

John Tyler and the Pursuit of National Destiny

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Source: *Journal of the Early Republic*, Autumn, 1997, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 467-491

Published by: University of Pennsylvania Press on behalf of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic

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# JOHN TYLER AND THE PURSUIT OF NATIONAL DESTINY

Edward P. Crapol

John Tyler rarely has been credited, either by contemporary observers or later historians, for having a vision of national destiny. Although he served as president during the “manifest destiny” decade of the 1840s, or what more recently has been characterized by one historian as an era of “manifest design,” Tyler routinely has been dismissed as a narrow states’ rights stalwart who, when president in the early 1840s, pursued continental expansion solely, as in the case of Texas, to preserve the institution of slavery.<sup>1</sup> His perceived prosouthern role in the peace conference of 1860–61, his decision to support secession after peace negotiations failed, and his subsequent election to the House of Representatives in the first Confederate Congress, indelibly etched in the American public’s mind an image of John Tyler as a stereotypical aristocratic southern slaveowner who, in defense of his region’s “peculiar institution,” championed states’ rights, secession, and the break-up of the Union.

Perhaps the individual who more than any other was responsible for creating this perception of Tyler was his son Lyon G. Tyler. In his three volume work, *The Letters and Times of the Tylers*, published in the 1880s, he interpreted his father’s career through the lens of the Civil War, consciously cultivating an image of John Tyler as a gracious, noble, and honorable southern patriot. Years later, in a pamphlet published in 1929 that gained some notoriety, he compared his father to Abraham Lincoln

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Frederick Merk, with Lois B. Merk, *Fruits of Propaganda in the Tyler Administration* (Cambridge, MA, 1971); Merk and Merk, *Slavery and the Annexation of Texas* (New York, 1972); and Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America* (Ithaca, 1985). For an earlier analysis of Tyler’s diplomacy, see Jesse S. Reeves, *American Diplomacy Under Tyler and Polk* (Baltimore, 1907).

JOURNAL OF THE EARLY REPUBLIC, 17 (Fall 1997). © 1997 Society for Historians of the Early American Republic.

and not surprisingly concluded that Tyler was the superior man both as leader and moral example. In his admirable, if misguided, profession of filial piety, the son not only distorted history but also did a disservice to the father. If John Tyler was not Lincoln's equal much less his better, it is also the case that as president he pursued a broad national agenda and was not simply an unyielding, doctrinaire sectionalist and states' rights advocate. Tyler was a key participant in the leadership of an antebellum generation that grappled for at least four decades with the issues of sectionalism and the preservation of the Union. When Tyler's public career is considered in its entirety, it becomes evident that he persistently rose above sectional partisanship and promoted a vision of national destiny designed to sustain, not destroy, the Union.<sup>2</sup>

A young John Tyler—he had not yet celebrated his 30th birthday—initially outlined his vision of national destiny in response to the Missouri crisis of 1819-20. As a member of the Virginia delegation to the House of Representatives, Tyler decried the contentious debate over Missouri's admission to statehood as a grave threat to the Union. In a February 1820 speech in the House, he defined sectional feelings and local prejudices that divide a people “as the bane of a republic.” Sparked by the hope that the pursuit of national glory would overcome sectionalism, Tyler proudly informed his colleagues that Americans “direct the destinies of a mighty continent. Our resources are unlimited; our means unbounded. If we be true to ourselves, the glory of other nations, in comparison with ours, shall resemble but a tale from the days of chivalry.” From that day forward, John Tyler, slaveholding member of Virginia's elite ruling class, doggedly tried to sell his vision of America's mission and destiny to the majority of his fellow white Americans of the South, North, and emerging West. Although Tyler generally has been depicted as a “champion of the Old South,” his foreign policy agenda was neither narrowly proslavery nor solely tied to the ascendancy of the South in the Union. Tyler envisaged a comprehensive foreign policy that would provide mutual, if not equal, benefits to all sections. He was a disciple of Madison and Jefferson in his belief that territorial and commercial expansion would allay sectional differences, preserve the Union, and create a nation of power and glory unparalleled in history.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lyon G. Tyler, *The Letters and Times of the Tylers* (3 vols., Richmond and Williamsburg, VA, 1884-96); Tyler, *John Tyler and Abraham Lincoln, who was the dwarf? A Reply to a Challenge* (Richmond, 1929).

<sup>3</sup> Tyler, *The Letters and Times of the Tylers*, I, 321. In 1855, when looking back at the Missouri crisis, Tyler observed: “The alarm bell, as Mr. Jefferson expressed it, had sounded, and the sections stood in array facing each other.” See *Lecture delivered before*

Two months after his Missouri crisis address, Tyler further elaborated on his vision of national destiny and mission. In a speech before the House on April 24, 1820, opposing a protective tariff, the Virginian identified Great Britain as the United States' chief rival in its quest for global commercial supremacy. At this point in his political career, Tyler represented and exclusively spoke for the interests of agriculture and commerce, which he declared "are twin sisters" and should not be restricted by the folly of high duties and tariff restrictions. "America," he announced, "is now the granary of the world; she supplies the wants of foreign nations as they arise." Free and unfettered trade would assure that the United States ultimately would become a leading world power. In 1820, however, Tyler was in no particular hurry to force the issue of America's mission and destiny. In order to surpass Great Britain in this contest, Tyler acknowledged that at some stage in the economic development of the United States, manufacturing would be an essential ingredient in the drive for national greatness. "When it shall correspond with the interest of this nation to become a manufacturing nation," he prophesied, "such will it become," but "natural causes produce the result," not an artificial protective tariff.<sup>4</sup>

Tyler's fascination with America's destiny and its role as moral example for the world surfaced again and again in his political speeches and public oratory. Upon his retirement from the House of Representatives in 1821 because of temporary ill health, Tyler said farewell to his constituents by urging them to look to a future that promised "the march of this favored land in the road of power and glory" and "the high destinies that await us." In 1826 when governor of Virginia he delivered the state's official eulogy to Thomas Jefferson on July 11 in Richmond. Praising Jefferson, who had died on July 4—the

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*the Maryland Institute for the Promotion of the Mechanic Arts, on Tuesday evening, March 20, 1855, by Hon. John Tyler. Subject: The Prominent Characters and Incidents of our History from 1812 to 1836* (Baltimore, 1855), 14. For the standard portrayal of Tyler as a sectionalist states' righter, see Oliver P. Chitwood, *John Tyler: Champion of the Old South* (New York, 1939).

