President, Planter, Politician: James Monroe, the Missouri Crisis, and the Politics of Slavery

John Craig Hammond

Historians have long sought to assess the role of President James Monroe in forging and then negotiating the passage of the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Their assessments have been written within a historiographical tradition that praises statesmanship over sectionalism, celebrates southern statesmen’s invocations of union and nationalism, and elevates compromise to the loftiest of American political values. Within that historiographical paradigm, interpretations of the politics of slavery focus on how sectional extremists exploited the fragility of the Union for their own purposes, and how moderate unionist statesmen intervened to save the Union from sectionalists. In turn, much historical writing seeks to identify sectional threats to union, castigate disunionists, and then celebrate how unionists won in every sectional crisis from the 1770s through the late 1850s, or explain how disunionists triumphed in 1860–1861. Overlapping spectrums of union and disunion, slavery and antislavery, statesmen and sectionalists form a metanarrative that provides an outline for most writing on slavery and politics from the American Revolution through the Civil War. In the broader scholarly literature on the politics of slavery, disunionism and narrow sectionalism are cardinal sins; unionism and nationalism are virtues.1

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Written within these historiographical conventions, celebrations of a unionist, nationalist, and even antislavery Monroe have come to dominate the literature on the Missouri crisis and the politics of slavery from the Revolution though the breakdown of the second party system in the 1850s. In the first scholarly study of the Missouri crisis, Glover Moore celebrated unionism but dismissed Monroe’s role in forging a compromise due to the president’s alleged ineptness. According to Moore, Monroe was “too undecided in his own mind about Missouri to bring pressure to bear on anybody else.” Lacking the decisiveness of a George Washington or the intellect of a Thomas Jefferson, Monroe proved unable to guide competing interests to an equitable compromise. Yet even if Monroe lacked the qualities of a statesman, he redeemed himself by signing into law a compromise forged by others, despite the determination of hot-headed Virginians to strike for disunion. Writing in the early 1970s, Harry Ammon successfully restored Monroe’s reputation from historians such as Moore who “portrayed Monroe as an ineffective and indecisive figure during the Missouri Crisis.” Ammon’s Monroe was a thoughtful statesman who, abiding by republican conventions on the role of the executive, “kept his activities on behalf of compromise deeply veiled.” From the 1970s through the early 2000s, historians largely ignored Monroe’s role in the Missouri crisis. That historiographical lull changed dramatically with the publication of Robert Forbes’s *The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath: Slavery and the Meaning of America,* which has become the authoritative source on the Missouri crisis and Monroe’s role in shaping its outcome. Forbes’s Monroe is an antislavery unionist and statesman worthy of effusive praise. In Forbes’s analysis, Monroe emerges as the secret leader of a group of “antislavery pragmatists” who recognized that slavery threatened to tear the Union asunder. Forbes’s Monroe secured a compromise intended to set the nation on a decidedly antislavery path, but that antislavery promise was foiled by unprincipled doughfaces such as Martin Van Buren and proslavery southerners who forged a proslavery Democratic party in the 1820s.²

Over the past decade, Forbes’s interpretation of Monroe has become standard in the literature on the Missouri Compromise and the politics of slavery. In a grand synthesis of the period between 1815 and 1848, Daniel Walker Howe borrows directly from Forbes, contending that Monroe supported the Missouri Compromise because he “favored” an antislavery “concession to northern sentiment.” Howe’s Monroe is a disinterested statesman who favored union-saving concessions: southern whites would receive Missouri without resections on slavery; northern voters and politicians would get slavery barred from most of the region encompassed by the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. In an equally grand synthesis of the abolition movement, Manisha Sinha builds on Forbes’s portrait of Monroe, placing him at the head of “a large bisectional coalition of religious and political leaders” who “sought to solve the problem of slavery and race” at the time of the Missouri crisis “by promoting colonization of African Americans.” Likewise, in a recent study on Monroe’s involvement with colonization at the time of the Missouri crisis, Daniel Pres-

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ton claims that Monroe “believed that slavery was both unjust and a detriment to the United States, and that it should be eradicated, not by acts of individual manumission but by comprehensive state or even national emancipation” accompanied by colonization. “A confirmed nationalist dedicated to the preservation of the Union,” Preston’s Monroe knew “that slavery had the potential to destroy the Union” during the Missouri crisis. In a selfless act of statesmanship, Monroe “threw his support solidly behind the compromise” to preserve union. In the most recent studies of the Missouri crisis, John R. Van Atta argues that a unionist Monroe sought unity within the fractured Republican party as part of his larger strategy to ameliorate growing sectional divisions, and Matthew W. Hall finds a similarly unionist Monroe who spent two months “marshalling every available resource to gain the necessary votes to win passage of the Compromise” and save the Union.³

Though the details differ in each account, the result is much the same: Monroe was a unionist and moderate on the slavery question, perhaps even moderately antislavery. Monroe’s moderation, statesmanship, and commitment to union allowed him to work behind the scenes to forge a judicious compromise that included important restrictions on slavery. His compromise kept the slavery issue at bay for a generation, until sectionalists and doughfaces repealed the compromise and brought the issue to the fore by selfishly forcing passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. In a historiographical metanarrative of union and disunion, nation and section, slavery and antislavery, statesmen and sectionalists, Monroe has been elevated into the pantheon of upper-South statesmen who valued union over section and compromise over radicalism on the slavery question.

