CHAPTER VI

AN OPPOSITION SENATOR

The Whig Party, led by General William Henry Harrison, stood for governmental policies greatly different from those the Democratic Party had been pursuing and from those advocated by William Rufus King. As March, 1841, approached, therefore, King expressed concern for the future of the country. He expected that the Whigs would take a stand against abolitionism to "gull the South" but predicted that they would call a special session of Congress in order to "rivet" upon the country their favorite measures: repeal of the Independent Treasury Act, creation of a United States Bank, distribution of the proceeds from the sale of public lands, and a high tariff. He also predicted that, despite Whig denunciation of the evils of patronage, "Old Harrison" would be surrounded by a horde of hungry office seekers.[1] Just as King predicted, Harrison called a special session of Congress, but he was dead before it met. John Tyler, Vice President and an advocate of state rights, succeeded to the presidency. The Whigs were able to repeal the Independent Treasury Act in the special session of Congress in 1841, but their attempts to provide for a United States Bank failed because of Tyler's vetoes of bills designed to carry out that object. Finally, as King had expected, Congress adopted

---

1 William R. King to Arthur P. Bagby, February 14, 1841, in Files of the Alabama Governors, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

the policy of distribution and provided for a higher tariff. From 1841 to his retirement from the Senate in 1844, King was one of the leading opponents of the Whig program and often came into conflict with Henry Clay, the chief Whig leader in the Senate.

During a special Senate session held in March, 1841, to approve nominations for the new Whig administration, King had an encounter with Clay which very nearly resulted in tragic consequences. The argument took place over a resolution to dismiss Blair and Rives, printers for the Senate, and Clay's personal attack on the senior editor, Francis Preston Blair. King maintained that Blair and Rives had done their work well and that they were being removed purely for political reasons. Politics, he asserted, should not enter into the question of printing. If a printer fulfilled his contract, the Senate could have no complaint against him. Under the circumstances, cancellation of the contract by the Senate would amount to a violation of the contract on the part of the Senate.[2] In answer to Clay's attack on Blair, King pointed out that Blair had once lived in Kentucky and had been an intimate associate of Clay. For many years, said King, he had been on terms of intimate association with Blair and had found that "for kindness of heart, humanity, and exemplary deportment, he could probably

---

2 Congressional Globe, 108 volumes (Washington: Globe Office, 1834-1873), IX, 236, 247.

compare with the Senator from Kentucky, or any other Senator on this floor by whom he has been assailed." If mere abusive language in his newspaper was to be used as a test for disqualifying Blair as Senate printer, the same test could be applied against the Whig editor of the National Intelligencer. By seeking to annul the old contract, the Whigs were trying "to wreak their vengance on a political foe, and provide for a political friend." How, King asked, could they commit such an act after their cries against proscription only a few weeks before?[3]

Clay came to his feet immediately and in an angry reply charged that King had made a personal attack on him in saying that Blair was his equal. He resented the fact that King had made the comparison when he knew that Clay considered Blair an infamous man. If King chose to make the charge, he called it "false, untrue, and cowardly."[4]

King declined to make a reply in the Senate, but immediately wrote a note challenging Clay to a duel.[5] Both men were bound over and put under bond not to fight in the District of Columbia, but some feared that they would fight

---

3 Congressional Globe, IX, 247-248.

4 Ibid., IX, 248.

5 Ibid.; Jacksonville Republican, April 7, 1841; John C. Calhoun to Thomas Clemson, March 10, 1841, in James Franklin Jameson, ed., Correspondence of John C. Calhoun, Annual Report of the American Historical Association (1899), II, 477. (Hereinafter cited as Jameson, Calhoun Correspondence.)

the duel outside the District after the Senate had adjourned.[6]

Conciliatory steps were taken, however, to prevent the duel from taking place. Friends of Clay first made an attempt to secure a statement from King that he had not meant to insult Clay so that Clay would be able to retract his charges. King, however, refused to make the statement. Clay's friends then sought King's permission for Clay to say that he had heard King had meant no insult and that he had been confirmed in it. Again King refused to accept the terms; he was willing to accept only an unconditional retraction on the floor of the Senate.[7] When other means of settlement failed, Clay made a retraction in the Senate. He expressed regret for the occurrence and pointed out that he had been under attack from Blair for ten years and had felt that King's speech was "a studied, a premeditated, and ... a preconceived design" to make an assault upon him and his character. He considered it a personal offense when King compared him to a man he had called a common libeller. Since the speech had been made, however, he had received satisfactory information that King had neither intended to

---

6 Martin Van Buren to Andrew Jackson, March 12, 1841, in Martin Van Buren Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

7 Francis P. Blair to Andrew Jackson, April 11, 1841, quoted in John Spencer Bassett, ed., Correspondence of Andrew Jackson, 7 volumes (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1926-1935), VI, 103. (Hereinafter cited as Bassett, Jackson Correspondence.)

