

1-1-2016

Through the Eyes of the Enemy: Why Henry Clay Lost the Presidential Election of 1844 through the Lens of The Daily Argus of Portland, Maine

Laura Ellyn Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal>



Part of the [Public History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, Laura E.. "Through the Eyes of the Enemy: Why Henry Clay Lost the Presidential Election of 1844 through the Lens of The Daily Argus of Portland, Maine." *Maine History* 50, 1 (2016): 58-78.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol50/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE ENEMY: WHY HENRY CLAY LOST THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 1844 THROUGH THE LENS OF *THE* *DAILY ARGUS* OF PORTLAND, MAINE.

BY LAURA ELLYN SMITH

The presidential election of 1844 was a critical turning point in the antebellum era. At stake was the controversial issue of Texas annexation, supported by the pro-expansionist Democrat James K. Polk and questioned by Whig Henry Clay. While historians generally accept the significance of the Texas issue, there is a lack of consensus over the importance of the anti-slavery Liberty Party in determining Clay's narrow loss. Additionally, there is an absence of detailed research on Maine as a Democratic state within traditionally Whig New England. The Daily Argus, as a Democratic newspaper that represented Portland—the most populous part of Maine—provides insight into the expansionist fervor that swept across the state and was embraced by Democrats nationwide. The newspaper vividly explains Clay's defeat through his continuous vacillation over Texas annexation throughout his campaign. The persistently vicious attacks on Clay reveal numerous explanations for his unpopularity in Maine. Simultaneously, The Daily Argus refutes the importance of the Liberty Party in Maine and, instead, emphasizes Texas annexation as the key issue that defeated Clay. Laura Ellyn Smith is currently a teaching assistant and doctoral student at the University of Mississippi, Arch Dalrymple III Department of History. She completed her MA in U.S. History and Politics at University College London, where she was awarded the Americas Excellence Award. She graduated with First Class Honors for her BA in American Studies with a Year Abroad from the University of Leicester. This article was written following her BA dissertation research conducted during her year abroad at the University of Southern Maine. She continues to follow her research interests in antebellum and Civil War-era America.

The presidential election of 1844 was a significant turning point in the approach to the American Civil War. The question of the territorial expansion of the United States, specifically referred to as the Texas question, was hotly contested as the slavery controversy re-emerged with a vengeance. Significantly, this election produced one of the closest results in American presidential electoral history. It was also one of the greatest reversals of electoral fortunes, as Henry Clay appeared unbeatable in the spring of 1844.

Despite Clay's long and controversial political history, it was unsurprising that as the leader of the Whig Party and a prominent statesman, he gained his party's nomination. Although Clay had already run unsuccessfully for the office of president in the notorious election of 1824 and again in the election of 1832, he still remained a towering political force.¹ The Whigs believed Clay's political career, which included his vital role in achieving the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and pacifying the Nullification Crisis of 1833, made him a strong candidate.² Clay had an extensive political record, as opposed to the low-profile Democrat James K. Polk, and the faith Whigs had "in the appeal of Clay . . . was well placed."³ This was demonstrated by the fact that the election of 1844 was extremely close, with victory being determined by the thirty-six Electoral College votes from New York.⁴ The support Democrats received from new immigrant voters, especially in New York, was certainly a factor in Clay's loss.⁵

Throughout the presidential election of 1844, *The Daily Argus* was the central newspaper publication in Portland, Maine. Originally called *The Eastern Argus*, the newspaper had begun circulation in September 1803 and by 1835, it was printed daily.⁶ During 1844, its editors were Charles Holden and Ira Berry.⁷ Maine and New Hampshire were "Democratic bastions in Whiggish New England," and *The Daily Argus* was a staunchly pro-Democrat newspaper.⁸ However, from this distinct regional vantage point, *The Daily Argus* is an important source in providing a vivid understanding of why Clay lost this crucial election, which determined America's westward expansion. Contemporary newspapers commonly reprinted articles from different publications across the country. *The Daily Argus* was no exception, and this enabled it to reflect national political sentiment, thereby enhancing its value as a primary source. *The Daily Argus* exemplified the tactics Democrats used in attacking Clay and supporting dark-horse Democrat candidate Polk. As a source, *The Daily Argus* provides a unique perspective on the election in New England, which in general was not a Democrat stronghold.

Although differing in opinions and temperament, Clay of Kentucky and Polk of Tennessee nevertheless did share some similarities.⁹ Both were Western men and more importantly, they were slaveholders who had stated that slavery was a necessary evil, even though neither had any intention of ending the peculiar institution.¹⁰ Historiographically, the importance of the existence of a third party, the antislavery Liberty Party with its presidential candidate James G. Birney, has been stressed as a significant factor in Clay's defeat. However, when examining the election, and its results from Maine, this argument appears flawed due to the overwhelming influence of the Texas debate. *The Daily Argus* is a prime example of a New England newspaper that portrays Texas as critical to the election. Clay's conflicted response to Texas and his subsequent loss of Maine provide insight into his defeat.