This narrative badly distorts the course and significance of the Missouri crisis, Monroe’s role in forging what became the Missouri Compromise of 1820, and his position on slavery, section, and union. It also misrepresents Monroe’s understandings of the relationship between slavery in Virginia and an expanding United States, while overlooking Monroe’s firm commitment to Virginia’s planter class. Monroe’s close identification with that class, along with a shifting mess of sectional, regional, and geopolitical calculations influenced his understanding of the Missouri crisis and his actions in shaping its outcome. Monroe might have been a moderate, a unionist, and a nationalist on matters such as a national bank, but regarding slavery Monroe was as protective of the institution as the most radical Virginia planters. Throughout the Missouri crisis Monroe proved more committed to preserving the waning power of Virginia’s planter class than to the Union, while his commitment to the planter class blinded him to the extent of northern determination to end slavery’s expansion. Monroe was neither a unionist nor a disunionist, neither a sectionalist nor a nationalist. Rather, as with so many other southern politicians, union and nation were subordinate to Monroe’s larger commitment to protecting and promoting the interests of the planter class. For Monroe, union was useful in instrumental terms.

Through the Missouri crisis, Monroe sought not the best compromise for the Union but the most favorable outcome for Virginia’s planter class. Toward this end he worked extensively with leading southern and Virginia politicians to defeat any congressional compromise that would place restrictions on slavery, even in far-off and unsettled territories. Monroe also signaled his willingness to endorse disunion, provided that Virginia planters’

interests could be protected by remaining in union with the southwest. In a sharp reversal from his previous opposition to compromise, Monroe accepted territorial restrictions on slavery only when it seemed likely that sectional disunion would also lead to southern separation from the West, or that northern restrictionists would prevail on their demands to halt slavery's expansion forever. In the end, Monroe grudgingly accepted the compromise because he determined that the least bad outcome for Virginia's planter class was a compromise that denied to northern antislavery restrictionists most of what they sought. Hardly a union-saving act of statesmanship pregnant with antislavery implications, Monroe's endorsement of the Missouri Compromise was a last-ditch effort to defeat a budding antislavery movement that stood a few congressional votes shy of enacting the most meaningful national restrictions on slavery in a generation.

Misunderstandings of Monroe's role in fashioning the Missouri Compromise have badly distorted interpretations of the Missouri crisis. The Missouri Compromise, as passed, focused narrowly on slavery in Missouri and the northern reaches of the Louisiana Purchase. Consequently, the compromise has progressed through history and been covered in historiography as a union-saving measure. As a result, historians have tended to work backward from the outcome, seeking to identify the origins of the compromise that admitted Missouri without restrictions while prohibiting slavery north of latitude 36°30'. But the “Missouri question,” as understood by contemporaries, was not simply about slavery in Missouri or the Louisiana Purchase. It was, instead, “the question whether the vast territory west of the Mississippi shall be peopled with slaves.” In supporting the 36°30' compromise on slavery, Monroe was not accepting a judicious compromise; he was, instead, seeking to defeat northern efforts to prohibit the “further extension of slavery in all states and territories hereafter admitted to the Union.”

Northerners arrived at such far-reaching demands because the Missouri question forced Congress to address systematically what had been proceeding haphazardly since 1815: massive migration and the growth of plantation slavery in the trans-Appalachian and trans-Mississippi Wests; the rapid acquisition of new territory through conquest and treaty; and the consolidation of the Union in once-contested borderlands. By 1819, expansion and the consolidation of the Union in its western and southern borderlands had entered a new phase. Between the War of 1812 and the Missouri crisis, six western territories had either received or applied for statehood. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams had won from Britain joint occupation of the Oregon Country and an American outlet on the Pacific coast. Concomitant with Adams’s actions in the Missouri crisis, he was involved in heated negotiations with Spain over Florida and Texas, which southern politicians insisted were included in the Louisiana Purchase with France but unjustly denied to the United States by Spain. In 1819 the United States stood on the verge of gaining or consolidating new territorial claims over a vast swath of the North American continent. For northern restrictionists and southern expansionists the problem of slavery in Missouri was part of a broader issue involving the place of slavery in a union forging a continental empire.

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The Missouri crisis had important antecedents. In April 1818 New Hampshire representative Arthur Livermore proposed amending the Constitution to prohibit slavery “in any State hereafter admitted to the Union,” only to have the proposal immediately voted down. The admission of Illinois to statehood later that year revived the issue of slavery’s place in an incipient continental empire. Despite the prohibition of slavery by Article VI of the Northwest Ordinance (1787), an elaborate system of indentured servitude ensnared 1,200 Illinois African Americans in a system of bondage that differed little from slavery. As Illinois moved toward statehood, leading politicians there favored the full legalization of slavery and the exclusion of Article VI from the state constitution. However, the western slavery advocate and former congressman Matthew Lyon warned Illinois politicians that “there is not the least probability that Congress will ever comply” on “the subject of slavery.” If Illinois wished to gain statehood, it needed to include the Article VI prohibition against slavery in its proposed constitution. The proposed Illinois constitution included Article VI in response to warnings from Lyon and others, but it contained an elaborate set of exceptions that permitted slavery, in circumstance if not by name. Northern Republicans, led by New York representative James Tallmadge, sought to block Illinois statehood on the grounds that “the principle of slavery” was not “sufficiently prohibited” in the proposed state constitution. Tallmadge’s efforts were defeated when southern politicians extolled the antislavery features of the Illinois constitution. Indeed, southern representatives praised the constitution for providing a model for gradually abolishing slavery and servitude in a region where both had long existed. Despite southern defenses of the allegedly antislavery features of the constitution, thirty-three northern representatives voted against the admission of Illinois to statehood in what should have been an uncontroversial, pro forma vote.6