give personal affront nor to cast the slightest imputation on his character or honor. Since he had been mistaken about King's intent, he now withdrew "every epithet in the least derogatory to him, to his honor, or to his character." After Clay had concluded his retraction, King answered that Clay had been correctly informed about his intentions and that nothing he had said had been meant to be personally offensive to Clay nor had he intended to attack the latter's character or honor.[8] At the end of King's speech, Clay advanced and shook hands with King amidst the approving cheers of the galleries who rejoiced because the two long-time senators had settled their dispute without bloodshed.[9] King received the plaudits of the Democratic press for his defense of Blair and for forcing the haughty Clay to make a public apology.[10]

Shortly after Clay's apology, the Senate adjourned, and King returned briefly to Alabama. He soon returned to Washington, however, to attend a special session of Congress called by the Whig leadership to repeal the Independent Treasury Act and to carry out other Whig measures.[11] In

---

8 Congressional Globe, IX, 257.

9 Washington Daily National Intelligencer, March 16, 17, 1841.

10 Washington Daily Globe, April 5, 1841; Tuscaloosa Flag of the Union, May 5, 1841.

11 Tuscaloosa Flag of the Union, May 5, 1841; Montgomery Alabama Journal, June 2, 1841.

this called session King again proved to be a thorn in the side of the Clay forces. He opposed various parts of the Whig program and resisted Clay's efforts to restrict Senate debates to certain subjects and to limit the time spent in debate. When Clay threatened to secure an abridgement of free discussion in the Senate, King pointed out that freedom of debate had never before been restricted in that body and proposed to resist all attempts to restrain full debate "even unto the death."[12]

In the special session bills were presented to repeal the Independent Treasury Act and to provide for an agency to replace the old Bank of the United States. King spoke only briefly during the debates on these bills, but he showed his attitude clearly by voting against repeal of the Independent Treasury Act and against both the Fiscal Bank bill and the Fiscal Corporation bill, two plans brought forward by the Whigs for the reestablishment of a national bank.[13]

King supported amendments to the Fiscal Bank bill to require publicity of the bank's transactions and to prohibit loans to bank officials or to members of Congress. He pointed out that the constitution prevented members of

---

12 Congressional Globe, X, 45, 204; see also Thomas Hart Benton, Thirty Years' View; or a History of the Working of the American Government for Thirty Years, from 1820 to 1850, 2 volumes (Washington: D. Appleton, 1856), II, 253. (Hereinafter cited as Benton, Thirty Years' View.)

13 Congressional Globe, X, 36, 256, 423.

Congress from receiving emoluments from an office created by them and that acceptance of favors from a corporation they had created would violate the spirit of the clause. He recalled that some members of Congress had received favors from the old Bank which they could not repay in kind but which they repaid in loyal support on the floor of Congress. This time he wanted the doors closed to such indirect vote purchasing.[14] Although King "detested a National Bank," he declined to take part in captious delay during the later stages of debate over the bill.[15] It eventually passed over Democratic opposition but was vetoed by President Tyler because it failed to satisfy his state rights constitutional views. In a fit of anger at the veto, Henry Clay accused the whole Loco-Foco Party of celebrating Tyler's veto on August 16. He pictured King at the White House "standing upright and gracefully, as if he were ready to settle in the most authoritative manner any question of order or of etiquette that might possibly arise between the high assembled parties on that new and unprecedented occasion."[16] King admitted that Clay had made a pretty sketch but said that it lacked truth; he had not been at the White House on the occasion, nor had some of the other Democrats whom Clay had

---

14 Ibid., X, 162, 172.

15 Ibid., X, 204.

16 Ibid., X (Appendix), 344.

mentioned.[17]

The Whigs quickly brought forward a second Fiscal Corporation bill, designed to meet some of the demands Tyler had insisted should be incorporated into the plan. Still opposed to a bank of any kind, King declared that the first bill, "most fortunately for the country," had been vetoed and that the presentation of a second bill was a violation of parliamentary usage which forbade the reintroduction of a measure that had been defeated during a session of Congress. He also castigated the Whig presiding officer who had sent the second bill to a committee from which opposition members had been excluded; to submit a bill to a committee made up entirely of its supporters violated all precedents. The bill, he declared, embraced a subject of great importance, "one more disputed on constitutional grounds, as well as upon grounds of expediency, than any other which ha/d/ ever agitated the country." Such a bill should not be hurried through but should receive full and fair consideration. He moved, therefore, that two new members be added to the committee considering the bill. The motion was withdrawn after King had proved that the committee had been unfairly selected.[18] The bill finally passed over Democratic opposition

---

17 Ibid., X (Appendix), 347.

18 Ibid., X, 378; see also Benton, Thirty Years' View, II, 335.

but was vetoed by Tyler.[19]

Some Whigs complained that the repeal of the Independent Treasury Act and the failure to pass the bank bills left the government without any legal system for handling public monies. King, no doubt with some malice aforethought, reminded them that the situation was one of their own making, for they had repealed the Independent Treasury Act and had failed to present Tyler a constitutional substitute for it. In their own haste to destroy, they had left only an old act of 1789 to control the treasury. This law, he felt, was still as good as it ever was; the country was in no danger simply because no bank law had been passed.[20]