In contrast to the pro-expansionist Democrats, who attracted new immigrant voters, the Whigs simply retained past voters.¹¹ The Democrats' success in 1844 was in part reliant on the religious and ethnic tensions that, due to the Whigs' perceived connection with nativism and anti-Catholicism, drove immigrant and Catholic voters to the Democrats.¹² Clay's alienation of the Catholic immigrant population hindered his chances of winning Maine and the numerically important state of New York. Catholic voters also disliked Clay's running-mate Theodore Frelinghuysen, whose nomination some Whigs later blamed for their loss.¹³ Additionally the belief by some of the immorality of Clay's character, the possible voter fraud that occurred, and crucially, the fumbling by the Whigs of the Texas issue, were also national factors whose significance is demonstrated in *The Daily Argus*.¹⁴

Due to the interest piqued by the Texas issue, the turnout rate in 1844 was almost the same as the election of 1840, an election that is renowned for the public interest it inspired.¹⁵ However in 1844, the Whigs lost eight more states in comparison to 1840.¹⁶ Historians differ over the significance of the tariff as a factor in the election. *The Daily Argus* often briefly referred to Clay's position on the tariff and thereby suggested its existence as an issue. Nonetheless, the debate over Texas is emotively described in much greater detail. Therefore *The Daily Argus* provides evidence that Texas was pivotal to Clay's loss.

The Daily Argus graphically illustrates the critical significance of the issue of Texas annexation to the outcome of the election. The overwhelming majority of historiography supports the thesis that Texas was the decisive issue. President Tyler had pushed Texas to the forefront of political debate with his expansionist zeal.¹⁷ Polk was elected on a pro-

expansionist platform and managed to avoid discussing the slavery controversy, whereas Clay seemed unable to discuss Texas without discussing slavery. He therefore could not clearly state that he either categorically opposed or was in favor of annexation.

While Northern Whigs wanted Clay to oppose annexation, Southern Whigs were adamant that Clay support expansion. As a renowned compromiser and negotiator, Clay was forced to use his skills in an attempt to unite the extremely fragmented and regionalized Whig Party. Cotton Whigs in the South supported slavery, whereas Conscience Whigs in the North, who were particularly prevalent in Massachusetts, sided with abolitionists.¹⁸

Unfortunately, the highly sectional debate over Texas annexation, and by extension slavery, forced Clay to attempt to support both sides in an effort to alienate neither. This lack of decisiveness caused both sides to mistrust him and vitally weakened his electoral support. This article will first explore the fatal errors in Clay's reaction to the issue of Texas annexation, as interpreted and responded to by *The Daily Argus*. The importance of the Texas issue will finally be made evident through *The Daily Argus* as the preeminent factor explaining Clay's electoral loss in Maine.

Clay's Mishandling of the Keystone of the Election—Texas

The centrality of the issue of Texas annexation was Clay's undoing. Firstly, Clay did not fully appreciate the increasing importance voters placed upon a candidate's opinion on Texas annexation. In this sense, Clay was attempting to run a race in the past, by focusing on issues such as the tariff and his beloved American System, rather than adjusting his platform to incorporate the current political context.¹⁹

Secondly, Clay's approach to the issue of Texas was completely mishandled. In attempting to avoid controversy, he tried to appease the free Northern states and the slave-holding South through confusing and contradictory statements concerning his position on the issue. This was in contrast to Polk's clear pro-expansionist stance, illustrated in his campaign slogans "Re-Annexation of Texas and the Re-Occupation of Oregon," and "Fifty-four forty or fight."²⁰ *The Daily Argus* fully endorsed Polk's pro-expansionist stance, while simultaneously mocking Clay's dithering statements. Texas annexation and slavery were intertwined but neither candidate wanted to reignite the slavery controversy during the campaign.

Both party conventions took place in Baltimore, the Whigs on May 1 and the Democrats on May 27.²¹ Clay was elected unanimously, with the Whigs largely ignoring his position on Texas.²² He was expected to campaign on the American System; protective tariffs, internal improvements, resurrection of a sole federal bank, and renewed economic growth.²³ Texas became the issue that re-united the Democrats against the traditionally anti-expansionist Whigs and extinguished Martin Van Buren's chance of nomination at the convention. Arguments over economic policy had splintered the Democrats. Van Buren was a hard money candidate and yet with the economy improving, the pro-banking Democrats and Southern Democrats such as John C. Calhoun came together to destroy Van Buren's aspirations.²⁴ Polk therefore became the Democratic candidate who, in order to gain the support of party members such as Van Buren, promised on June 12 to become a one-term president.²⁵ For the entirety of the campaign, Polk embodied Texas annexation.

The Daily Argus was quick to observe that Texas annexation had re-united the Democrats while causing a schism in the Whig Party. They scorned Clay's belief that annexation would produce war with Mexico and the Southern Whigs' fear that Texas would become unwelcome competition in the crucial cotton and sugar markets or "rivals in Texas."²⁶ Slavery therefore was not the only reason why some Whigs opposed Texas annexation. Clay found it impossible to display a neutral opinion on Texas that would mollify both Northerners and Southerners.