Two months after the admission of Illinois, Pennsylvania congressman John Sergeant revived Livermore’s efforts to forge a more general prohibition on slavery’s expansion. Sergeant proposed a “general ordinance, whereby the fundamental principles of civil and religious liberty shall be guaranteed to the inhabitants of the Territories exterior to the limits of the United States, and made the basis of all Governments hereafter to be established in the Union.” When pressed on the proposal’s vague wording, Sergeant acknowledged seeking to prohibit slavery in the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase and in any territories that the United States might acquire from Spain in the future, including Florida and Texas. The House tabled Sergeant’s motion, but the issue returned the following month when Congress took up Missouri statehood. Rep. Tallmadge proposed, as a condition of statehood, that Missouri prohibit the further introduction of slaves into the state and provide for the emancipation at age twenty-five of all slaves born after statehood. In effect, Tallmadge proposed imposing a gradual abolition plan on Missouri similar to those that had nearly eradicated slavery from the northern states over the previous forty years. After a few days of furious debate, the House passed the Missouri statehood bill with the Tallmadge restrictions on slavery; the Senate rejected the measure in early 1919; and Congress adjourned with the issue unresolved. The Sixteenth Congress would return to the issue in January 1820.7


7 Annals of Congress, 15 Cong., 2 sess., Jan. 15, 1819, p. 547. For later uses of the language of John Sergeant’s proposal, see, for example, ibid., 16 Cong., 1 sess., Jan. 27, 1820, p. 966. On broader conflicts over slavery between 1815 and 1819, see Mason, Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic, 130–76.
Before then, a broad group of northern politicians and voters would deem themselves “restrictionists” and call on Congress to do what Livermore and Sergeant had counseled over the previous year: adopt a full, final, and comprehensive prohibition of slavery’s expansion. Northern calls for that prohibition extended not just to Missouri but also to the remainder of the region covered by the Louisiana Purchase, to the looming acquisitions of Spanish Florida and Texas, and to any present or future territory “from the Mississippi River to the South Sea.” As one newspaper noted in December 1819, the upcoming Congress would address not the question of slavery in Missouri but “the Abolition of Slavery in the states or territories which may be hereafter admitted to the Union.” This expectation echoed the language and understandings of “the Missouri question” that became widespread across the North as the congressional session neared. In late 1819 and early 1820, local meetings, town and city councils, and state legislatures across the North adopted resolutions and petitions calling on Congress to prohibit the “further extension of slavery in all states and territories hereafter admitted to the Union.” Pamphlets and articles that filled northern newspapers repeated this demand. Most confidently expected that “slavery shall not be permitted to spread beyond its present confines.”

The demands expressed in the widely circulated resolutions, petitions, articles, and pamphlets shaped congressional debates. The initial committee for addressing the Missouri question was instructed to “inquire into the expediency of prohibiting by law the introduction of slaves into the territories of the United States west of the Mississippi.” For Pennsylvania senator Jonathan Roberts the “Missouri question” involved not just slavery in Missouri but also the question of “whether freedom or slavery is to be the lot of the regions beyond the Mississippi.” New Jersey representative Joseph Bloomfield received a letter from a constituent pondering “whether a civil war would be preferable”—not to slavery in Missouri but “to the extension of slavery beyond the Mississippi.” The recently retired Pennsylvania senator Abner LaCock noted that a group of Pennsylvania congressmen likewise sought a general prohibition on “the establishment of slave states over the Mississippi.” In a letter to Ohio governor Ethan Allen Brown, Ohio senator William Trimble acknowledged receipt of the Ohio legislature’s resolution “relative to the admission or extension of slavery in the territories of the United States or any new State which may be hereafter admitted to the Union.” In effect, northern restrictionists sought to implement a new Northwest Ordinance for the vast regions west of the Mississippi River and for Florida. For northern restrictionists—a self-identified group that included

the majority of northern congressmen and a sizeable portion of the electorate—the Missouri question offered Congress an opportunity to halt slavery’s expansion fully, finally, and forever. 9

Southern politicians, including Monroe, recognized that northern restrictionists sought a general and comprehensive prohibition on slavery’s expansion. Southern newspapers reprint the proceedings of northern restrictionist meetings. Adding their own commentary, they dismissed the resolutions as “solecisms,” or derivatives of “the Doctrine of the Hartford convention.” North Carolina senator Montfort Stokes explained to his governor that “a considerable majority” of northern congressmen “are in favor of restriction as to all the country purchased from France,” which, for southern politicians such as Stokes and Monroe, included Texas. Virginia senator James Barbour warned members of the Virginia legislature that “in both branches of Congress there was a decided majority for extending the 6th Article of the [Northwest] Ordinance to the territories of the U.S.” Virginia representative and future president John Tyler likewise feared that “a joint resolution restricting the territories,” “being general in its terms,” would soon pass Congress. In a public letter Monroe explained to Virginia planters that northern restrictionists intended to pass territorial restrictions on slavery, and that “the exclusion will be general,” covering all future and present territories of the United States. More than simply a debate over the status of slavery in Missouri or even the northern reaches of the Louisiana Purchase, the Missouri question centered on the place of slavery in an empire expanding to continental proportions. 10