Distribution of the proceeds from the sale of public lands, coupled with the granting of pre-emption rights to settlers, constituted another major item of business before the 1841 special session of Congress. In favoring distribution of the proceeds from public land sales, Henry Clay maintained that the Compromise Tariff Act of 1833 called for the payment of government expenses from the tariff, not from public land revenues. King questioned this contention, declaring that there had been no understanding at the time of the Compromise Act that proceeds from land sales were to be given up as revenue. Never in 1833 had he heard a whisper

---

19 Congressional Globe, X, 423, 450.

20 Ibid., X, 450.

that such an idea had entered into consideration.[21] When the Whigs insisted on rushing a bill through the Senate with little debate at the same time the House was considering the Bankrupt bill, King charged them with making a bargain with supporters of the Bankrupt bill to secure passage of both bills. Never before had he seen legislation so disgraced with "bargain and sale." He declared that the Distribution bill under consideration was defective both in general principles and specific details. It would operate unequally on such states as Alabama and Missouri and needed to be amended to give "equity and equal justice." Unless the bill were changed, the portion to be distributed to the old states was so small as to be despised, and the portion to be given to the new states would be so inadequate as to excite indignation.[22] He proposed further that the cost of obtaining public lands be deducted from the amount made available for distribution. His amendment, however, was defeated.[23]

Finally, King introduced an amendment to test whether the Compromise of 1833 was to be kept in good faith if distribution were adopted. His amendment provided that distribution would be discontinued whenever the duties on any article under the tariff law were raised to exceed twenty per cent. The Whigs, he pointed out, had said they had no

---

21 Ibid., X, 313-314.

22 Ibid., X, 347-348.

23 Ibid., X, 355-356.

intention of disturbing the tariff; let them vote for the amendment and prove their good faith. King favored such a commitment because he did not want to see "a recurrence of those troubles which had well nigh distracted if not dissolved the Union." It was better to place all doubts at rest rather than to leave any questions which might produce trouble later. Lacking restraint, the majority might try to go beyond the constitution. Certainly, they had shown tendencies to do so in the recent past.[24] King's amendment was defeated,[25] but it was later presented in a milder form by John MacPherson Berrien, Whig senator from Georgia. King maintained that the form he had suggested was more clear-cut in its wording, for it proposed to stop distribution if any rates of duty were pushed beyond twenty per cent whereas Berrien's amendment was not clear on that point.[26] Nevertheless, the Berrien amendment was adopted, and the Distribution Act passed shortly thereafter.[27] King voted against the act and warned the Whigs that they would be "obliged to come forward and acknowledge to the country that they had been wrong" in adopting distribution. They would find it necessary to retrace themselves or they would be driven from

---

24 Ibid., X, 358-359.

25 Ibid., X, 359.

26 Ibid., X, 369.

27 Ibid., X, 370, 388.

office by the vote of the people.[28] The following year the Whigs were forced to give up distribution because tariff rates had to be raised to increase government revenue and because President Tyler refused to accept a plan of permanent distribution along with a high tariff.[29]

A tariff bill was passed at the special session raising rates to twenty per cent on certain items, including such luxuries as watches, jewelry, and expensive laces. King maintained that lower existing rates would produce more revenue than the proposed new ones and that the high duties on luxuries were being proposed for purely political reasons. Eventually, however, he voted for the bill because he felt the government required more revenue to operate after the Distribution Act had been passed.[30]

In the regular session of Congress which met in December, 1841, distribution and the tariff continued to be important issues. During debates over a bill to repeal distribution and to pledge revenue being spent for that purpose to national defense, King declared that he had always considered distribution a "hasty, inconsiderate, and improvident measure." He welcomed a proposal which would "take back the proceeds of one of the sources of general revenue from an obvious misapplication" and return it to the treasury to be

---

28 Ibid., X, 438.

29 Ibid., XI, 867, 963.

30 Ibid., X, 391, 438.

spent for national defense.[31]

Later King presented resolutions of the Alabama legislature rejecting that state's share of distribution funds.[32] Debate ensued when Henry Clay introduced a resolution calling on the Committee on Public Lands to inquire into the expediency of distributing money refused by any state among the other states.[33] At the time King introduced the Alabama resolutions, he had declared that his state regarded the Distribution Act as a "gross and palpable violation of the Constitution."[34] He now denied that Congress had the right to give away Alabama's share of the public land revenues. Clay himself had said in earlier debates that proceeds from the public lands belonged to the states. If Alabama chose to return its share to the general government, what right had other states to take it? The money, when relinquished by a state, should go to the general fund of the treasury so that taxes could be reduced. The people of Alabama had sensibly seen that distribution was creating a necessity for taxation and that indirect taxation, which would be resorted to, would throw an unequal burden on the southern states.

---

31 Ibid., XI, 42-43. National defense had become an important issue because of trouble between the United States and Great Britain. See below, p. 199.