On April 17, 1844, Clay wrote his "Raleigh Letter" in which he strenuously and definitively opposed Texas annexation.²⁷ He argued against those harboring aims of "territorial aggrandizement."²⁸ This can be interpreted as an attempt by Clay to disparage the pro-expansionist sentiment that Polk personified. Tactically he tried to frighten voters with his opinion that "Annexation and war with Mexico are identical" and that other countries would come to Mexico's aid.²⁹ In contrast to his 1812 War Hawking, Clay stated that "I regard all wars as great calamities."³⁰ He listed "the debts, and obligations, and encumbrances, and wars" the U.S. would become responsible for.³¹ Specifically he raised the negative financial consequences of war, which would hinder his long-term desire for internal improvements.

Clay summarized by stating his belief that "at this time" annexation was a "measure compromising the national character...inexpedient in the present financial condition . . . and not called for by any general expression of public opinion."³² Furthermore, the annexation of Texas

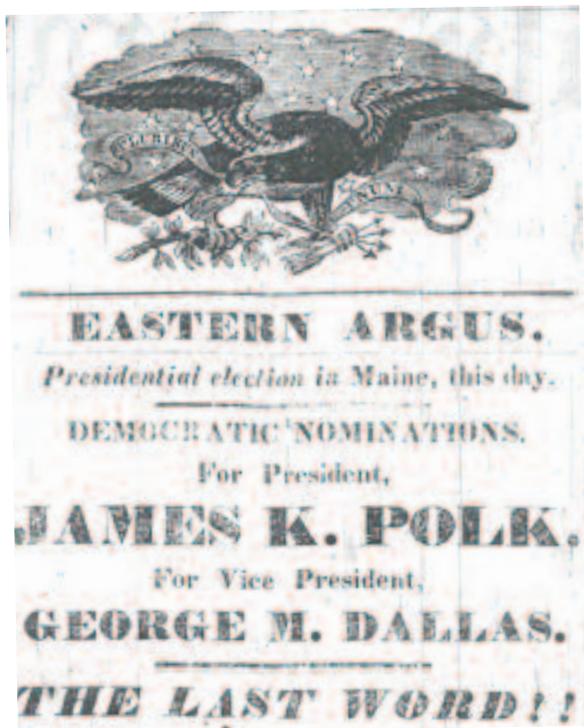


Image depicting the enthusiasm in Maine for voting for James K. Polk. *The Daily Argus*, Monday, November 11, 1844.

could bring to fruition his greatest nightmare: it would “sow the seeds of a dissolution of the Union.”³³ The balance of power between North and South, which he had worked so hard to maintain, would be upset.³⁴ Clay rightly regarded pro-expansionists as ignoring this possibility.

On Tuesday July 9, *The Daily Argus* dismissed Clay’s practical argument that Texas could be divided into five states, with only two being suitable for slavery.³⁵ The editor also mocked Clay’s subjective phrase “fair, honorable, and constitutional,” which Clay used to describe what he thought would be the necessary conditions for Texas annexation.³⁶ The election of 1844 can be seen as Clay’s rude awakening as to how increasingly isolated his opinions were from those of the electorate. The pro-expansionist stance of *The Daily Argus* reflected a nationalist sentiment, of which Clay was largely unaware.

In contrast to *The Daily Argus*, the Whig newspaper the *Alabama*



A political cartoon published in the *Argus* two months before the election mocking the belief that Henry Clay could still win New England despite his old age. *The Daily Argus*, Monday, September 16, 1844.

Monitor wrote to Clay under the impression that his views on Texas had been “grossly misrepresented” in order to gain the Northern abolitionist vote.³⁷ This was a reflection of how Clay’s “Raleigh Letter” had damaged his popularity in the South and in an attempt to rectify this, he wrote two “Alabama Letters” from his Ashland estate. Published on July 1, the first “Alabama Letter” defended the position expressed in his “Raleigh Letter” as timely considering the many states that had “almost unanimously, declared against annexation.”³⁸ Clay referred to the theory that he pandered to abolitionist support as “perfectly absurd.”³⁹ He stated, “No man in the U. States has been half as much amused by them [abolitionists] as I have been.”⁴⁰ Southern Democrats could nevertheless claim Clay possessed abolitionist sentiments by reminding fellow slaveholders that he had not reflected their sectional interests as evidenced in the Missouri Compromise.

The Daily Argus was among Democratic newspapers across the country in suggesting that Clay was pandering to the “Anti-Slavery votes given to Gen. Harrison.”⁴¹ The newspaper emphasized how Clay and “his cunning whigs” were insisting “that *their success alone will prevent the annexation* of Texas and the extension of slavery!”⁴² This statement highlights the concern among Maine readers that although expansion was desirable, it had consequences for the slavery debate.

As *The Daily Argus* proclaimed that Liberty Party candidate Birney

would not be elected; voting for him would effectively be a “vote given for Polk, annexation, and Slavery.”⁴³ Whigs attempted to convince Southerners that annexation would encourage the extinction of slavery as the original Southern states would be unable to compete. *The Daily Argus* mockingly responded that, “to sustain Slavery, they *must* vote for Clay.”⁴⁴ Clay was described as Janus faced, with one side to be seen by the North and the other by the South.⁴⁵ Neither accepted Clay’s attempt to bridge the sectional divide.