When Congress reconvened in January 1820, it again faced the immediate issues of Missouri statehood and a prohibition on slavery’s future expansion. Southern obfuscation and obstruction, however, caused debate to degenerate into an inchoate mess involving the distinct but related issues of slavery in Missouri; slavery in the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase; slavery in Florida and Texas; the place of slavery in an ill-defined West; the legitimacy of the ban on slavery by Article VI of the Northwest Ordinance; the constitutionality of restrictions on slavery; and the place of slavery in the past, present, and future of the southern states. Congressional speeches, the private correspondence of politicians, newspaper articles, and pamphlets touched on most if not all of these issues. As debate dragged on with no resolution in sight, select northern and southern congressmen began searching for a resolution. By mid-January, even the most ardent restrictionists conceded that “Congress have left the favourable time pass. They should have prohibited slavery” in Missouri “when the Territorial government was formed” in 1804. Unless northern restrictionists would “compromise to admit Missouri without restriction,” it would “be


extremely difficult perhaps impracticable to prevent the further introduction of slavery in the Territories.” The restrictionists’ initial Missouri compromise would trade Missouri statehood without restrictions for a prohibition on “the further introduction of slavery in the Territories.”

By early February 1820, with a compromise agreed to in principle, the main issue facing Congress was the extent of territorial restrictions on slavery. Former Pennsylvania senator LaCock cajoled northern and southern politicians to “let the slaveholding states accept Missouri Arkansaw, & the Floridas, & give an equivalent to the others in the west.” Maine representative Mark Hill expected northerners to admit Missouri without restrictions, “provided slavery shall never exist in what is now the vacant territory.” Southerners, however, remained concerned about slavery in “the Floridas.” By late February, a majority of congressmen agreed to the 36°30’ parallel that would go down in history as the Missouri Compromise. But as Congress went through its final round of votes, a group of northern congressmen sought more extensive prohibitions on slavery’s expansion. On multiple occasions, northern restrictions sought “to exclude slavery from the whole country west of the Mississippi, except in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri.” This measure would have, in substance, conceded Florida but prohibited slavery everywhere else, including in Texas. These proposals failed, as did a House proposal declaring “that there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in any of the territories of the United States.” With Congress on the verge of settling the issues of slavery in Missouri and in the remainder of the land of the Louisiana Purchase, a sufficient number of northerners joined their southern colleagues to defeat these proposals, narrowly at first but more decisively later. By early March, southern compromisers shared their northern counterparts’ determination to end the issue. When the Virginian John Randolph tried to reopen debate following House passage of the compromise, Speaker of the House Henry Clay had the clerk physically move the bill and the House journal to the Senate so that the House could not reopen the issue.

For many northern politicians and voters, the Missouri Compromise stood as a rank failure. Ohio congressman John Sloane could barely bring himself to write about “the disgraceful character of the Missouri business.” Most southern politicians were far more jubilant. In a piece circulated widely across southern newspapers, the Washington National Intelligencer concluded that while the Missouri crisis was a “trying time in Congress,” the “trial has passed, and we look now only for harmony and conciliation on all sides.” Outside Virginia, southern politicians celebrated: they had defeated a concerted northern effort to impose comprehensive restrictions on slavery’s expansion. “We have carried the question to admit Missouri and all of Louisiana, to the Southward of 36-30 free of restriction from slavery,” read another letter that was frequently reprinted alongside the Washington National Intelligencer piece. The compromise “will include Arkansaw and the

11 Trimble to Brown, Jan. 29, 1820 (reel 1), Brown Collection. For the issues touched on in the Missouri debates, see Van Atta, Wolf by the Ears; Van Cleve, Slaveholders’ Union; Hammond, Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion in the Early American West; Forbes, Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath; and Mason, Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic.

Floridas, and give the Southern interest in a short time an addition of six, and perhaps eight members," hinting at the slave states to be formed out of the expected acquisition of Texas. In their private correspondence, southern congressman also expressed satisfaction with the Missouri Compromise. Clay deemed “the arrangement which has been made a very good one.” Alabama senator John Walker deemed “the compromise on the Missouri question” a “wise and necessary measure” that has “saved the Republic.” North Carolina senator Stokes likewise celebrated his work in settling the Missouri question. Stokes and his southern colleagues had set out “to rescue from the rapacious grasp of these fanatics a considerable portion of Louisiana,” and they had done just that. Stokes accepted the 36°30’ parallel as a “prudent and proper concession.” The South had defeated efforts to pass a full prohibition on slavery’s expansion, securing Florida, Texas, and the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase “as an asylum for slaves already too numerous to be comfortably supported in some of the southern states.”