32 Ibid., XI, 152.

33 Ibid., XI, 213.

34 Ibid., XI, 152.

They had a right to tax reduction if they refused their public land funds. In answer to those who said that the distribution of land revenues did not involve giving away funds derived from taxation, King pointed out that the public lands had been acquired by purchase and that this had required tax money. Distribution, therefore, was a direct distribution of money used in purchasing the lands, and an indirect distribution of taxes required to replace public land revenue drained away under the act. "Nobody mistakes the main object of the whole measure--" he declared, "to create a necessity for laying on high taxes." No man should vote for the Clay resolution unless he favored the real object of the distribution scheme, high tariffs for the protection of the manufacturing interests.[35] The subject was sent to committee, but no action was taken by the committee.[36]

King again attacked the distribution policy during debate over a bill to provide for the issue of $5,000,000 in treasury notes. He admitted that an issue of notes was needed to meet the requirements of the government, but he opposed the Whig position that "tariffs must be resorted to; and yet the distribution must go on." He and his Democratic colleagues were willing "to resort to taxation of any amount" to supply the needs for an economical administration

---

35 Ibid., XI (Appendix), 141, 146.

36 Ibid., XI, 146.

of the government, but they were told that distribution must be continued.[37]

In the tariff debates, which occupied much of the attention of Congress in its 1841-1842 session, King favored the adoption of such rates as would produce revenue necessary for the government. Although he opposed the principle of protection, he was willing to vote for reasonable discrimination if a common sense plan could be worked out.[38] As he saw them, however, neither the temporary bill nor the permanent bill brought forward by the majority constituted "common sense" plans. He opposed the temporary tariff designed to extend existing duties because he felt it was a violation of a solemn promise made at the previous session that the pledges of the Compromise Act of 1833 would not be disturbed. Made at the time the Distribution bill was under consideration, this promise had induced some to vote for that bill who would otherwise have opposed it. Tampering with the tariff would violate a pledge made to them.[39] During debates on the main tariff bill, King declared that he was not opposed to "incidental protection" and that he did not wish to be accused of desiring to break down and destroy domestic industry. Instead, he merely asked that

---

37 Ibid., XI (Appendix), 332-333.

38 Ibid., XI, 370; (Appendix), 332.

39 Ibid., XI, 638.

the tariff bear equally on all parts of the country.[40] In its final form, however, the bill provided for higher rates and distribution. King, therefore, cast his vote against it. After it had been passed by both houses of Congress, it was vetoed by President Tyler because he opposed the distribution feature.[41] Tyler, however, accepted a substitute bill calling for higher tariff rates but not including the distribution feature.[42] Thus the President, supported by King and other Democrats, was able to win a half-way victory over the Whigs by blocking one of their pet measures. But Tyler's defiance subjected him to attacks from that group similar to attacks made on him the previous year after he had prevented the creation of a national bank by vetoing the two bank bills.[43]

King was one of Tyler's defenders while he was under attack. At the time of the first bank veto, for example, he defended Tyler against the charge that he was a "weak, vacillating, and faithless man."[44] In July, 1842, King came to his defense again when a New York Whig Committee presented resolutions in the Senate condemning the President and

---

40 Ibid., XI, 808.

41 Ibid., XI, 808-809, 894-896.

42 Ibid., XI, 963.

43 Ibid., XI, 894-896; Washington Daily National Intelligencer, September 15, 1841.

44 Congressional Globe, X (Appendix), 331.

expressing confidence in the Whig majority. King opposed printing of the resolutions because the whole purpose of the petitioners was "to countenance and encourage party measures" and to exhort those whom it favored to continue their attacks on Tyler. And to suppress it would not be to suppress legitimate public opinion.[45]

During the Tyler administration, King defended the interests of southern slaveowners on a number of occasions. When a northern senator moved that the word "slaves" be stricken from a resolution before the Senate, he denounced the "miserable, contemptible, and wretched fanatics" in the country who were trying to invade the rights of the South and expressed regret that slavery had not been explicitly recognized in the constitution.[46] In 1844, when a Massachusetts senator offered a resolution of his state legislature calling for the abolition of slave representation by constitutional amendment, King declared that the adoption of such a proposition would cause an immediate dissolution of the union. The adoption of such a resolution by a state legislature, he said, showed "a feeling of hostility" toward southern institutions which, if persisted in, was designed "to sap the very foundations of the government itself." He saw too many cases of this type tending to create "unkind

---

45 Washington Daily National Intelligencer, July 13, 1842.

46 Congressional Globe, XI, 115.

feelings" between the sections. He hoped, therefore, that such agitation would cease so that people of the different sections would not be further alienated. Any incendiary movement, whether it emanated from a state legislature or from individual fanatics, deserved the condemnation and execration of "every man devoted to the permanent existence of the government"; the national government should be looked upon as a guardian of the interests of all the sections.[47]

King resented not only the interference of northern fanatics in southern affairs but also the interference of the British government in the slave trade. He spoke out against British activities after some of the slaves from the ship Creole had been freed at Nassau by British authorities and after slaves had escaped from the Formosa under similar circumstances. If Britain continued to commit such outrages, said King, "nothing could prevent collision" between her and the United States.[48] He also objected to the British claim of the right of visitation aboard American ships for the purpose of detecting smugglers of slaves. It was high time that the British should be forced to obey the laws of nations and to respect American property and the American flag.[49] King welcomed the Webster-Ashburton