<sup>4</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 16th Cong., 1st sess., 1956-60. With his two speeches in the House of Representatives in 1820, Tyler established his credentials as a major spokesman for what Michael H. Hunt has depicted as "national greatness," and what later would be labeled "manifest destiny" by John L. O'Sullivan, editor of the *Democratic Review*. For example, in 1839 O'Sullivan echoed Tyler when he pronounced: "We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward March? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can. . . . The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness." See Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, 1987), 30-31.

fiftieth anniversary of American independence—as the brilliant author of a universal document, Tyler predicted that “when the happy era shall arrive for the emancipation of nations, hastened on as it will be by the example of America, shall they not resort to the Declaration of our Independence as the charter of their rights, and will not its author be hailed as the benefactor of the redeemed?” The illustrious Jefferson had long served as Tyler’s inspiration and role model. Jefferson and John Tyler’s father had been roommates in Williamsburg in the 1760s and remained lifelong friends. Quite literally, throughout his youth and early adulthood John Tyler had imbibed Jeffersonian principles, including an expansionist outlook and a disposition to distrust the British.<sup>5</sup>

Tyler revisited the theme of national destiny yet again several years later when a member of the United States Senate. In a speech on the tariff, which extended over three days in early February 1832, he reaffirmed his commitment to free trade and expressed concern about the need to extend foreign markets for the nation’s agricultural production. On this occasion, he elaborated on the mutuality of benefits to be attained from unrestricted commerce and doubted, as advocates of protectionism charged, that the course of free trade would lead to the United States being recolonized by Great Britain, its former mother country and primary commercial competitor. With uncanny prescience, Tyler instead predicted that when in the not-too-distant future Britain repealed its restrictive Corn Laws, a huge market would be opened for American grain. Then, returning to his earlier vision of American mission, Tyler rhapsodized:

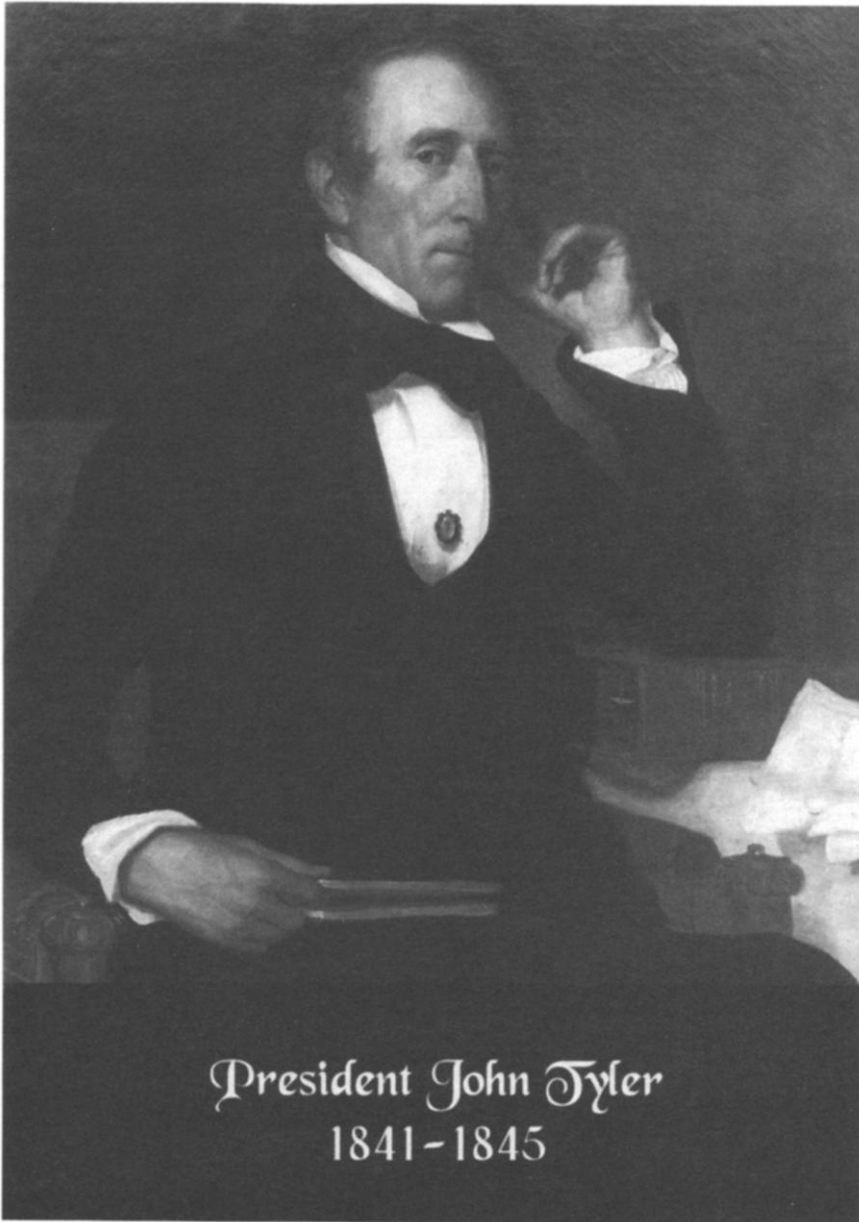
My imagination has led me to look into the distant future, and there to contemplate the greatness of free America. I have beheld her walking on the waves of the mighty deep, carrying along with her tidings of great joy to distant nations. I have seen her overturning the strong places of despotism, and restoring to man his long-lost rights.

For a slaveowner who held other human beings as property, this was a lofty, if contradictory, vision of “free” America’s mission in the world. Apparently, while in public office, Tyler never identified slavery as a “great contradiction” in the American republican experiment, although

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<sup>5</sup> Tyler, *The Letters and Times of the Tylers*, I, 337, 348.

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Portrait by George Peter Alexander Healy. Photo by Katherine Wetzel.

there is evidence that later in retirement, amidst the sectional strife of the 1850s, he recognized this inconsistency in his foreign policy agenda.<sup>6</sup>

The tariff controversy threatened to disrupt the Union and many of Tyler's southern brethren were bedeviled by the challenge to states' rights inherent in the nullification crisis of 1832-33. John Tyler, however, saw a more ominous danger for the slave South on the horizon. Unlike John C. Calhoun, his friend and sometime political ally, Tyler as a senator from Virginia placed national interests above those of his region and supported the compromise that effectively ended South Carolina's confrontation with the federal government. On this occasion he clearly demonstrated that he was not merely a "champion of the Old South."<sup>7</sup> To Tyler's mind, the more serious threat to the existing Union and southern interests in the mid-1830s was the gathering storm of abolitionism. Northern abolitionist societies directed in the main by clergymen who espoused, according to Tyler, a misguided evangelicalism had proliferated at an astounding rate in a few short years. Congress was inundated with their petitions calling for the national government to support a host of antislavery measures. Pulpit and podium from New England to New York and Pennsylvania abounded with abolitionist invective; the federal mails were rife with incendiary literature denouncing slavery and slaveholders. Much to Tyler's disgust and outrage, these demonic abolitionists seemed possessed in their determination to capture center stage in the national political arena. For someone who defined himself as a moderate on the slavery issue, the self-righteous abolitionist onslaught was particularly galling.

If his son Lyon Tyler is to be believed, John Tyler had troubling doubts about slavery, deploring it as an evil, and never rationalizing the South's "peculiar institution" as a blessing or positive good. As a member of Congress' District Committee, Tyler in 1832 introduced a bill

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<sup>6</sup> A. G. Abell, *Life of John Tyler, President of the United States, up to the close of the Twenty-Seventh Congress . . .* (New York, 1844), 129. See also Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York, 1991), for an excellent discussion of slavery as the "great contradiction." For evidence of Tyler's later doubts about slavery and expansion, see Tyler to General Thomas Green, Feb. 29, 1856, Huntington Letters, Tyler Collection (Special Collections Department, University of West Virginia Library, Morgantown), in which he took credit for Texas annexation and criticized Polk's Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo as follows: "True I would not have negotiated a treaty of peace without settling the slave question in that treaty. The omission to do which was a great blunder—of this I will talk to you when I see you."