Over the course of the Missouri crisis, Monroe’s actions were driven by his concerns for maintaining the privileged position of Virginia’s planter class both at home and within the Union. Though historians hail Monroe’s role in guiding the nation to an equitable compromise, from December 1819 through early February 1820 Monroe remained singularly committed to having Congress defeat territorial restrictions on slavery. In mid-February 1820, however, Monroe’s position on restrictions abruptly changed. He now feared that the restrictionists were on the verge of prevailing and that the shifting dynamics of union and disunion now worked against the interests of Virginia’s planter class. Monroe became convinced that a compromise prohibiting slavery north of the 36°30’ parallel was the best outcome possible for Virginia’s planters. After mid-February Monroe sought passage of the final Missouri Compromise—not because he was a unionist seeking an equitable outcome for all sections and interests but because he feared that far worse outcomes awaited Virginia if the issue was not immediately put to rest.

Monroe identified deeply with Virginia’s gentry, the amorphous group of planters, politicians, and professionals who believed that their birth, talent, and distinction marked them as the rightful governing class of Virginia and the Union. Born into a middling family and orphaned young, Monroe attended the College of William and Mary and rose into the ranks of the gentry thanks to the patronage of planters who appreciated his service to Virginia during the Revolutionary War. Monroe emulated the planter class who oversaw his rise. The inheritor of a single slave in 1774, Monroe owned at least seventy-five slaves in 1820. By then, Monroe’s slaves carried the financial burden of supporting his extended family, including two brothers, a sister, two daughters, and a son-in-law. Even amid the Missouri crisis Monroe remained active in managing his slaves and estates with his son-in-law and trusted confidant, George Hay. In late 1819 he and Hay sought to sell

13 John Sloane to Benjamin Tappan, March 29, 1820 (microfilm: reel 2), box 5, Benjamin Tappan Papers (Manuscript Division); “The Question Settled,” Washington National Intelligencer, March 3, 1820; “Copy of a Letter from the Honorable Charles Pinckney,” Charleston City Gazette and Daily Advertiser, March 10, 1820; Henry Clay to H. M. Brackenridge, March 7, 1820, folder 26, box 1, Henry Marie Brackenridge and Family Papers (Special Collections Library, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pa.); John Walker to Charles Tait, April 17, 1820, folder 10, box 1, Tait Family Papers (Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery); Stokes to Branch, Feb. 27, 1820, folder 2, box 1, Slaves and Slavery Collection.
his “Carver plantation” and to collect debts for slaves sold on credit. The following winter Monroe sought work for the slaves he had gifted to his daughter and Hay; Monroe promised “employment” for “any number” of Hay’s “people” at Monroe’s main estate making and laying bricks. As much as any Virginia planter or politician, Monroe and his extended family were dependent on his slaves’ labors, and he took an active role in running his family’s extended plantation operations.14

Monroe’s pre-presidential political career was marked by efforts to fend off internal and external attacks on Virginia’s gentry and slavery. Over a lifetime of public service, Monroe was an able defender of both. As a delegate to the Confederation Congress in the late 1780s, Monroe protected Virginia’s territorial claims south of the Ohio River and persistently fought for access to the Mississippi River, a preeminent concern of southern planters. As a member of the Virginia legislature and the state ratifying convention in 1788, he voted against ratification, identifying with Virginia’s antifederalist planters who opposed ceding any authority over Virginia to the federal government. As governor in 1800, Monroe led efforts to suppress Gabriel’s Rebellion and to prevent future revolts. To that end, he worked with Virginia planters and President Thomas Jefferson to secure a colony where free blacks, along with slaves suspected of “conspiracy, insurgency, Treason, and rebellion,” would be permanently banished. Gabriel’s Rebellion turned Monroe into an early and enthusiastic advocate of colonization—not to facilitate emancipation but to protect slavery by forcibly exiling free blacks and potentially rebellious slaves. During the War of 1812 Monroe served as both secretary of state and secretary of war. During the war he was tasked with fending off British raids in the Chesapeake region; these raids had resulted in the flight of approximately 3,400 slaves to British forces. After the war, Monroe personally oversaw delegations seeking the return of escaped slaves or British compensation for planter losses. Like other Virginia planters, Monroe feared that Britain would again invade the Chesapeake and use former slaves to incite rebellion among those still held in bondage. As secretary of war and then as president, Monroe sought to defend Chesapeake planters by securing funding for forts, including what would become the largest moated military fort in North America, Virginia’s Fortress Monroe. In a long and distinguished career in public service, Monroe identified with Virginia’s planter class and devoted himself to protecting planters from any attack on slavery. He would do the same as president during the Missouri crisis.15

Forty years of slaveholding and forty years of countering threats to slavery had nurtured in Monroe a deep concern for protecting slavery, especially when planters seemed to be beset by enemies, whether from the North, from Great Britain, or from their own...