---

47 Ibid., XIII, 175-176.

48 Ibid., X, 47.

49 Ibid., X, 47; XII, 335.

Treaty, negotiated in 1842 between Daniel Webster and Lord Ashburton, because it settled outstanding differences between the United States and Britain, especially the much disputed right of visitation. As both nations agreed in the treaty to keep a naval force of eighty guns on the coast of Africa to enforce laws respecting the slave trade, the British no longer found it necessary to continue the "intolerable" practice of visitation.[50]

By 1844 the Texas question was becoming an important topic of discussion; it, too, was closely related to the slavery issue. Although King went abroad before the Texas debates had advanced very far, his letters, written both before and after he went abroad, show that he was a staunch defender of annexation. He wrote in May, 1844, that no candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination could win the prize unless he favored annexation and that he favored James Buchanan for the place because he was a supporter of annexation.[51] In Europe, as Minister to France, he worked unceasingly to prevent European interference from wrecking American plans to annex Texas.[52] He congratulated President Tyler in September for his successful negotiation of an

---

50 Ibid., XII, 335.

51 King to David Hubbard, May 14, 1844, in George W. Campbell Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress. (Hereinafter cited as Campbell Papers.)

52 See Chapter 7.

annexation treaty and predicted that Tyler's patriotism and statesmanship would be recognized when party prejudice had subsided.[53]

In the early 1840's American eyes were turned not only toward Texas but also toward the Oregon country which had been jointly occupied by the United States and Great Britain for many years. King expressed himself from time to time in favor of the American claim to Oregon. On one occasion, he said the best course for the United States would be to take possession of the country and hold it until all arguments were settled about its ownership. The country "must be ours," said King; for no foreign power could long hold possession of any portion of the North American continent.[54] On another occasion, he declared that the United States owed it to its citizens who wanted to go to the area "to protect and encourage them." To exercise the right of joint occupancy was no more than the British were doing themselves.[55] In France, King later took an active part in bringing about the annexation of Oregon by working to prevent French intervention during the negotiations between the United States

---

53 King to John Tyler, September 13, 1844, quoted in Tyler, The Letters and Times of the Tylers, 2 volumes (Richmond: Whittet and Shepperson, 1885), II, 328.

54 Congressional Globe, XII, 105.

55 Ibid., XIII (Appendix), 103.

and Great Britain.[56]

While Congress debated the tariff, distribution, and other subjects, while questions of foreign policy were being settled, and while the Whigs made their attacks on President Tyler, various hopefuls looked toward the 1844 campaign. Among the persons who had ambitions for the Democratic vice presidential nomination was William R. King. As for part of the Alabama Democratic press, in fact, he had been a candidate for 1844 almost as soon as the 1840 election was over. A correspondent of the Tuscaloosa Flag of the Union, for example, suggested Buchanan and King as the presidential and vice presidential nominees as early as August, 1842; and the Cahawba Democrat put the same two names in nomination in the fall of the same year.[57] Promoters of King pointed to his long service in the Democratic ranks, his general popularity, especially in the South, and his residence in the banner southern state for the Democratic Party.[58]

King's candidacy for the vice presidency faced a serious obstacle in the South because John C. Calhoun was a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination. Since it was generally agreed that the Democratic ticket would have to be balanced with a Northerner and a Southerner, the

---

56 See Chapter 7.

57 Tuscaloosa Flag of the Union, August 31, 1842; ibid., October 5, 1842, quoting Cahawba Democrat.

58 Tuscaloosa Flag of the Union, May 10, 1843.

Calhoun press in Alabama at an early date sought to set King aside so that Calhoun would have a better chance for the first office. The Montgomery Advertiser declared in May, 1843:

> We like Col. King -- we respect him as a private citizen and as a statesman, but if he is to be used in Alabama to defeat the nomination of Mr. Calhoun for the Presidency, we now declare to the Flag and its friends, that the friends of Mr. Calhoun, if destined to fall, will go down with their colors nailed to the mast. The Vice Presidency we view as insignificant, when compared with the great interests which are involved in the issue of the Presidency.[59]

If King's friends continued to urge his candidacy for the vice presidency, such a course would "prostrate his well earned reputation." The Greensboro Beacon charged that supporters of King were associating his name with that of Martin Van Buren for purely selfish reasons. They were only interested in promoting King's cause. Supporters of Calhoun, it pointed out, would be glad to support King if they found Calhoun was out of the running for the presidency, but they could not support him so long as Calhoun had a chance for the highest office.[60] Such, in general, was the tone of the argument used by the Calhoun press so long as Calhoun remained a candidate for the presidency. Calhoun recognized that King stood in his way, for he wrote in 1842

---

59 Quoted in Mobile Register, May 23, 1843.

60 October 7, 1843.

that King preferred Buchanan to himself.[61]