<sup>7</sup> For an insightful discussion of Tyler's role during the nullification crisis and the negotiations that led to the compromise tariff bill of 1833, see Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York, 1991), 418-25.



prohibiting the slave trade in the District of Columbia. He unsuccessfully sought to eradicate the “slave mart” atmosphere of the capital of the republic by ending practices that made Washington a “depot for the slave brought from the two neighboring States.”<sup>8</sup>

Tyler’s uneasiness about slavery, however, did not lead him to advocate manumission, either privately or publicly. Indeed, the problems a large manumitted and free black population might pose to his home state led him to join the Virginia Colonization Society, a group dedicated, as was its national counterpart, the American Colonization Society, to resettling freed slaves in Liberia on Africa’s west coast. Apparently Tyler also hoped, according to his most recent biographer Robert Seager, that eventually there would be a “diffusion” or “bleeding” of Virginia’s black “slave population into and throughout the territories—a form of abolition by anemia.” Consequently, he viewed abolitionist interference and their arrogant presumption that they knew what was best for his state and region as the most serious threat to the Union since the Missouri crisis.<sup>9</sup>

Like Tyler, other members of his intellectual circle publicly and privately expressed their apprehension over abolitionism’s unprecedented assault on their society and its peculiar institution. For two of his close confidants, the states’ rights stalwarts, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker and Abel Parker Upshur, the threat of disunion was their uppermost concern, and paradoxically, a possible remedy for the South’s dilemma. In their private correspondence the three friends commiserated about the fate of their region. In the midst of the abolitionist challenge, Tucker, a law professor at the College of William and Mary, anonymously published a novel, *The Partisan Leader*, that forecast disunion and the creation of a separate southern confederacy. Upshur, a future secretary of the navy and secretary of state in the Tyler administration, privately may have shared Tucker’s disunionist agenda, but his public stance became that of an ardent defender of slavery. Black slavery was essential to white freedom argued Upshur, and he maintained that the South’s peculiar institution was “a great positive good, to be carefully protected and

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<sup>8</sup> Tyler, *The Letters and Times of the Tylers*, I, 571.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Seager II, *and Tyler too: A Biography of John and Julia Gardiner Tyler* (New York, 1963), 53. In a speech to the people of Gloucester, Virginia during the summer of 1835, Tyler said “I have seen this Union twice in great danger.” The first occasion was the Missouri crisis, which he pointed out, “insignificant as that question was, in comparison with the present, it produced the most fearful agitations.” Tyler, *The Letters and Times of the Tylers*, I, 578, 579.



preserved.”<sup>10</sup> Tyler rejected disunion as an option at this stage as well. He also had too many reservations about slavery to follow Upshur’s lead in describing that institution as a blessing for all concerned. His friends’ paths of resistance struck him on the one hand as too negative and on the other as too defensive. Tyler remained a committed Unionist who sought a solution to the abolitionist challenge within that framework.

Tyler’s response to the abolitionist challenge was one that he had outlined when a young congressman during the Missouri crisis. The pursuit of national destiny again was recommended as an antidote to sectionalism. In his address presented at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1837 to commemorate the fifty-sixth anniversary of the revolutionary battle that signaled victory over the British, Tyler exhorted the gathering:

I would exorcise the spirit of sectional feeling, which is but too rife in the land. I would point to a common country—a common glory, and a common destiny. I would exhibit America, at no distant day, as the arbitress of nations—the protectress of liberty. I would have her broad stripes and bright stars to shine over every sea, as a warning to tyrants, that their end was near—and a signal to man, that the day of deliverance was at hand.

In urging the remedy of national greatness to allay the malady of sectional strife, Tyler preferred that the United States should achieve its destiny without resort to force of arms. “I would have her victories priceless, but bloodless,” he stipulated, “and won only by the force of great example.”<sup>11</sup>

At no time during these patriotic flourishes did Tyler betray the slightest concern that the pursuit of national greatness might undermine states’ rights and lead to a strong centralized government. He seemed oblivious to yet another contradiction in his ideology. Just as slavery mocked Tyler’s notion of “free” America’s global mission, the chase for national glory ultimately would clash with his traditional Jeffersonian view of limited government and his dedication to restricting executive power

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<sup>10</sup> A.P. Upshur to N.B. Tucker, Mar. 8, 1836, Tucker-Coleman Collection (Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA); Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, *The Partisan Leader* (Washington, 1836); A.P. Upshur, “Domestic Slavery, as it exists in our Southern States, with reference to its influence upon Free Government,” *Southern Literary Messenger*, 5 (Oct. 1839), 687.

<sup>11</sup> “An Oration Delivered by John Tyler at York Town, Oct. 19, 1837,” *ibid.*, 3 (Dec. 1837), 752. A few months after Tyler’s address, Abraham Lincoln also expressed concern about the future of the Union. See his “Address Before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois,” on the topic “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions,” Jan. 27, 1838, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy Basler (8 vols., New Brunswick, 1953-55), I, 108-13.

and preventing its extension at the expense of Congress and the states. Clearly, Tyler was untroubled by this contradiction because he was operating on the Madisonian assumption that the federative system was uniquely able to expand indefinitely across unsettled space without the danger of consolidation. For Tyler it was axiomatic that national greatness, to be achieved by expansion, went hand in hand with states' rights and weak central government.<sup>12</sup>

One of the more surprising features of the opposing world views of John Tyler and his abolitionist adversaries was their common appeal to republicanism as the basis for two distinct, but not entirely dissimilar, foreign policy agendas for the nation. In his Yorktown address future president Tyler held up the example of the Founding Fathers, extolling their unselfish adherence to freedom, liberty, and republican principle. It was their legacy of government based on "popular rights" that must be preserved. If those elements of common heritage and common pride—republican virtue, liberty, and freedom—were allowed to flourish, the United States would become "a blessing to the whole human race."<sup>13</sup> Tyler's patriotic Americanism reflected the feelings of many other southern leaders. Pride in the glory and future of the United States of America was a shared legacy among southerners because, as historian William J. Cooper has noted, their "fathers and grandfathers had helped bring it into being and had nurtured its early growth. Feelings and expressions of patriotism and allegiance to the Union marked southern Americanism."<sup>14</sup>

In the late 1830s and early 1840s the northern antislavery enterprise laid claim to a virtually identical republicanism that stressed liberty, freedom, and patriotic virtue. But for abolitionists, the South's peculiar institution betrayed America's fidelity to republican principles. Slavery was a blot on the nation's republican honor. The republic could be purified only through the elimination of slavery. Then, a new direction in the nation's diplomacy would fulfill America's destiny as the beacon

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<sup>12</sup> The link between territorial expansion and the preservation of states' rights was an article of faith for many Democrats. For example, in June 1844 Senator Sidney Breese of Illinois argued in behalf of Texas annexation by asserting that "if Congress is confined to its proper functions, and each state permitted to exercise its undoubted powers . . . no reasonable bounds could be assigned to the proper extension of this confederacy. It is peculiarly adapted to great enlargement and extension." *Congressional Globe*, 28th Cong., 1st sess., Appendix, 543. I wish to thank Michael A. Morrison for bringing this quote to my attention.

<sup>13</sup> Tyler, "Oration at York Town," 752.