slaves. Writing at the height of the Missouri crisis to Hay, Monroe explained how the gentry’s position on slavery had changed dramatically since the Revolution. Monroe ascribed Virginia’s support of the prohibition of slavery by the Northwest Ordinance to “a generous sentiment which grew out of the revolutionary struggle.” Virginia’s gentry could afford such sentiments in 1787 because “we had then no experience of the dangers menacing us from domestic slavery, & we went the full length with our northern brethren.” But Virginians have “since had experience” with slavery’s dangers—from Gabriel’s Rebellion to the War of 1812 to a dangerously large and growing enslaved population in Virginia. Generosity toward the antislavery sentiments of northern whites was a luxury Virginians could no longer afford. With a dangerously large population of slaves, expansion was now a necessity; all Monroe asked was that the North “show some regard for our peculiar situation.” Throughout the Missouri crisis, the “peculiar situation” of Virginia slavery and the gentry class remained Monroe’s paramount concern. Possessing a dangerously large enslaved population, and fearful of slave rebellion and British invasion, Monroe and the planter class demanded unfettered access to all present and future federal territories.16

While northern restrictionists held public meetings and drafted resolutions in the interlude between the fifteenth and sixteenth Congresses, Monroe and many of his Virginia colleagues were already involved in fending off transatlantic political attacks on slavery. In late 1818 the widely read Scottish magazine *Edinburgh Review* published a scathing critique of southern society, arguing that slavery undermined claims to the superiority of republicanism over monarchism. In the summer and fall of 1819, Virginian planters responded with a series of widely reprinted articles published under pseudonyms such as Hampden. Monroe, along with “Messrs. Jefferson & Madison,” corresponded with the authors of many of these pieces, providing praise, encouragement, and advice on the content of the essays. As the start of the congressional session neared in late 1819, the authors of these series changed their byline from “To the Edinburgh Review” to “Missouri Question,” or simply began addressing northern restrictionists rather than British authors critical of the South.17

Hay was among the most prolific essayists. A member of the Virginia senate, Hay published pieces from November 1819 through February 1820 in the *Richmond (Va) Enquirer* and the *Washington National Intelligencer* under the moniker An American. Monroe remained publicly silent throughout the Missouri crisis, instead communicating his positions on restriction and expansion through Hay’s essays. As the congressional session opening neared, Monroe suggested that Hay pen a piece showing that “congress has no right to admit into the union, any new state, on a different footing, from the old, written with ability & moderation.” Hay responded that he would be “taking precisely the view of that subject which your letter exhibits.” A dutiful son-in-law, Hay delivered two lengthy articles demonstrating that “Congress have no power to impose” restrictions on an incoming state or on any federal territory. Throughout the Missouri crisis, Monroe provided Hay with praise, encouragement, tips, and political intelligence on the course

16 Monroe to Hay, Dec. 27, 1819, JMA 442, box 46D (Monroe Museum).
of the Missouri question as Hay penned articles and served as Monroe’s unofficial spokes-
man in the Virginia legislature.\footnote{Monroe to Hay, Dec. 20, 1819 (microfilm: reel C54), James Monroe Papers, 1788–1828, mss2M7576a (Virginia Historical Society, Richmond); Hay to Monroe, Dec. 24, 1819 (reel 7), General Correspondence, 1758–1839, Monroe Papers (Manuscript Division); “For the Enquirer. Missouri Question,” Richmond (va) Enquirer, Jan. 1, 1820; “No. 6. Expedition,” ibid., Jan. 15, 1820. For Monroe’s and George Hay’s correspondence on the Missouri question, see also Monroe to Hay, Dec. 27, 1819, JMA 442, box 46D (Monroe Museum); Monroe to Hay, Jan. 1819, Monroe Papers, 1788–1828 (Virginia Historical Society); Monroe to Hay, Feb. 6, 1820 (microfilm: reel 4), box 10, Correspondence, 1772–1836, Monroe Papers (Manuscripts and Archives Division). Hay’s authorship of the essays by An American series constituted perhaps the most wide-ranging, conservative defense of slavery and its permanence published in the United States up to that time. The essays were written with the full knowledge, encouragement, and assistance of Monroe, and with the intent of defeating restrictions on slavery’s expansion. Monroe heartily approved Hay’s arguments, adding as a postscript to one of the many letters they exchanged that “your papers have certainly been well received & produced a great effect. You have sustained the cause of the South & West.”\footnote{John Quincy Adams, April 29, 1819, diary entry, in John Quincy Adams and the Politics of Slavery, ed. Waldstreicher and Mason, 60; “From the National Intelligencer. To the Edinburgh Reviewers,” Richmond (va) Enquirer, Nov. 23, 1819; “From the National Intelligence. To the Edinburgh Reviewers,” ibid., Nov. 30, 1819; “For the Enquirer Missouri Question,” ibid., Jan. 1, 15, 18, 1820. Emphasis in original. Hay to Monroe, Dec. 24, 1819 (reel 7), General Correspondence, 1758–1839, Monroe Papers (Manuscript Division); Monroe to Hay, Jan. 10, 1820 (microfilm: reel 4), box 10, Correspondence, 1772–1836, Monroe Papers (Manuscripts and Archives Division).}}