While the Calhoun press attacked King's candidacy, the Mobile Register, the Tuscaloosa Flag of the Union and other newspapers stood up manfully for his cause. The Register called opposition to King, Alabama's old and tried representative, a political curiosity brought about by the selfish desires of some to elevate Calhoun at all costs.[62] Early in 1843 the Flag of the Union put Van Buren and King at the masthead and threw open its columns to their supporters. In November it pointed out that Calhoun was unlikely to win the presidency and that King as vice president would give the cotton growing interests some representation in the executive department. As he was well known throughout the country, he would bring strength to the ticket.[63] Meetings throughout Alabama in 1843 endorsed King's candidacy, and the Alabama Democrats in their 1843 convention named Van Buren and King as their presidential and vice

---

61 Jameson, Calhoun Correspondence, II, 512. King attended a Charleston, South Carolina, meeting in March, 1843, for the purpose of choosing a candidate (Calhoun) for 1844, but he refused to take a major part in the proceedings. Washington Daily Globe, March 18, 1843, quoting Charleston Mercury.

62 December 16, 1842.

63 April 19, 1843, November 29, 1843.

presidential candidates.[64] Thus in Alabama the forces opposing King failed in their purpose of pushing him aside and elevating Calhoun. The Calhoun press charged that their favorite had been unfairly treated. The "Old Hunkers" had had their way over the "Chivalry." A correspondent of the Montgomery Alabama Journal declared that Calhoun had been laid on the shelf and that the gallant and chivalric leaders had submitted as quietly as their dictating friends on the "right wing" could have asked.[65]

In addition to his strength in Alabama, King received support in other states. He never developed the strength in Pennsylvania, however, that he had built up in 1840. The Tuscaloosa Democratic Gazette reported in April, 1844, that he was popular in New Hampshire, New York, and Maine and that demonstrations had been made in his favor in Virginia, North Carolina, Illinois, and Missouri. The Raleigh Standard in his native North Carolina pointed to his "vigilant, active, intelligent and firm" service as a senator and to his distinguished work as presiding officer of the

---

64 Tuscaloosa Flag of the Union, May 3, November 15, 22, 1843; Tuscaloosa Democratic Gazette, December 21, 1843. Efforts to substitute Calhoun for Van Buren and James K. Polk and Amos Kendall for King were defeated at the Alabama Convention. Democratic Gazette, December 28, 1843.

65 Montgomery Alabama Journal, December 13, 1843. The "Chivalry" was a name applied to the Calhoun faction, and the "Hunkers" were moderate Democrats.

Senate.[66] The Newport, New Hampshire, Argus and Spectator preferred King so that in the event the President should die the country would not be "ashamed at, nor disgraced by" his elevation to the office. It called him a Democrat of the old "war school," who had been true "in all times and seasons, in adversity as well as prosperity."[67]

About the beginning of 1844 the question of the vice presidency began to attract considerable attention at the national level. At least two other aspirants proved to be strong candidates along with King: James Knox Polk and Richard Mentor Johnson. A correspondent, writing over the name "Amicus" in the Washington Globe of January 8, 1844, called attention to the need for more consideration of the vice presidential question. As the presidential candidate had already been decided, he said, the vice presidential nomination was the most important business that would come before the 1844 convention. Two principles should govern the selection of the vice presidential nominee: he should be a Jackson man, and he should be a Southerner. There were two leading Democrats from the South, however, and the choice would have to be made between them. "Amicus" suggested criteria, therefore, which could be used in judging whether Polk or King should be the choice of the convention.

---

66 Quoted in Tuscaloosa Flag of the Union, April 5, 1843.

67 Quoted in Tuscaloosa Flag of the Union, June 7, 1843.

Both men, he pointed out, were North Carolinians; both had presided over their respective houses of Congress; both had good character and ability; both had been supporters of Jackson. But "Amicus" felt that King had claims which entitled him to first consideration: he was an older and a more experienced man; he had served much longer in Congress than Polk and had served in both houses; his service in the Senate had enabled him to learn more about the "science and practice" of government; he came from a state that had expressed a preference for Van Buren and had consistently voted the Democratic ticket. In the contest ahead the Democracy had "no compliments to spare" for an unfortunate public man who could not bring his own state into the Democratic fold.[68]

A friend of Polk answered "Amicus" over the signature "A Tennessee Democrat." King, said the "Tennessee Democrat," had served longer in Congress, but he had left little impress on the records of the country. King could never live down the fact that he had voted for the Bank of the United States in 1816 even though he had since changed his views. Polk, on the other hand, had been one of the most loved and the feared of Jackson's supporters, especially when he was Speaker of the House. Polk was sound on all issues. Polk's presence on the ticket would help to carry the

---

68 Washington Daily Globe, January 8, 1844.

doubtful state of Tennessee whereas King came from a state that was already assured to the Democrats. Polk, moreover, had equal or greater strength than King in other states.[69]

