cheap public lands and a low tariff. By opposing the principle of

protection in 1832, King was influential in securing concessions favorable to the agricultural interests. He contributed greatly to the settlement of the nullification crisis in 1833 by following a middle course in the conflict between South Carolina and Andrew Jackson and by throwing his support to Henry Clay's Compromise Tariff proposal. King helped to defeat the banking monopoly of the Bank of the United States in 1832 and strongly defended President Jackson when he came under attack by proponents of the Bank for his removal policy. King and Thomas Hart Benton, moreover, led the fight to expunge the resolutions censuring Jackson from the Senate Journal. King defended Van Buren's Independent Treasury plan for handling government monies and helped to secure passage of the measure in 1840.

As a leader of the opposition, King deserves credit for the defeat of much of the Whig program proposed by Henry Clay. As spokesman of the opposition, King was influential in preventing the creation of a new national bank. King's proposal to stop distribution if tariff rates were raised above twenty per cent effectively checked Whig plans for both protection and distribution at the same time. King fought not only the nationalistic measures of the Whigs but also Clay's efforts to restrict the Senate's right to full debate on all issues. Partially successful in his opposition to the Whig program on banking and manufacturing, King was fully successful in protecting the Senate's right to

unlimited debate.

As Minister to France from 1844 to 1846, King contributed greatly to the success of three important measures of the United States: the annexation of Texas, the settlement of the Oregon boundary, and the Mexican War. King convinced the French government that it would be unwise to join England in her plan of intervention and thereby made it possible for the United States to annex Texas without fear of foreign interference. He secured French assurances that France would not intervene against the United States in England's behalf in the Oregon controversy. Finally, he obtained assurance from the French government that it would not act in a manner unfriendly to the United States during the Mexican War.

King performed his last great service for the United States during the crisis of 1850. He was one of the leading advocates of compromise in the Senate. Taking a moderate position himself, he called on both Northerners and Southerners to recede from advanced views and to make concessions in order to save the union. As presiding officer of the Senate after the death of President Zachary Taylor, moreover, King sought to guide members of the Senate into a saner consideration of the problems before them. Hence, King deserves much credit for securing passage of the Compromise measures of 1850. He deserves even more credit for securing the acceptance of these measures by the South.

King admitted that Southerners had just cause to complain about this legislation, but he advised acquiescence and criticized those Southerners who spoke of disunion. By defending the Compromise measures, King made himself unpopular among extremist factions in the South, but he sought to preserve the union rather than to retain popularity among extremist groups. More than any other man in the South, perhaps, King was responsible for winning the section over to the cause of compromise and union.