Clay was largely at fault for producing this impression of vacillation. In his first “Alabama Letter,” for example, he wrote that, “I could have no objection to the annexation of Texas” while simultaneously claiming that the “paramount object of [his] . . . public life” was preservation of the Union.⁴⁶ These two statements contradicted his fundamental belief that annexation threatened the Union. It reflects Clay’s realization that his anti-annexation stance was damaging his popularity in the South. As a true politician, he attempted to avoid the question and pass the blame.

Clay finished this relatively short letter by referring to “Mr. Tyler’s abominable treaty” and describing Texas annexation as a “bubble blown up by Mr. Tyler in the most exceptionable manner, for sinister purposes.”⁴⁷ Clearly, Clay was unaware of how his varying responses to the Texas issue were injuring him. His first “Alabama Letter,” published in the South and intended to appeal to Southerners, was widely rejected in that region, likely because Clay knew his letters would be published nationally and therefore he could not appear too pro-expansionist for fear of alienating the North.

Clay’s second “Alabama Letter” was disparaged by Democratic newspapers, among them *The Daily Argus*, as “explaining his first.”⁴⁸ *The Daily Argus* portrayed it as a paradox: now Clay was “not only not opposed to annexation, but *actually in favor of it*.”⁴⁹ He began this much longer letter by explaining that his views had been “misconceived, if not misrepresented” in the South by Democrats portraying him as a vacillating politician.⁵⁰ As in his first letter, he expressed his disapproval of President Tyler’s actions relating to Texas, in particular his eagerness to obtain Texas without involving Mexico.⁵¹ Clay also reiterated the sentiment from his first letter, of a “considerable and respectable portion of the confederacy” opposing annexation, meaning states rather than the general population.⁵² Clay attempted to demonstrate consistency by using the phrase “still believe” and repeating that “at this time” annexation would produce war and endanger “the integrity of the Union.”⁵³ However, he contradicted himself again by stating that with reference to an-

nexation, he would be “glad to see it.”⁵⁴ This further undermined his attempt to appear consistent toward the issue of annexation.

The Daily Argus depicted Clay as a self-contradicting politician attempting to portray himself as supporting annexation. This inconsistency delighted Clay’s enemies.⁵⁵ Clay claimed he would support annexation if it came “without dishonor—without war, with the common consent of the Union, and upon just and fair terms,” the practical achievement of which was impossible, as he probably knew.⁵⁶ Further evidence of his indecisiveness can be seen in his dismissive statement that he did not think it right to announce his policy “in advance.”⁵⁷ This reflects Clay’s final retreat from a coherent Texas policy; Polk, by contrast, successfully evaded detailing how annexation would be achieved.

In his effort to avoid controversy, Clay rarely even mentioned slavery, despite his fundamental belief that slavery and Texas were intertwined. However, in his second “Alabama Letter,” reprinted in *The Daily Argus*, Clay reiterated the importance of keeping the question of Texas and slavery separate.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Clay wrote that he believed slavery was “destined to become extinct, at some distant day...[by the] inevitable laws of population.”⁵⁹ As he did with the Texas issue, he hoped to portray an opinion on slavery that alienated neither the North nor the South. This was impossible given the intensity of the debate, which in contrast, Polk successfully avoided.

Clay’s two “Alabama Letters” likely contributed to his loss of the election. The Southern letters exemplify Clay’s mismanagement of the key national issue of the campaign, which ultimately led to his defeat. *The Daily Argus* declared that “Clay whiggery” was “dead in the East.”⁶⁰ The more Clay wrote, the more support he lost. As a Democratic newspaper, *The Daily Argus* was naturally dismissive of Clay’s candidacy, but Clay’s vacillating tactics provided the grist for these Democratic onslaughts.

The Response to Clay’s Vacillation

Simultaneously, the Democrats, or “Locofocos” as the Whigs derogatorily called them, were being attacked for their vagueness on how they would achieve Texas annexation.⁶¹ An article from Kentucky, reprinted in jest by *The Daily Argus*, encouraged Whigs to “Force them to speak out, . . . and if they do not promptly answer, throttle them and stop their clamor.”⁶² This proved to be an impossible task for the Whigs. Indeed, it was Clay who received the majority of national political at-

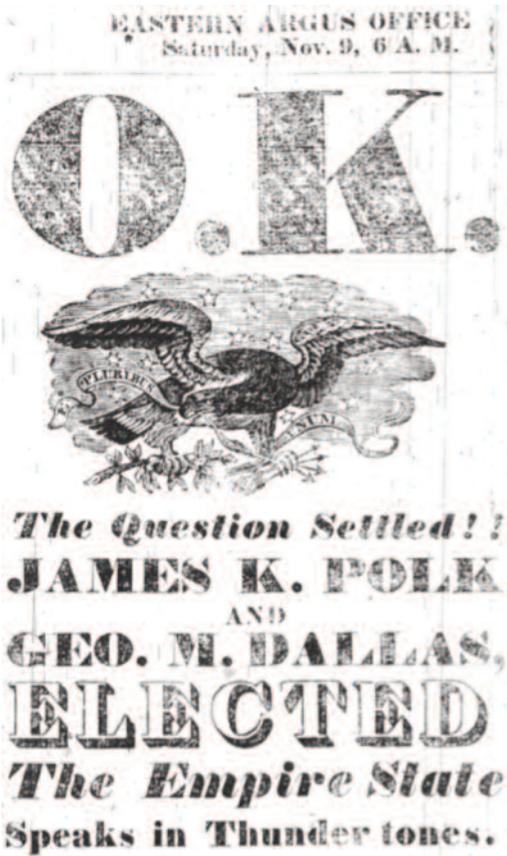


Image cheering James K. Polk's narrow victory of the election of 1844 due to winning New York's thirty-six Electoral College votes. *The Daily Argus*, Saturday, November 9, 1844.