"Amicus" rejoined that "Tennessee Democrat" had made a mistake in attacking King's record and character and declared that at least a hundred men had claims equal to those of Polk for preference.[70] "Tennessee Democrat" replied that Polk had served the party well and had attracted more attention than King, whose activities had been confined to the "closet and council chambers." Tennessee was a prize to be won, and Polk was the man best suited to accomplish that purpose.[71] "Amicus" closed the correspondence by declaring that he had accomplished his purpose in arousing interest in the contest. King, he said, would do nothing to secure his own advancement. Though at the vortex of the political whirl, he never talked about the subject and was willing to let the people decide.[72]

King himself was taking a keen interest in political developments. In December, 1843, he wrote that Van Buren was decidedly the Democratic favorite for President and that he was probably destined to be the party nominee. Calhoun's prospects, if he had ever had any, had been ended along with

---

69 Ibid., January 15, 1844.

70 Ibid., January 19, 1844.

71 Ibid., January 22, 1844.

72 Ibid., February 14, 1844.

those of Buchanan. As regards himself, there was "good reason to believe" that he would be placed on the ticket as the vice presidential nominee, but he was willing to let other arrangements be made for the good of the cause.[73] About the same time Andrew Jackson was writing Van Buren that although King had been nominated by Alabama and North Carolina he would be dropped and the preference given to Polk. Polk, said Jackson, was the strongest and truest man who could be found in the South.[74] Francis P. Blair wrote Jackson from Washington in December that the choice would probably be confined to Polk and King if Van Buren continued to be the leading presidential candidate.[75] Still feeling that Van Buren would be the presidential nominee, King wrote friends in Alabama in January, 1844, urging that supporters of Calhoun throw their influence behind Van Buren. Any division in Democratic ranks, he warned, might result in defeat. Defeat would rivet upon the country "the curse of Whig domination" and "all those odious and unconstitutional measures for which Clay and Company ha/d/ been struggling for many years."[76] In February Jackson wrote that Polk and

---

73 King to Catharine Ellis, December 12, 1843, King Collection.

74 Jackson to Van Buren, November 29, 1843, quoted in Bassett, Jackson Correspondence, VI, 246.

75 Blair to Jackson, December 16, 1843, quoted in ibid., VI, 250.

76 King to A. G. Mabry, January 13, 1844, in possession of Laurence Tipton, Selma, Alabama.

King would be the strongest candidates for vice president, but by March King had about given up hope of being made the party nominee. A movement in the Pennsylvania Convention in favor of Richard M. Johnson had given the Kentucky leader a decided advantage at the Baltimore Convention. The party, therefore, would probably have "the old Candidates, and the old issues."[77]

Shortly thereafter, however, an event occurred that made King's predictions unlikely, for late in April there appeared in print Martin Van Buren's now famous letter in which he opposed the annexation of Texas. This letter made him unacceptable to many Southerners and made it improbable that he would obtain a two-thirds majority in the May convention. Van Buren's loss of support caused both King and Buchanan to revive their hopes that one or both might be chosen for the presidency or vice presidency. Writing from New York on May 10, after he had been chosen Minister to France, King told Buchanan that he felt Van Buren would be dropped, probably with his own consent. Although Van Buren might have strength in New York, he would lose in the South and West. King had warned the New York leaders that Van Buren could probably carry only Alabama in the South. Under the circumstances, he hoped Buchanan would not object to

---

77 Jackson to Martin Van Buren, February 7, 1844, quoted in Bassett, Jackson Correspondence, VI, 258-259; King to Catharine Ellis, March 15, 1844, King Collection.

having his name brought forward for the presidency and that he would allow the delegates at Baltimore to judge for themselves whether he was suitable for the nomination.[78] Four days later, he wrote Buchanan that if Van Buren persisted in running for the presidency he would bring upon the party a "shameful defeat." If he released his delegates, however, Buchanan's nomination would be "rendered certain" because none of the other candidates were as acceptable as he.[79]

On the same day, King wrote to David Hubbard, a delegate from Alabama to the Baltimore Convention, expressing doubt that Van Buren would be able to win the election after his letter opposing annexation. Very many in the country, he said, feeling that the annexation question was of "more importance to the prosperity & safety of our country, than all others put together," would refuse to support Van Buren. Even if Van Buren withdrew, the convention would have to choose between numerous contenders, including President Tyler who had apparently decided to take the field. Tyler could not win against the regularly chosen candidates, but might receive votes that would have an effect on the election results. As a possible candidate to replace Van Buren, King pointed to the qualifications of Buchanan, who favored immediate annexation and would make an "able & safe

---

78 King to Buchanan, May 10, 1844, Buchanan Collection.

79 King to Buchanan, May 14, 1844, Buchanan Collection.

President." Buchanan, he felt, would be the strongest available candidate because he could carry Pennsylvania. King advised party unity because it alone could save the country from Whig rule.[80]

In the Hubbard letter, King revealed that his hopes of becoming the vice presidential nominee had revived. He wrote Hubbard that if Buchanan were made the presidential candidate, he would be gratified to be his running mate, "not so much from any desire for office, as from I think a well founded belief, that it would aid the cause in the South; particularly in No. Carolina, now the most doubtfull of the Southern States." His absence from the country, he felt, should not be used against him since no person worthy of high office should ever disgrace himself by taking the field as a stump orator anyway.[81]

Neither Buchanan's nor King's hopes were gratified by the convention; for, after a deadlock produced by Van Buren's failure to win a two-thirds majority, James K. Polk, King's old opponent for the vice presidency, was given the presidential nomination. Since Polk was a southern man and political bargains called for a northern man for the vice presidency, King's name was never brought before the

---

80 King to David Hubbard, May 14, 1844, Campbell Collection.

81 Ibid.

convention. Instead, George Mifflin Dallas of Pennsylvania was chosen as the Democratic vice presidential nominee.[82] The Whigs chose Henry Clay and Theodore Frelinghuysen to oppose the Democratic candidates.