<sup>14</sup> William J. Cooper, *Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860* (New York, 1983), 179.

of liberty and the wellspring of republican virtue. The abolitionist vision of a future American foreign policy, as expressed by James Birney and Joshua Leavitt, among others, in the 1840 presidential campaign was typified by the concept of a “free diplomacy” uncompromised by the contradiction of black slavery and dedicated to “diffusing the blessings of commerce, peace, civilization, and liberty over the globe.”<sup>15</sup> Although the Liberty party did poorly at the polls, its foreign policy agenda persisted as an antislavery counterpoise to Tyler’s vision for the future of the American republic.

Within a few months after the 1840 election victory of the Whig ticket of “Tippicanoe and Tyler too,” John Tyler became the first vice-president in American history to succeed to the presidency on the death of an incumbent. Mockingly dubbed an “accidental” president by the political pundits of the day, the new chief executive quickly as well as deftly confronted the sectional challenge of the antislavery forces by counteracting and replacing, in some instances unabashedly co-opting, their vision of a free diplomacy with one dedicated to national destiny and glory. In this context, Tyler’s foreign policy during his presidency becomes more comprehensible. Initially, with Daniel Webster as secretary of state, who shared Tyler’s enthusiasm for commercial expansion if not his concern to protect the institution of slavery, the administration settled Anglo-American border disputes, extended the Monroe Doctrine to bring the Hawaiian Islands into the American sphere of influence, and opened the way for the first American mission to China. With Upshur as secretary of the Navy, and later as secretary of state, the administration expanded the Navy for coastal defense and, more importantly, to promote and protect “an empire of commerce” in the hemisphere and all along the Pacific rim. In addition, Tyler and Upshur, and later Calhoun, had a territorial expansionist agenda that sought to secure Pacific Ocean ports in California, and included the speedy annexation of Texas coupled with a diplomatic strategy to secure Oregon for the North and West as a sectional trade-off for Texas. Though not all of these diplomatic initiatives were successful, they clearly were designed to undercut the antislavery challenge, sublimate sectionalism, fulfill the national destiny, and not incidentally, win Tyler a full second term as president.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Emancipator*, Oct. 22, 1840. See also Edward P. Crapol, “The Foreign Policy of Antislavery, 1833-1846,” in *Redefining the Past: Essays in Diplomatic History in Honor of William Appleman Williams*, ed. Lloyd C. Gardner (Corvallis, OR, 1986), 85-103.

<sup>16</sup> Howard Jones, *To the Webster-Ashburton Treaty: A Study in Anglo-American Relations, 1783-1843* (Chapel Hill, 1977), 118-60; Crapol, “Foreign Policy of Antislavery”; Hietala, *Manifest Design*, 55-71.

Tyler's enthusiasm for expansion to the Pacific and beyond has long been recognized by historians. Forty years ago Norman Graebner noted that "John Tyler's administration revealed a keener acquisitiveness toward California than either of the two that preceded it." Several other scholars of the Tyler years also have emphasized his administration's "Pacific-mindedness" and its fascination with the possibilities of commercial expansion to the vast, beckoning markets of the Pacific rim. Unquestionably "Pacific-mindedness" was one of the hallmarks of the Tyler presidency. With the guidance and collaboration of New Englander Webster, Tyler consciously and deliberately pursued several bold initiatives. Perhaps the most outlandish was the 1842 tripartite scheme to partition Mexico and settle the Oregon controversy. Anticipating Great Britain's support for the plan, this American expansionist duo proposed that in return for dropping two million dollars in American claims against Mexico, that government would cede all of California north of the thirty-second parallel, which included the harbors of San Francisco and Monterey, to the United States. The next step would include Mexico's recognition of Texan independence, followed by a joint Mexican-American agreement guaranteeing an independent Texas republic. Presumably diplomatic pressure from Great Britain would convince the Mexicans to accept such an unfavorable and one-sided deal. To cement British backing for the scheme, Tyler and Webster offered a settlement of the disputed Oregon territory at the Columbia River, which meant that Britain would receive territory between the Columbia and the forty-ninth parallel to which it had little legitimate claim. Finally, to seal the entire California-Texas-Oregon package, the Tyler administration proposed a tripartite treaty among the United States, Great Britain, and Mexico approving these territorial exchanges.<sup>17</sup>

Neither Mexico nor Britain signed on to the tripartite scam. Whether or not Tyler and Webster ever seriously thought this overly optimistic plan had a chance of success is an unanswerable question. But even in failure the scheme is significant on several counts. It revealed Tyler's readiness to place national above sectional interests because he was willing to accept an independent Texas, foregoing possible annexation of the Lone Star republic, for the prize of California and its Pacific harbors.

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<sup>17</sup> Norman A. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* (New York, 1955), 70-71; Norma Lois Peterson, *The Presidencies of William Henry Harrison & John Tyler* (Lawrence, KS, 1989), 133-43; Seager, *and Tyler too*, 211-12; Daniel Webster to Edward Everett, Jan. 29, 1843, in *The Papers of Daniel Webster, Diplomatic Papers*, ed. Kenneth E. Shewmaker, Kenneth R. Stephens, and Anita McGurn (6 vols., Hanover, NH, 1983-87), I, 842-43.

Texas and slavery would be sacrificed for “windows on the Pacific.” Perhaps Tyler hoped this would be merely a temporary sacrifice because the proposed treaty did not preclude a future request by an independent Texas for annexation to the United States. Apparently Tyler also believed the national interest would be served by the provision of the tripartite deal that offered Britain an Oregon settlement that included all the territory north of the Columbia River. As he explained to his son in 1845 a few months after leaving office, “I never dreamed of ceding this country, unless for the greater equivalent of California, which I fancied Great Britain might be able to obtain for us through her influence in Mexico; and this was but a dream of policy which was never embodied.” California’s “windows on the Pacific” clearly were the main focus of Tyler’s expansionist dreams. His preoccupation with the unrealistic tripartite scheme exposed the true depth of his obsession with visions of America’s national destiny.<sup>18</sup>

In what may be best described as an exhilarating and almost hectic pursuit of national greatness during his presidency, Tyler surrounded himself with like-minded dreamers of destiny, many of whom were also disciples of Madison and Jefferson. His cabinet and the tiny “corporal’s guard” in Congress included both northerners and southerners who had visions of national glory nearly identical to his. And it surely was not by coincidence that his administration’s official newspaper and political mouthpiece was named the *Madisonian*. Among this regionally diverse band of commercial and territorial expansionists were, of course, the three men who served as secretary of state during Tyler’s reign—Webster, Upshur, and Calhoun. Other proponents of national destiny in the cabinet were Hugh Legaré, Thomas Gilmer, and William Wilkins. In Congress two of Tyler’s confidants who dreamed of territorial empire and national greatness were Robert J. Walker of Mississippi and Caleb Cushing of Massachusetts. Perhaps the most eloquent of this company of dreamers was Edward Everett, the administration’s minister to Great Britain, who as early as 1824 in a commencement address at Harvard echoed Tyler’s sentiments about the American republic’s future: “Should our happy Union continue, in no great futurity this great continent will be filled up with the mightiest kindred people known in history; our language will acquire an extension which no other ever possessed; and the empire of the mind, with nothing

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<sup>18</sup> Tyler to Robert Tyler, Dec. 11, 1845, in Tyler, *The Letters and Times of the Tylers*, II, 448.