tacks, particularly on the question of Texas. Distrust of Clay was even put into poetic form:

He wires in and wires out,
And leaves the people still in doubt,
Whether the snake that made the track,
Was going South, or coming back.⁶³

As part of their on-going attacks on Clay, *The Daily Argus* wrote a regular column entitled "The Two Clays."⁶⁴ To deter abolitionists in the North from voting for Clay, *The Daily Argus* derogatorily described him as an abolitionist.⁶⁵ The mere mention of the possibility of freed blacks remaining in America would have provoked anxiety among the majority of Northern whites, who feared that emancipation would produce disastrous economic and social consequences.

Interest in Clay's opinion on slavery peaked when his well-intentioned cousin, Cassius M. Clay, wrote a letter that was published initially on August 13 in the *New York Tribune* and reprinted with commentary in *The Daily Argus* on September 19.⁶⁶ The letter described Clay as possessing "feelings [which] are with the cause" of abolition.⁶⁷ The core issue of the election, the letter stated, was a competition between "Polk, slavery, and Texas" and "Clay, Union, and liberty."⁶⁸ The inclusion of the word liberty was extremely damaging, even though it misrepresented Clay's beliefs as a slaveholder.⁶⁹

Once again, Clay was forced to convince voters that the views he expressed were consistent with what he believed. Preservation of the Union was Clay's stated priority, and this was suggestive of an anti-annexation stance, which he could not explicitly express as it would be political suicide in the South. Clay attempted to correct his cousin by initially writing to the *Lexington Observer and Kentucky Reporter* to state that his cousin's letter had been written without his knowledge.⁷⁰ His cousin, he insisted, had "entirely misconceived" his feelings toward slavery.⁷¹ Despite his role in the Missouri Compromise, he declared that Congress had "no power or authority over the Institution of Slavery."⁷² Nor did the states alone have power over slavery.⁷³ Finally, Clay argued that Congress had no jurisdiction over slavery in the District of Columbia.⁷⁴

Clay firmly believed in the Whigs' potential to harmonize "all parts of the Union."⁷⁵ *The Daily Argus* described the letter as an attempt to "save his *character* in the South," and Clay's enemies once again rejoiced in this latest misjudgment.⁷⁶ Cassius Clay's letter was just as harmful to his prospects as were the "Alabama Letters." Clay was clearly concerned that his cousin's portrayal of him as an abolitionist had damaged his chances in the slaveholding states. He described to his cousin the "delicacy" of his position, as he was well aware of how "every word" would be "tortured and perverted".⁷⁷

After attempting to court the Southern vote, he was doubtful that "any considerable number of the Liberty men can be induced to support me."⁷⁸ In the North, Clay exasperatingly recognized that he was "represented as an *ultra supporter of the institution of slavery*."⁷⁹ Yet in the South, he was believed to be an Abolitionist. In frustration he stressed, "I am neither the one nor the other."⁸⁰ This apparently neutral position was no longer tenable in the increasingly sectional climate. It seemed whatever Clay wrote his words were, indeed, twisted.

The Daily Argus described this letter as evidence that Clay had been using his cousin in an attempt to gain abolitionist votes.⁸¹ This, the

newspaper argued, confirmed that his “feeling in the South” had inspired the “Alabama Letters.”⁸² By the beginning of October, *The Daily Argus* was claiming that “if Mr. Clay’s doom were not already sealed, this would do it.”⁸³ Unfortunately for Clay, they were correct. The Whigs’ mismanagement of the key intertwined issues of Texas and slavery proved to be the death knell of Clay’s presidential prospects.

Clay realized too late that he had written too much and in a letter to the Washington D.C. pro-Whig newspaper, the *National Intelligencer*, he vowed not to write any more concerning current affairs.⁸⁴ This was a tenable position for Clay, but in his letter he again stated his opposition to annexation, in apparent defiance to his “Alabama Letters.”⁸⁵ Clay remained misunderstood and voters remained suspicious of him, as the commentary in *The Daily Argus* and other Democratic newspapers made clear.

Some voters incorrectly assumed he had simply given up; a sentiment expressed in an article in *The Daily Argus* entitled “Backing Out.”⁸⁶ The editor described him as having “written, and spoken himself nearly to death”: and mocked the fact that “*mum* is now his motto.”⁸⁷ The fact that Texas would be the decisive issue of the election was “antithetical to everything Clay sought to achieve,” and perhaps from this perspective, Clay was unable to fully resolve the apparent inconsistencies that plagued his campaign.⁸⁸

Conceivably if Clay had understood earlier in the campaign the enthusiasm for Texas annexation, he would have accepted it and tried to develop a more consistent approach. Instead, he grounded his campaign in the traditional platform of his American System, which had not attracted voters in two previous presidential campaigns. As *The Daily Argus* demonstrated, his American System was ineffective as a campaign issue in 1844.