Hay was unmistakably a radical on the slavery question. In a conversation with John Quincy Adams, Hay deemed the international slave trade “a child of humanity,” an in-eradicable feature of human existence. In his An American essays, Hay maintained that slavery “will most probably continue to exist through all succeeding time.” He declared it “an unquestionable truth, that it is not at this moment in the power of human wisdom to devise a plan for the gradual abolition of slavery which does not require for its completion a degree of virtue, philosophy, and moderation, among both whites and blacks, which it would be folly to anticipate.” He deemed emancipation “a plain, palpable, reversal” of the “decree of the Almighty” on race and slavery. Hay insisted that there was “no plan” of emancipation “that can be devised, which will not bring upon those intended to be re-
lied, incalculable suffering.” He counseled that “there are moral as well as physical evils in this world, which no human agency can remove.” In Hay’s rendering, slavery was not a positive good to be celebrated; instead, it stood as a burden placed on blacks and whites alike by providence. Meddling with the institution only increased suffering for blacks and whites; \textit{“Real humanity”} required the unrestricted expansion of slavery, to the equal ben-
efit of blacks and whites. In sum, Hay’s An American series constituted perhaps the most wide-ranging, conservative defense of slavery and its permanence published in the United States up to that time. The essays were written with the full knowledge, encouragement, and assistance of Monroe, and with the intent of defeating restrictions on slavery’s expansion. Monroe heartily approved Hay’s arguments, adding as a postscript to one of the many letters they exchanged that “your papers have certainly been well received & produced a great effect. You have sustained the cause of the South & West.”

Like most Virginia planters, Monroe and Hay tied expansion to the theory of “diffu-
sion” and “amelioration.” Slavery’s expansion would “diffuse” the Atlantic slave states’ enslaved black population into the West, promising to “ameliorate” the condition of slaves. With the enslaved population diffused, planters would supposedly better provide for their slaves (who provided for themselves, in any case). Diffusion and amelioration also promised to lessen the likelihood of slave rebellion, as slaves who labored under better material conditions would allegedly be more content with their lot. Fewer and more content slaves would be less likely to rebel, deterring Britain from invading Virginia when the United States and Britain once again met in war. To protect slavery at home, Virginia planters needed unrestricted access to the West. Otherwise, they would be “damed up in a land
of slaves” inclined to revolt. Hardly a sincere but misguided attempt to create conditions that would permit gradual emancipation, diffusion and amelioration, planters acknowledged, would be the means by which they would safely manage slavery in perpetuity.20

In the caldron of the Missouri crisis, Monroe, Hay, and other leading Virginians forged new understandings of the relationship between the permanence of slavery in Virginia and the necessity of its continued expansion. Slavery “will most probably continue to exist through all succeeding time,” explained Hay, with a sentiment shared widely in the numerous essays penned by Virginians and the speeches they delivered on the floor of Congress. Senator Barbour echoed Hay’s arguments: Slavery “has existed from the earliest ages of the world.” “Reality has since taught” Virginians “that the evil” of slavery “is incurable by human means.” To the South “has been assigned such a portion as, in reference to their number and various considerations, no remedy, even plausible, has been suggested, though wisdom and benevolence united have increasingly brooded over the subject.” Expressing a creed widespread among Virginia planters, Barbour accepted that slavery and racial subordination were ineradicable features of southern life.21

Having accepted slavery’s permanence, Virginia slaveholders needed to provide for what Hay deemed “the proper and effectual management of slaves,” which required that slaveholders command unrestricted access to the trans-Mississippi West. As Barbour noted at the height of debate, “the real question is, what disposition shall we make of those slaves” in the slave states? “Shall they be perpetually confined on this side of the Mississippi, or shall we spread them over a much larger surface by permitting them to be carried beyond that river?” Only by maintaining unrestricted access to the regions “beyond that river” could the gentry maintain their control over slavery at home. Prohibiting expansion was tantamount to “a declaration that slavery does not exist within the United States; but if it does, that Congress may abolish it, or confine it to narrow limits.” No real difference existed between prohibiting slavery’s expansion and destroying the gentry’s ability to manage slavery at home. Having accepted slavery’s permanence, and having grown politically, economically, and ideologically dependent on the unrestricted expansion of slavery and the domestic slave trade that fed it, neither Monroe nor the gentry could brook any restrictions on slavery’s expansion.22

20 Hay to Monroe, Dec. 24, 1819 (reel 7), General Correspondence, 1758–1839, Monroe Papers (Manuscript Division); Monroe to Hay, Dec. 20, 1819, Monroe Papers, 1788–1828 (Virginia Historical Society); “From the National Intelligencer. To the Edinburgh Reviewers,” Richmond (va) Enquirer, Nov. 23, 30, 1819; “For the Enquirer. Missouri Question,” ibid., Jan. 15, 18, 1820; Roane to Monroe, Feb. 16, 1820 (microfilm: reel 4), box 10, Correspondence, 1772–1836, Monroe Papers (Manuscripts and Archives Division). Historians have tended to frame diffusion and amelioration as a sincere but misguided attempt to create conditions that would permit gradual emancipation. See, for example, Ford, Deliver Us from Evil. For a more critical analysis of amelioration that focuses on how planters in the Americas used amelioration to preserve slavery, see Christa Dierksheide, Amelioration and Empire: Progress and Slavery in the Plantation Americas (Charlottesville, 2014).