Before the Democratic convention met King had left the country on his mission to France. In order to accept the post he had given up the Senate seat which he had held so long and which he valued so highly. He did so at the request of a President elected by the Whig Party even though he had refused a similar appointment offered him by Van Buren. His misgivings upon leaving the Senate are revealed in his letter of resignation. King wrote Alabama Governor Benjamin Fitzpatrick:

> In relinquishing the situation I held, and accepting of the highly responsible office to which I have been appointed, I yielded to the opinion and advice of friends on whom I rely, and not from any desire of office on my part. They were induced to believe that I could at this particular period more effectually subserve the great interests of our country, and especially those of my honored State, by accepting this office, than by remaining in the Senate.... But, I am free to say that it was with this hope alone that I consented to abandon a more honorable station -- one every way congenial to my feelings -- and for a season to place myself far distant from my home, my country and friends.[83]

---

82 Tuscaloosa Democratic Gazette, June 10, 1844.

83 King to Fitzpatrick, April 11, 1844, quoted in Tuscaloosa Democratic Gazette, May 1, 1844.

After King left the United States, he continued to take an interest in the presidential campaign. Before he heard that the tide had turned in favor of Polk and Dallas, he wrote Buchanan that they were bad selections for the ticket; Dallas had brought no strength to the ticket, nor did either of the men have the weight and influence throughout the country needed for winning an election. If Buchanan had been the nominee, Clay would not have been elected. As it was, the question was doubtful.[84] Later he welcomed news that Polk and Dallas had united the country and, with the help of the Texas question, were carrying all before them. He was especially glad, for he would have looked upon the election of Clay "as a death blow" to American prosperity, if not "to the Government itself."[85] When he received news that Polk and Dallas had carried New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, and probably the election, he expressed gratification that the country had been saved from the "dictatorial rule of Harry of the West."[86]

In January, 1845, King expressed fear for the coming administration. Seeds of strife, he wrote Buchanan, had

---

84 King to Buchanan, November 14, 1844, Buchanan Collection.

85 King to John C. Calhoun, [November, 1844], quoted in Jameson, Calhoun Correspondence, II, 988.

86 King to John C. Calhoun, November 29, 1844, quoted in Chauncey Samuel Boucher and Robert Preston Brooks, Correspondence Addressed to John C. Calhoun, Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1929, p. 265.

already been sown in the Democratic Party. Calhoun would be seeking to control the party, and Benton, Cass, and others would be seeking to exert their influence also. Only if Polk took the helm of state in his own hands, regardless of cliques or sections, would he be able to succeed. If he wavered, his administration would fail, and the divided party would go down with him. King advised Buchanan to accept the post of Secretary of State in a well-chosen cabinet as his acceptance would be a means of restoring harmony in the party. King called on Buchanan to use his influence to secure revision of the Tariff of 1842 so as to put an end to strife over the tariff issue. Said King:

> Were the Tariff question arranged upon liberal principles; and old J. Q. and his abolition brethren in H__L; we should hear no more of a dissolution of our Union; which has been so often threatened by Fanatics, & fools, that it begins to be seriously believed, even by well informed persons in Europe, that the Republic cannot last.[87]

After the Polk administration had been organized and had proved to be working well, King expressed satisfaction at Polk's determination to know no clique or parties within the Democratic ranks. But firmness was still needed to keep the same course, for various leaders would look out mostly for their own interests. Outside the Cabinet, Calhoun would give only lukewarm support to the administration, and Van

---

87 King to Buchanan, January 28, 1845, Buchanan Collection.

Buren was dissatisfied with the appointments that had been given to his group. Benton, Cass and Woodbury, he felt, would also be looking out for themselves, and Walker would be working to secure promotion of his relative Dallas to the presidency. All in all, he found much room for intrigue and dissension within the administration.[88]

Before his appointment as Minister to France, King had been a leader of the opposition against Henry Clay's Whig program. He had opposed repeal of the Independent Treasury Act, reestablishment of a national bank, tariff increases, and distribution. He had fought to prevent the Clay machine from restricting the minority in debate and had defended President Tyler after he came under attack for his state rights views. Certainly, then, King had performed his work well as opposition senator. Well did he deserve mention as a potential Democratic vice presidential nominee and appointment to the Court of France by Tyler.

---

88 King to Buchanan, April 30, 1845, Buchanan Collection.