The Final Nail in the Coffin: Clay’s Loss of Maine

As Clay’s questionable position on Texas weakened his appeal in the South, it became increasingly imperative that he captured key Northern states. The significance of Maine is demonstrated through its support of the Democrats, as opposed to neighboring states in New England who continued the tradition of supporting the Whigs. *The Daily Argus*, which rarely mentions the Liberty Party, provides evidence indicating how the importance of the Liberty Party has been overemphasized in explaining Clay’s defeat.

The majority of Liberty Party members were religious former Whigs who deemed Clay to be immoral.⁸⁹ Throughout the election the Liberty Party was especially vicious toward Clay and the Whigs, particularly regarding Clay's blundering response to his position on the issue of annexation.⁹⁰ Birney created a pamphlet detailing Clay's involvement in slavery entitled *Headlands in the Life of Henry Clay*.⁹¹ The Whigs responded to the Liberty Party's attacks in kind, specifically accusing Birney of sympathizing with Catholicism, as one of his sons went to a Catholic school.⁹² This accusation did nothing to rebut the belief that Whigs were nativists.

In the results of the election of 1844, the Liberty Party, compared to previous elections, actually lost votes in numerous states in the East.⁹³ Therefore, it was issues such as the Texas question that were significant in determining the outcome of the election, as *The Daily Argus* demonstrated. After the exciting presidential election of 1840, the phrase "As Maine Goes, So Goes the Nation" was born, and this is certainly an accurate description of the results of the election of 1844.⁹⁴ The pro-Whig *Barre Gazette* in Massachusetts was already lamenting by early October that "such a man" as Clay "shall be sacrificed by fools."⁹⁵ *The Daily Argus*, by contrast, continued attacking his character and specifically Clay's past connection to dueling.

The Daily Argus' editor insisted that "CLAY IS STILL A DUELIST".⁹⁶ Clay responded by mentioning previous letters in which he opposed dueling and pointed to his voting record against it, but he also argued that there were matters of greater significance to discuss than dueling.⁹⁷ Questioned as to whether he would agree to a duel, he stated, "I cannot reconcile it to my sense of propriety to make a declaration one way or the other."⁹⁸ This contradictory and non-committal response likely encouraged further speculation about Clay's character and trustworthiness. These character attacks intensified as the campaign closed.

Conversely, *The Daily Argus* described Polk as "an anti-duelist on Christian principles."⁹⁹ The Democrats circulated a description of Clay's abuse of the Ten Commandments, and portrayed him as lacking religion.¹⁰⁰ They also depicted Clay as aristocratic compared to Polk, or "Young Hickory," as he was called in reference to Andrew Jackson, whose letters in support of Polk were often reprinted. In this manner, Democrats cast Polk as a champion of the common man. Many Irish immigrants in Maine supported the Democrats in response to the Whigs association with nativism and anti-Catholicism.¹⁰¹



This image from the *Argus* shows the importance of the Texas issue in the election of 1844. This issue was neglected greatly by Whigs such as Henry Clay. *The Daily Argus*, Tuesday, September 10, 1844.

Maine was one of three northern states in which the Whigs did not massively overrun the Democrats after the issue of Texas had become central.¹⁰² Texas became the pivotal issue of the campaign in Maine. Interestingly, during 1843 the Maine congressional delegation, Whigs and Democrats alike, opposed President Tyler's treaty for annexation.¹⁰³ However, by 1844 throughout New England and indeed Maine, Whigs were decisively opposed to annexation, whereas Democrats on the whole supported it.¹⁰⁴

As a Democratic newspaper, *The Daily Argus* was strongly expansionist and enjoyed Clay's fumbling over the issue.¹⁰⁵ Democratic newspapers seized upon Clay's espousing different policies towards Texas annexation in the North and in the South.¹⁰⁶ Maine was not known as a strong supporter of abolition, as the shipping industry and cotton mills were dependent upon the produce of the slave-owning South.¹⁰⁷ In fact, during 1844, the Portland Anti-Slavery Society had great difficulty find-



Political cartoons were created by the media derogatorily depict Whigs as coons. *Hudson River Chronicle*, 22nd October 1844, Early American Newspapers Series 1, 1690-1876, Vol. 8, Issue 2, B.L.

ing either a church or public place that would allow them to hold their meetings.¹⁰⁸ The city passed a resolution refusing the society's use of public facilities for meetings, stating that speakers "have been known to use the language the most vile and abusive of our best men and our best institutions."¹⁰⁹

The Maine Liberty Party, founded in 1841, gained only 5.7% of the state vote.¹¹⁰ The party's success in Maine, although limited, cut into the Whig constituency, in part because the Liberty Party supported prohibition as well as abolition.¹¹¹ Clay's reputation for drinking, frequently depicted in *The Daily Argus*, certainly did not endear him to Liberty Party voters or even moralistic Whigs.¹¹² Although most historians argue that Clay's mishandling of the Texas issue was the primary cause for his losing the 1844 election, Lex Renda downplays the significance of Texas and argues that Clay and the Whigs were successful in the North portraying their opposition to annexation.¹¹³