to resist its sway, will attain an expansion, of which, as yet, we can but partly conceive.”<sup>19</sup>

In pursuing these foreign policy goals Tyler, the visionary spokesman for national greatness, proved as well to be a pragmatic politician and opportunistic statesman. Despite his earlier reservations about presidential prerogatives in foreign policy when a member of the Senate during Jackson’s presidency, Tyler used executive power to full advantage.<sup>20</sup> For instance, within months after entering the White House he and Webster secretly authorized a deal with a private entrepreneur, Alfred Benson, to ship American settlers at government expense to the Oregon country. Benson’s firm was contracted by the Navy Department in 1841 “to establish a line of transport ships to the Oregon Territory, conveying fifty passengers by each trip without charge, upon the condition that they should have the benefit of transporting all the government supplies to the Pacific, at the rate of \$3 per barrel freight.” In February 1845 in response to a request by the House of Representatives for information about the Benson contract, then Secretary of the Navy John Y. Mason explained that “the President has deemed that considerations of state policy” authorized the arrangement. Mason’s explanation confirmed that for President Tyler the chief executive’s authority in the realm of foreign policy justified, without legislative approval, this clandestine and unprecedented arrangement for the use of a non-state actor as the government’s “chosen instrument.” Clearly he did so because it would help secure an American foothold in Oregon without unduly alerting the British government to his administration’s ambitions in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Everett quoted in Paul Revere Frothingham, *Edward Everett: Orator and Statesman* (Boston, 1925), 84. The rhetoric of national greatness appears in the speeches and correspondence of all of these individuals. For one example, see Caleb Cushing’s 1838 speech in the House of Representatives, in which he argued that westward expansion would fulfill “the great destiny reserved for this exemplar American Republic,” cited in Claude Fuess, *The Life of Caleb Cushing* (2 vols., New York, 1923), I, 247. For a different view of the expansionism of Tyler and Upshur that emphasizes their sectionalist agenda, see William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York, 1990), 355-71.

<sup>20</sup> “In my recent public course,” Tyler explained to a fellow Virginian, “no other motive has governed me but a desire to uphold the Constitution and the laws, and to restrain executive power already grown too great, within the limits which they prescribe.” Tyler to John Coalter, May 29, 1834, Tyler Family Papers.

<sup>21</sup> *Letter from the Secretary of the Navy*, House Report 161, 28th Cong., 2d sess., 1-3; and *Report from the Committee on Naval Affairs*, Senate Report 319, 31st Cong., 2d sess., 1-2. See also Daniel Webster to Caroline Le Roy Webster, June 24, 1849, in *The Papers of Daniel Webster, Correspondence*, ed. Charles M. Wiltse and Wendy Tilghman (6 vols.,



Tyler's pragmatism and political expediency extended to his domestic policies as well. Despite his lifelong adherence to the concept of free trade and minimal import duties, as president he temporarily compromised his principles by signing the highly protective tariff bill of 1842. Tyler did so to meet the revenue needs of the government, but he also believed it was an essential step in his effort to revive a depression-ridden American economy and restore national prosperity.<sup>22</sup> Acceptance of a tariff that aided industry symbolized his transition from being exclusively a champion of the twin sisters of commerce and agriculture to a more inclusive advocate of economic progress who promoted domestic industry and manufacturing as well. Actually, Tyler earlier had made a shift at the state level urging governmental support of industry. In the late 1830s he presided over a commercial convention in Norfolk, Virginia, that recommended state funds be appropriated for internal improvements (specifically canals and railroads) and the encouragement of manufacturing. As president of the convention, Tyler delivered the keynote address, appointed five members to a committee on manufacturing, and on one occasion proudly displayed a sample of domestic manufacture from the Matoaca Factory in Petersburg, Virginia.<sup>23</sup> This newly acquired commitment to governmental aid for industry and manufacturing reflected an evolution in the Virginian's thinking about what was necessary for the United States to succeed in its quest for national greatness.

President John Tyler's flexibility on the issues of executive power and the desirability of an energetic centralized national government at the expense of states' rights was consistent with the practices of his idols Jefferson and Madison when they occupied the White House. Their dictum for presidential action became his: when in power use the power. He shared as well their faith in territorial and commercial expansion as a means to allay sectionalism by enlarging and preserving the empire. Tyler the nationalist was able to build upon the legacy of his mentors. By the 1840s his vision of national destiny was aimed at moving the United States from the status of a dependent peripheral nation to that of a core

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Hanover, NH, 1974-84), VI, 343-44. For an analysis of the role of non-state actors and chosen instruments in American foreign relations, see Emily Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (New York, 1982).

<sup>22</sup> Traditionally, historians have argued that Tyler's approval of the 1842 tariff was motivated primarily by a concern for revenue for the federal government and did not represent a shift to protectionism. See, for example, Seager, *and Tyler too*, 167; Remini, *Henry Clay*, 603; and Maurice G. Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System* (Lexington, 1995), 181-85.

<sup>23</sup> Richmond (VA) *Enquirer*, Nov. 16, 20, 23, 1838.

nation that rivaled Great Britain in the strength of its commerce, shipping, and overall economy.<sup>24</sup>

In a remarkable 1843 document that was a blueprint for American commercial empire, Tyler outlined to Edward Everett, then minister to England, how the United States might leap to the forefront of nations in this contest for global stature:

I wish this country to be in a condition to become the carrier of the world. I fear that the Oregon Question cannot be placed in a situation standing alone, to meet the sanction of the Senate. But if a commercial treaty could be connected with it, having the feature of moderate duties upon importations here, giving reasonable encouragement to our manufacturing labour at the same time we substituted permanency in place of extravagant duties—and as a correlative concession on the part of England, a reduction of duties on tobacco—cotton & rice, and the abolition of all duties on Indian corn—salted provisions &c & if possible a low duty exclusively in favour of American flour & wheat, then a circle of interests would be completed which embracing the whole union & every interest, would secure us peace in any contingency and give a new vigour to public prosperity.

Although Tyler failed to achieve his overall objectives as outlined to Everett, he did lay the groundwork for the success of Polk's bold expansionist agenda by framing the major issues of the 1844 campaign. And after Polk's election, this intrepid expansionist and cast-off, lame-duck president gained congressional approval of Texas annexation by joint resolution, a constitutionally questionable maneuver that one historian recently has labelled a "sleight of hand."<sup>25</sup>

After leaving the White House, Tyler believed that he had done his part to advance America's destiny as a great world power. He was justly proud of his administration's successes in the Pacific, especially bringing the Hawaiian Islands into the United States sphere of influence and securing the nation's first treaty with China. The Tyler Doctrine for Hawaii, announced in a special message to Congress in December 1842 in response to fears that either Britain or France might annex the islands,

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<sup>24</sup> For analyses of Jefferson's and Madison's use of presidential power, see Bradford Perkins, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, Volume I, *The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865* (New York, 1993); and Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill, 1980).

<sup>25</sup> Tyler to Edward Everett, Apr. 27, 1843, quoted in Merk, *Slavery and Annexation of Texas*, 212; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston, 1986), 151. Tyler's formula to Everett was basically the settlement reached by Polk in 1846, which included the Walker tariff, repeal of the Corn Laws, and settlement of the Oregon boundary at the 49th parallel.