However, *The Daily Argus* suggests that at least in Maine Clay's Texas policy was in fact crucial. *The Daily Argus* was the central newspaper in the most populous part of the state and like most newspapers of the day it was the most important medium for spreading political news. The editor's stance influenced voter behavior by adopting a popular writing style that made it difficult to differentiate between fact and opinion.¹¹⁴ *The Daily Argus* targeted Clay's indecisiveness, persuading even those opposed to annexation to mistrust him. Renda's comment that "Texas was in some ways an abstraction" is valid only in the sense that Democrats succeeded in avoiding discussion of how annexation would be achieved.¹¹⁵

Moreover, Renda's thesis, that economic prosperity vindicated the

Whig tariff of 1842, does not consider the various forms the national campaign took in different states.¹¹⁶ For *The Daily Argus*, the economy was a subordinate issue, and the Whig Tariff was openly scorned. Even though Whigs insisted they were responsible for the nation's economic recovery, Maine voters failed to support them.¹¹⁷ *The Daily Argus* demonstrates the amount of defamation that occurred during the campaign. Ridicule aimed at Clay and the Whigs or emboldened warnings were frequently published in the paper:

That Same Old Coon!
He is a Hartford Convention,
Black Cockade, Blue light,
Bank, High Tariff, National Republican,
Federal WHIG.
WATCH HIM!!¹¹⁸

Although both Democrats and Whigs participated in this defamation, *The Daily Argus* was particularly scathing, accusing Whigs of desperately "lying Outright," with "Forgery to sustain it."¹¹⁹ Whether these accusations were accurate is less significant than the fact that they were displayed prominently in the central newspaper in Portland. The Whigs lost 12,270 votes in Maine between the election of 1840 and the election of 1844, allowing Democrats to win the state in the latter year.¹²⁰

Conclusion

In the months preceding the presidential election of 1844, *The Daily Argus* vividly portrayed the critical issues that caused Clay's defeat. Clearly voters were caught up in the pro-expansionist fervor. Clay did not realize the importance of the Texas issue, and it was impossible for him to express himself on the subject of annexation in a manner that could appease both Northerners and Southerners without appearing indecisive. As disparaging comments in *The Daily Argus* show, Clay simply did not appreciate what was important to Maine voters; nor could he communicate with them effectively, despite his renown as an orator.

Clay remained ignorant of the fact that with the improving economy, the tariff was no longer an effective issue. Texas, and not the tariff, was the nation's priority. Overconfident, he campaigned on his American System, and in this third and final presidential campaign, he failed to capture voters' imaginations with these policies. Due to the schis-

matic sectional composition of the Whig party, the issue of Texas became the dilemma Clay could not overcome. Polk already had an advantage in the South, through his clear pro-expansionist stance, whereas *The Daily Argus* shows that Clay was unable to overcome the simultaneous attacks on his character and the references to his contradictory statements on Texas. The Whigs not only failed to respond successfully to Democratic tactics, but they also failed to replicate them: Polk was elected on a pro-expansionist platform without clearly explaining how he would accomplish annexation.

The Whigs underestimated the importance of the immigrant vote in Maine and elsewhere. Their connection to nativism and the choice of Protestant evangelist Theodore Frelinghuysen as Clay's running mate was ill advised. Nonetheless, it was Clay's miscalculation on the Texas issue that ensured his defeat. Renda argues that Texas was not as significant as most historians state, given the limited success of the Liberty Party in the North.¹²¹ However, the significance of the Texas issue went beyond its impact on sectional issues and the importance of the Liberty Party's ability to draw off Whig supporters. The true explanation for Clay's defeat lies in the Whig Party's faulty decision making on the Texas issue. Voters across the country lost their trust in Clay due to his contradictory responses to this pivotal issue. These contradictions were recorded and exploited throughout the campaign in *The Daily Argus* and other Democratic newspapers, and the success of this tactic was exemplified by the Democratic victory in the election of 1844.

NOTES

1. Scott Farris, *Almost President: The Men Who Lost The Race But Changed The Nation* (Guilford, C.T.: Lyons Press, 2012), p. 20.
2. John Q. Adams to Polk: 1825-1849, *The Presidents*, Vol. 1 (Craig Haffner and Donna E. Lusitana, US, 2005), The History Channel.
3. Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 201.
4. David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American* (New York: Random House, 2011), p. 392.
5. Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991), p. 664.
6. Joseph Griffin, *History of the Press of Maine* (Brunswick, M.E.: Press of J. Griffin, 1874), p. 51.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

8. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, p. 368.
9. *The Presidents*.
10. John Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk* (New York: Times Books, 2003), p. 96.
11. Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006), p. 574.
12. Remini, *Henry Clay*, p. 664.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 664.
14. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, p. 275.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 332.
16. Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate: Webster, Clay, and Calhoun* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 366.
17. *The Presidents*.
18. Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1983), p. 44.
19. Remini, *Henry Clay*, p. 634.
20. Archie P. McDonald, *Texas: A Compact History* (Texas: State House Press, 2007), p. 84; Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), p. 58.
21. Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, pp. 78-79.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
24. Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, p. 546 and pp. 570—571.
25. Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, pp. 92-93.
26. *The Daily Argus*, Wednesday 3rd July 1844, From: The Portland Public Library, (M.E.), Microfilm.
27. McGill University: “Henry Clay Raleigh Letter,” HIST 301, 2003, McGill University, 10 August 2013 <www.arts.mcgill.ca/history/faculty/troyweb/Courseweb/HenryClayRaleighLetter.htm>
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*
34. *The Daily Argus*, Tuesday 9th July 1844; “Henry Clay Raleigh Letter.”
35. *The Daily Argus*, Monday 22nd July 1844.
36. McGill University: “Henry Clay Alabama Letters,” HIST 301, 2003, McGill University, 10 August 2013 <www.arts.mcgill.ca/history/faculty/TROYWEB/Courseweb/HenryClayAlabamaLetters.htm>

37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. *The Daily Argus*, Thursday 19th September 1844.
41. Ibid., Thursday 18th July 1844.
42. Ibid., Monday 2nd September 1844.
43. Ibid., Thursday 18th July 1844.
44. Ibid., Monday 2nd September 1844.
45. "Henry Clay Alabama Letters."
46. Ibid.
47. *The Daily Argus*, Monday 2nd September 1844.
48. Ibid., Monday 2nd September 1844.
49. "Henry Clay Alabama Letters."
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. *The Daily Argus*, Tuesday 3rd September 1844.
55. "Henry Clay Alabama Letters."
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. *The Daily Argus*, Tuesday 10th September 1844.
60. Ibid., Wednesday 3rd July 1844.
61. Ibid., Wednesday 3rd July 1844.
62. Walter R. Borneman, *Polk: The Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America* (New York: Random House, 2009), p. 123.
63. *The Daily Argus*, Wednesday 9th October 1844.
64. Ibid., Friday 4th October 1844.
65. Remini, *Henry Clay*, p. 661; *The Daily Argus*, Thursday 19th September 1844.
66. Remini, *Henry Clay*, p. 661.
67. Ibid., p. 661.
68. Ibid., p. 661.
69. *The Daily Argus*, Thursday 19th September 1844.
70. Ibid., Thursday 19th September 1844.
71. Ibid., Thursday 19th September 1844.
72. Ibid., Thursday 19th September 1844.
73. Ibid., Thursday 19th September 1844.

74. Ibid., Thursday 19th September 1844.
75. Ibid., Thursday 19th September 1844.
76. Ibid., Thursday 3rd October 1844.
77. Ibid., Thursday 3rd October 1844.
78. Ibid., Thursday 3rd October 1844.
79. Ibid., Thursday 3rd October 1844.
80. Ibid., Thursday 3rd October 1844.
81. Ibid., Thursday 3rd October 1844.
82. Ibid., Thursday 3rd October 1844.
83. Remini, *Henry Clay*, p. 662.
84. Ibid., p. 662.
85. *The Daily Argus*, Monday 7th October 1844.
86. Ibid., Monday 7th October 1844.
87. David Zarefsky, "Henry Clay and the Election of 1844: The Limits of a Rhetoric of Compromise," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring, 2003), p. 80.
88. Reinhard O. Johnson, *The Liberty Party, 1840—1848: Antislavery Third-Party Politics in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), p. 42.
89. Ibid., p. 42.
90. Ibid., p. 42.
91. Ibid., p. 42.
92. Ibid., p. 45.
93. Christian P. Potholm, *Maine: An Annotated Bibliography* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2012), p. xii.
94. *Barre Gazette*, 11th October 1844, Early American Newspapers Series 1, 1690- 1876, Vol. XI, Issue 22, British Library.
95. *The Daily Argus*, Tuesday 5th November 1844.
96. Ibid., Tuesday 5th November 1844.
97. Ibid., Tuesday 5th November 1844.
98. Ibid., Saturday 2nd November 1844.
99. Seigenthaler, *James K. Polk*, p. 95; *The Daily Argus*, Thursday 17th October 1844.
100. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, p. 204.
101. Ibid., p. 201.
102. David M. Gold, *An Exemplary Whig: Edward Kent and the Whig Disposition in American Politics and Law* (New York: Lexington Books, 2012), p. 114.
103. Ibid., p. 114.
104. *The Daily Argus*, Friday 18th October 1844.
105. Ibid., Thursday 3rd October 1844.
106. Maine History Online: "Slavery's Defenders and Foes," Maine Historical Society, 2010. National Endowment for the Humanities, Tuesday 9th April 2013 <http://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/777/page/1186/display?use_mmn=>

107. Ibid.
108. Ibid.
109. Charles E. Clark, *Maine: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977), p. 117; Johnson, *The Liberty Party*, p. 46.
110. Johnson, *The Liberty Party*, p. 40; Gold, *An Exemplary Whig*, p. 115.
111. Gold, *An Exemplary Whig*, p. 115.
112. Lex Renda, "Retrospective Voting and the Presidential Election of 1844: The Texas Issue Revisited," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Fall, 1994), p. 849.
113. Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 4.
114. Renda, 'Retrospective Voting and the Presidential Election of 1844', p. 849.
115. Ibid., p. 846.
116. Ibid., p. 850.
117. *The Daily Argus*, Wednesday 4th September 1844.
118. Ibid., Thursday 24th October 1844.
119. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, pp. 196-37.
120. Renda, "Retrospective Voting and the Presidential Election of 1844," p. 850.