Photographed about 1900, the parlor decoration at Sherwood Forest, John Tyler's home in Charles City County, Virginia, included two Chinese vases which were a gift from Caleb Cushing upon his return from negotiating the treaty with China in 1844. The vases, one of which contains large plumes, are on the floor in front of the mirror hung between the windows.

Photograph courtesy of Tyler's great-granddaughter, Mary Morris Booth.

stated that the United States adamantly opposed "any attempt by another power...to take possession of the islands, colonize them, and subvert the native Government." The 1844 Treaty of Wangxia, negotiated by Caleb Cushing, gave American merchants access to five Chinese ports, included a most-favored-nation provision, and contained what was perhaps its most pathbreaking feature, an extraterritoriality guarantee for all Americans

resident in China. Significantly, Cushing's handiwork served as the standard for other treaties with China for more than a decade.<sup>26</sup>

John Tyler also took exceptional pride in his role in the annexation of Texas and in retirement frequently hailed it as the crowning achievement of his presidency. On several occasions in the late 1840s and 1850s in private correspondence with relatives and friends, Tyler made his case. "Texas was lost but for my prompt action," he bragged to his brother-in-law, Alexander Gardiner of New York. Apparently fearful that James K. Polk was receiving unwarranted public acclaim for his part in annexation, Tyler complained to his friend, General Thomas Green: "It would be indeed strange if my enemies could deprive me of credit of having annexed Texas to the Union. I presented the question - urged it first in the form of a treaty to the Senate - met the rejection of that treaty by a prompt and immediate appeal to the H. of R. - fought the battle before the people and conquered its formidable adversaries with their trained bands, and two days before my term expired adopted and enforced the alternate resolution under which Texas took her place amid the fraternity of States. My successor did nothing but confirm what I had done." Then, perhaps reflecting a lingering disappointment that his administration's schemes to obtain the coveted "windows on the Pacific" had failed, the former president took credit as well for Polk's success in bringing California into the American fold by confiding to Green: "Nor is that all. Texas drew after it California." This was a familiar refrain in Tyler's correspondence in these years. He adamantly believed, quite unrealistically, that had the Senate ratified his original Texas treaty in the spring of 1844, "that ratification would have been followed by immediate negotiation [*sic*] and I do not doubt but that California would have been peaceably acquired."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> James D. Richardson, comp., *Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (20 vols., Washington, 1913), V, 2065; John H. Schroeder, *Shaping a Maritime Empire: The Commercial and Diplomatic Role of the American Navy, 1829-1861* (Westport, 1985), 71-2; John K. Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842-1854* (Cambridge, MA, 1953); Richard E. Welch, Jr., "Caleb Cushing's Mission and the Treaty of Wanghia: A Review," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 58 (Dec. 1957), 328-57. Apparently, Tyler's defense of Hawaiian independence was prompted in part by the December 1842 visit to Washington of Prince Timoleo Haolilio, who alerted the administration to European designs on his homeland. Prince Haolilio also raised the possibility of the annexation of the Hawaiian Islands by the United States. See Seager, *and Tyler too*, 185.

<sup>27</sup> Tyler to Alexander Gardiner, Aug. 7, 1848, Gardiner-Tyler Papers (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT); Tyler to General Thomas Green, Feb. 29, 1856, Huntington Letters, Tyler Collection; John Tyler to Col. David L. Tyler, Dec. 7, 1849, Tyler Family Papers. Daniel Webster also was

Not surprisingly, Tyler also steadfastly, and in this instance, justifiably claimed that his Texas diplomacy was a national and not merely a sectional achievement. Early on in his presidency when he first broached the Texas question with Webster, he argued that annexation would benefit both Northern and Southern interests.<sup>28</sup> And when John C. Calhoun publicly announced in February 1847 that he alone “was the author of the great measure” of Texas annexation, Tyler and his entire family went into a rage. The former president denounced the South Carolinian’s impertinence and his egotistic assumption of unilateral credit: “He is the great ‘I am,’ and myself and Cabinet have no voice in the matter.” Tyler especially deplored and resented “that Calhoun should make it appear that the object & end of annexation was to extend slavery to Texas for the protection of the other slave states.” National interests were uppermost in Tyler’s campaign to secure Texas. As he explained to his son Robert: “When the Mexican Gulf shall be crowded with innumerable ships freighted with the rich productions of Texas...then will it be seen that my labors were not in vain to advance the highest destinies of the country.” Reiterating the point once again, Tyler stressed in another letter to his son a few years later that the annexation of Texas “was not narrow, local or bigotted. It embraced the whole country and all its interests.”<sup>29</sup>

Neither the raging Mexican war, which Tyler publicly supported even though he privately questioned Polk’s provocative actions that brought on the conflict, nor the brewing sectional crisis over the question of slavery’s expansion into additional territories that might be wrested from Mexico, immediately dampened Tyler’s enthusiasm for empire and

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disappointed at the failure to obtain California and commenting to his son Fletcher on the annexation of Texas in 1845, believed the port of San Francisco was “twenty times more valuable . . . than all of Texas.” See Richard W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (New York, 1960), 108.

<sup>28</sup> In October 1841, Tyler tried to convert a skeptical Webster: “I gave you a hint as to the possibility of acquiring Texas by treaty. I verily believe it could be done. Could the North be reconciled to it, could anything throw so bright a lustre around us? It seems to me that the great interests of the North would be incalculably advanced by such an acquisition. How deeply interested is the shipping interest. *Slavery*,—I know that is the objection, and it would be well founded, if it did not already exist among us, but my belief is that a rigid enforcement of the laws against the slave-trade would in time make as many free States south as the acquisition of Texas would add of slave States, and then the *future* (distant it might be) would present wonderful results.” Tyler to Daniel Webster, Oct. 11, 1841, in Tyler, *The Letters and Times of the Tylers*, II, 126.

<sup>29</sup> Seager, *and Tyler too*, 324; Julia G. Tyler to Alexander Tyler, Mar. 4, 1847, Gardiner-Tyler Papers; Tyler to Robert Tyler, Mar. 18, 1847, in Tyler, *The Letters and Times of the Tylers*, II, 468; Tyler to Robert Tyler Apr. 16, 1850, Tyler Family Papers.

national glory. Upon reflection and in the context of the sectional crisis of 1850, however, he feared once again that the Union might dissolve. In a series of letters to members of his wife's family in New York, all of whom were staunch Unionists, Tyler expressed doubts about the future of the United States. To his brother-in-law Col. David L. Gardiner he wrote: "I fear that we are destined to great trouble upon the slavery question and the end is not yet. I am a silent but not indifferent spectator of what is passing, and I confess to you that I am not without my fears and apprehension and yet I have much confidence in the good sense of the American people." In another letter the former president lamented: "When I look at the sectionalism of the day I almost tremble for the future."<sup>30</sup>

But amidst all his talk of gloom and doom, John Tyler retained some optimism that his old formula of national destiny as the cement of the Union still might mend sectional divisions. If the Union should last, he wrote Samuel Gardiner, another member of his wife's northern clan in November 1850, "what are all other governments and all other people but mere dependencies of this mighty Republic. It will indeed, without a metaphor, be the possessor of the trident of Neptune and the sword of Mars, and a policy of all governments will be the creature of its dictation." Because the old Madisonian formula had worked for most of his lifetime, Tyler was reluctant to abandon it. He was not totally oblivious, however, to the connection between his expansionist beliefs and actions and the resulting sectional discord that arose over the question of the extension of slavery to the newly acquired territories. Apparently Tyler was one slaveowner who questioned whether or not slavery had to expand to survive. The only solution was to accept, as he did in the case of California's constitution excluding slavery, local or state control of the "peculiar institution." National greatness and America's destiny should be the common pursuit; presumably slavery would become a non-issue subsumed in that glorious future.<sup>31</sup>

Despite John Tyler's guarded optimism, slavery and race relations remained the nagging unresolved issues that tainted and hence jeopardized the glories of empire and expansion. One scholar of the antebellum era, Thomas Hietala, has explained the pursuit of national destiny and its 1840s variant, manifest destiny, as a crisis of national confidence rather than the bold spread-eagleism normally associated with this phenome-

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<sup>30</sup> Tyler to Col. David L. Gardiner, Dec. 7, 1849, July 25, 1850, Tyler Family Papers.

<sup>31</sup> Tyler to Samuel Gardiner, Nov. 26, 1850, *ibid.* See also Tyler's letter in 1856 to General Thomas Green, Huntington Letters, Tyler Collection.



non.<sup>32</sup> In his recent book, *Manifest Design*, Hietala argued that Tyler and his successor, James K. Polk, embraced territorial and commercial expansion because of their anxiety and uneasiness about race relations, antislavery agitation, population growth, modernization, and international competition for colonies and trade. As far as Tyler's presidency was concerned, Hietala's analysis of the Virginian's anxieties over race relations and antislavery agitation was on target. Hietala also correctly emphasized Tyler's fears and concerns about the United States losing out in the international scramble for colonies and trade. John Tyler especially feared, as another scholar of the period, Kinley Brauer, has made clear, the global ambitions of Great Britain.<sup>33</sup>

However, on the issues of population growth and modernization—which presumably encompassed industrialization, urbanization, and technological change—Hietala's "anxious aggrandizement" argument is inaccurate and far less persuasive. John Tyler was not anxious or uneasy about population growth and modernization. He viewed both as part of a natural process that would fulfill America's destiny. For example, in his fourth and final annual message of December 3, 1844, President Tyler summed up the accomplishments of his administration by approvingly pointing to, among a host of other achievements, the revival of commerce and manufacturing and the rapid growth of cities. He also welcomed technological advancements that surely would help foster the nation's mission, confidently observing that "the influence of our political system is destined to be as actively and as beneficially felt on the distant shores of the Pacific as it is now on those of the Atlantic Ocean. The only formidable impediments in the way of its successful expansion (time and space) are so far in the progress of modifications by the improvements of the age..." On another occasion, when comparing the annexation of Texas to the Louisiana Purchase, he clarified the link between technology and expansion with the observation that "distant regions are by the application of the steam engine brought within a close proximity."<sup>34</sup>

Earlier that election year, in a letter of April 22 submitting the Texas annexation treaty to the Senate, President Tyler revealed yet again his debt to fellow Virginian James Madison on the virtues of expansion and growth, when discussing the "proposed enlargement of our territory. From this, I am free to confess, I see no danger. The federative system

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, William H. Goetzmann, *When the Eagle Screamed: The Romantic Horizon in American Diplomacy, 1800-1860* (New York, 1966).

<sup>33</sup> Hietala, *Manifest Design*, xi; Kinley J. Brauer, "The United States and British Imperial Expansion, 1815-60," *Diplomatic History*, 12 (Winter 1988), 19-37.

<sup>34</sup> Richardson, comp., *Messages and Papers*, V, 2189, 2178.

is susceptible of the greatest extension compatible with the ability of the representation of the most distant State or Territory to reach the seat of Government” and the “addition of new States has served to strengthen rather than to weaken the Union.”<sup>35</sup> Throughout his life John Tyler retained his belief in and commitment to the Madisonian principle that territorial expansion was an essential epoxy of federal union. In confronting the major problems faced by his generation, the most significant being the great contradiction of slavery in a republic dedicated to freedom and liberty, Tyler did not merely take counsel of his fears and anxieties. He stubbornly and persistently urged his fellow citizens both South and North to keep faith in America’s national destiny, ever confident even as he glimpsed the storm clouds of disunion and civil strife on the horizon, that the “future of the civilized world is in our hands if we be but true to ourselves.”<sup>36</sup>

In the 1850s the former president also revealed a heightened appreciation for the increasingly vital role played by private entrepreneurs, or non-state actors, in the pursuit of empire and national destiny. Oddly enough for a slave-owning Virginian and lifelong Jeffersonian, Tyler not only singled out merchants for particular praise, but also extolled their self-interested commitment to the Union. In a lecture to the Library Association of Petersburg, Virginia, in 1854 he told his audience that the American merchant “has caused the name of his country, by his fidelity to his engagements, to be honored, and has won for himself the respectful confidence of the world. His present elevated condition gives rise to reflections intimately associated with the destiny of the country, whose power and glory he has done so much to increase. Above all other men, he should most highly appreciate the value and importance of the union of the States.” In the conclusion of this remarkable tribute to the merchant class from an aristocratic plantation owner and allegedly doctrinaire advocate of states’ rights, Tyler urged Virginian merchants to challenge and surpass the commercial achievements of their northern counterparts. If they succeeded, he predicted, their triumph in the

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 2165-66.

<sup>36</sup> *A Lecture prepared at the Request of the Library Association of Petersburg, delivered on the 4th of May, 1854* (Petersburg, 1854), 6. Julia Gardiner Tyler shared her husband’s fascination with America’s destiny. In her famous response “to the Duchess of Sutherland and Ladies of England” defending the South and slavery, which was reprinted in the February 1853 issue of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Mrs. Tyler warned her British antagonists that “Governments and countries which are now looked upon as stars of the first magnitude, will ere long, if the United States roll on their present orbit, be secondary and tertiary in the political hemisphere.”

marketplace assuredly “will make the American merchant oracular in all he does on the great exchange of the world.”<sup>37</sup>

Amidst the threatening sectional turmoil of the 1850s Tyler not only commended the virtues of a merchant class wedded to the limitless commercial promise of the Union, he also retained an unswerving faith in the United States as “a mighty empire” and the world’s model republic. But he was empathic in his belief that America should lead by example and not by force of arms. In response to a query from the Jefferson Literary Society of Philadelphia in early 1852 requesting his “opinion on the subject of intervention,” Tyler unequivocally endorsed the principle of nonintervention in the internal affairs of other nations. Americans must foreswear military escapades as well as “paper bulletins and governmental declarations” in the pursuit of their mission abroad. Otherwise, he warned, we had “better proclaim ourselves the knights errant of liberty and organize at once a crusade against all despotic governments. We should announce to all Nations our determination to advance with sword the doctrines of republicanism” and shout to the international community that “*there is but one form of gov’t upon earth which we will tolerate and that is a Republic.*” At least for Tyler, if not for all devotees of national greatness and glory, the pursuit of national destiny should not have led the United States into becoming the world’s policeman.<sup>38</sup>

Despite all of Tyler’s buoyant optimism about the future destiny of the United States as a great power and its role as a model republic for the world to emulate, the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 confronted him with the reality of his and the South’s worst nightmare. Lincoln was

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<sup>37</sup> *A Lecture prepared at the Request of the Library Association of Petersburg.* Summarizing the work of a number of historians of the early republic, William Earl Weeks has noted that: “Although assisted by federal policy, private citizens conducted the bulk of antebellum America’s relations with the world.” See his recent article, “American Nationalism, American Imperialism: An Interpretation of United States Political Economy, 1789-1861,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 14 (Winter 1994), 490. Secretary of State Lewis Cass clearly expressed this approach in his instructions to U.S. Minister to China in 1857, William B. Reed: “We go there to engage in trade, but under suitable guarantees for its protection. The extension of our commercial intercourse must be the work of individual enterprise, and to this element of our national character we may safely leave it.” Cass to Reed, May 30, 1857, Senate Document no. 30, 36th Cong., 1st sess., 8.

<sup>38</sup> John Tyler to —, Feb. 3, 1852, Tyler Family Papers. Tyler was not alone in expressing these views about the United States, for as Bradford Perkins has argued about the antebellum years: “Time and again, Americans demanded that they be respected as a model for the world.” See Bradford Perkins, “Interests, Values, and the Prism: The Sources of American Foreign Policy,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 14 (Winter 1994), 460.

the rare nineteenth-century American politician who, when elected to the nation's highest office, defied the Madisonian formula of "extending the sphere" and rejected the argument that the preservation of the American system depended on unbridled continental expansion. As historian Walter LaFeber has noted, Lincoln "believed that no expansion was preferable to expansion that enriched slavery and discriminated against freeholding whites." Unlike Lincoln, the aged John Tyler, now in his seventies, remained confident of the expansionist panacea and during the crisis of 1860-61 supported the compromise presented by his boyhood chum from their days at William and Mary, John J. Crittenden of Kentucky. The Crittenden Compromise was a serious last-ditch effort by a member of Tyler's generation to invoke the previously reliable Madisonian formula. When the Republican president-elect flatly rejected Crittenden's proposal and acted upon his privately stated belief that there "is, in my judgment, but one compromise which would freely settle the slavery question, and that would be a prohibition against acquiring any more territory," Tyler chose secession over union.<sup>39</sup>

Why in the end did Tyler forsake the Union along with his lifelong commitment to the pursuit of America's national destiny? Undoubtedly because the Madisonian approach was the bedrock of his belief in national destiny—territorial aggrandizement and ever more land for the expansion of both slave and free labor were absolutely essential in his formula for national greatness. Not surprisingly, but unfortunately for the nation he had served so faithfully, when that recipe for national glory was discarded he chose slavery and its continued unrestricted expansion as the key ingredients in his vision of the American dream. Tyler's decision for secession also was driven by the fear of a future race war between blacks and whites. Shortly after Lincoln's election, he candidly explained to an old friend how slavery and expansion were inextricably linked to his anxieties about the racial question. In a November 16, 1860, letter to Dr. Silas Reed, Tyler confided that Virginia "will never consent to have her blacks cribbed and confined within proscribed and specified limits - and

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<sup>39</sup> Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad since 1750* (New York, 1989), 138-39; Chitwood, *John Tyler*, 448-54; Abraham Lincoln to James T. Hale, Jan. 11, 1861, in Basler, *Works of Lincoln*, IV, 172. Lincoln undoubtedly opposed the expansion of slavery, but it is less certain that he opposed expansion per se. There is evidence that he shared the outlook of the political abolitionists of the 1840s who sought overseas markets for American wheat, corn, and other grains. For example, see Lincoln's comments in his Annual Message to Congress, Dec. 1, 1862, calling for foreign "outlets" for the agricultural products of the "vast interior region" of the United States, in Basler, *Works of Lincoln*, V, 529.

thus be involved in all the consequences of a war of the races in some 20 or 30 years. She must have expansion, and if she cannot obtain for herself and sisters that expansion in the Union, she may sooner or later look to Mexico, the West India Islands, and Central America as the ultimate reservations of the African race." An embittered Tyler concluded that Lincoln's victory signalled that "now everything is reversed, and no more Slave States has apparently become the shibboleth of Northern political faith."<sup>40</sup>

As one of Virginia's delegates to the Peace Convention that met in Washington in February 1861, Tyler earnestly sought compromise of the tried and true expansionist variety to save the Union. When that effort failed, he attended the Virginia state convention the following month and voted with the majority for secession. During the floor debate at the Virginia convention, former president John Tyler explained his reasons for wanting to leave the Union. The necessity of future territorial expansion for the South headed his list. This became emphatically clear when Virginia's elder statesman incredulously responded to a delegate from the western section of the state who spoke against secession and rejected the argument for continued territorial expansion:

But, sir we were told that we wanted no more land; that we have plenty of land to fill up for one hundred years to come. I did not expect to hear this upon this floor. I do not know the gentleman who uttered the remark. Want no more land! Content to remain but seven States in the vast collection of Northern States! Want no expansion! No more power than they will grant you!

In this emotional speech the angry old man also denounced the compromise offered at the peace convention, which he believed was fundamentally different from Crittenden's original proposal. "And yet, in my firm belief," Tyler proclaimed to his fellow Virginians, "you cannot acquire a foot of land under this provision of the Peace Conference, for it effectually closes the door to further expansion on the part of the South."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Tyler to Silas Reed, Nov. 16, 1860, John Tyler Papers (Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

<sup>41</sup> John Tyler's remarks of March 13, 1861, in George H. Reese, ed., *Proceedings of the Virginia State Convention of 1861, February 13-May 1* (4 vols., Richmond, 1965), I, 647, 653. For an excellent discussion of the importance of the issue of future territorial expansion to the secession crisis of 1860-61, see Robert E. May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854-1861* (Baton Rouge, 1973), 206-44.

Obviously saddened by the breakup of the United States, Tyler also was perplexed that his expansionist formula for national destiny and greatness had failed to preserve the Union. His faith in Jeffersonian nationalism had been sustained for four decades by the easy success of republican territorial and commercial expansionism. It had consistently worked in the past to finesse sectionalism and cement the Union through its guarantees of individual economic opportunity and the pursuit of the American dream, and its overall promise of technological change, human progress, and national glory. Throughout his public career until the eve of the secession crisis, Tyler had promoted a nationalism that combined the expansionist Madisonian formula with the pursuit of national destiny to sublimate sectionalism and sustain the Union. But in the late 1850s that traditional nationalism based on territorial aggrandizement and slavery, the legacy of Presidents Jefferson, Jackson, Tyler, and Polk, had been challenged and displaced by a competing antislavery nationalism, with its origins in the political abolitionism of the 1840s and dedicated to free soil and free men.<sup>42</sup> Defiantly rejecting the ascendant nationalism of Lincoln and the Republicans, John Tyler reluctantly abandoned both the Union and his lifelong pursuit of American national destiny.

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<sup>42</sup> For recent perceptive analyses of competing antebellum nationalisms, see Tom Chaffin, "'Sons of Washington': Narciso López, Filibustering, and U.S. Nationalism, 1848-1851," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 15 (Spring 1995), 79-108; and Michael A. Morrison, "Westward the Curse of Empire: Texas Annexation and the American Whig Party," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 10 (Summer 1990), 221-49.