Monroe's understanding of the regional, sectional, and partisan dynamics of the Missouri crisis also deepened his opposition to restrictions on slavery. Though northern Republicans led and sustained the movement for restrictions, Monroe convinced himself that the Missouri question originated in a Federalist scheme to rule over the Union or destroy it. As Monroe understood matters, the origins of the Missouri crisis stretched back to the “same spirit which prevailed in 1786” and that resulted in the Jay-Gardoqui Treaty with Spain. Though never ratified, the Jay-Gardoqui Treaty would have ceded American navigation rights on the Mississippi River to Spain, forestalling southern settlement of the West. At the time of the treaty’s negotiation, southern politicians alleged that it originated in a New England plot to dominate the Union by denying the South access to the West, or, failing that, to create a separate New England confederacy. Monroe’s fears of New England supremacy dated to the 1780s, when he served as a Virginia delegate to the Confederation Congress; the passage of forty years had done little to mitigate his suspicions. Monroe alleged that the “dormant spirit” of New England domination had risen to drive Federalist actions during the Missouri crisis. He further insisted that New England and New York Federalists had no interest in the well-being of slaves or the future of slavery’s expansion. Instead, they had “seized on a popular topic”—slavery—“which gives them the command of the best affections of their constituents, who are ignorant of the condition of their Southern brethren.” Enjoying popular adulation at home for the first time since the War of 1812, Federalists allegedly exploited the slavery issue to realize their plan to “dismember the Union” or to rule over it.23

Like most Virginia planters, then, Monroe was convinced of the necessity of unrestricted slavery expansion for three reasons. Expansion was the most humane course of actions for slaves. Virginia planters and Monroe also believed that unrestricted expansion was a necessity, a just concession to financially strapped planters who lived in near-constant fear of slave revolt and British invasion. Lastly, like most Virginia planters, Monroe insisted that the entire Missouri question was simply New England Federalists’ latest attempt to destroy the Virginia gentry in their quest to dismember the Union or rule over it. With northern restrictionists seeking to end “the further introduction of slavery in all states and territories hereafter admitted to the Union,” Monroe took a covert but leading role in forcing passage of a Missouri bill without any restrictions on slavery. Monroe sought no compromise on restrictions; as he explained to a Virginia correspondent, “My object has invariably been to defeat the whole measure.”24

Monroe initially sought to “defeat the whole measure” by joining Missouri statehood with Maine statehood. While the details of that strategy shifted, Monroe’s goal remained no territorial restrictions. Initially, Monroe supported Henry Clay’s strategy of joining statehood bills for Maine and Missouri, then forcing a straight up or down vote on the joint bill. By early February, however, “Maine and Missouri” became “all the rage” as an


24 Monroe to Everett, Feb. 11, 1820, in James Monroe Papers in Virginia Repositories.
increasing number of northerners expressed outrage at “the trick that has been played upon the Yankys about Maine.” Monroe began to “doubt the policy which led to the union of Maine with Missouri” in a single bill. Too many northern politicians seemed willing to call the bluff of southerners who were holding Maine statehood hostage to Missouri without restrictions. Furthermore, leaving the issue of Maine and Missouri statehoods unresolved put Republicans inclined to support the South “in the hands & at the mercy of the authors of this scheme,” Rufus King and New England Federalists who allegedly sought the presidency or, failing that, disunion. Monroe retreated from the joint bill...
not because he sought an equitable compromise but because Clay’s joint bill was forcing antirestrictionist northerners to support restrictions.\textsuperscript{25}

In early February Monroe proposed a different plan but still indicated no willingness to trade Missouri statehood for restrictions on territorial slavery elsewhere. Plotting with Senator Barbour, Monroe counseled that “the best course for our union, and for that also of the southern states, will be, to separate the two questions at once, and to admit Maine.” Admitting Maine without restrictions “will put the southern members on high ground. It will be a just reward to Maine” and for New England Republicans who voted against Missouri restrictions. Most importantly, Monroe expected this strategy to “secure a better result in the final arrangement of the business:” the “unqualified admission of Missouri” and a rejection of restrictions on slavery in the territories. Monroe also provided Barbour with the arguments to use in favor of admitting Missouri without restrictions “on its own merits.” Concluding, Monroe advised Barbour “to have immediately a meeting of the southern members, & act promptly” to arrange the bills and line up votes.\textsuperscript{26}

When Monroe wrote and spoke of compromises in January and early February, this “compromise”—Maine statehood for Missouri without any restrictions on slavery in the territories—was foremost in his mind. Historians have incorrectly combined unfounded

\textsuperscript{25} Prentiss Mellen to Samuel A. Bradley, Feb. 2, 1820, folder 2, box 1, Slaves and Slavery Collection; Charles Hammond to John C. Wright, Feb. 2, 1820 (microfilm: reel 1), Charles Hammond Collection, 1793–1841, 1862, no. 96 (Ohio History Connection). Emphasis in original. Monroe to Madison, Feb. 5, 1820 (microfilm: reel 19), General Correspondence, 1723–1859, James Madison Papers (Manuscript Division).

\textsuperscript{26} Monroe to Barbour, Feb. 3, 1820, box 1, James Barbour Correspondence, 1792–1848, MssCOL205 (Manuscripts and Archives Division). For Monroe’s repeat of the substance of this plan to James Madison, see Monroe to Madison, Feb. 5, 1820 (reel 19), General Correspondence, 1723–1859, Madison Papers.
assumptions about Monroe’s unionism, statesmanship, and antislavery inclinations to create for Monroe a significant role in forging the 36°30’ compromise as early as January 1820. Early in that month, John Quincy Adams had a private meeting with Monroe; Adams expressed his “apprehensions” about the continuation of the Union, especially in light of the Missouri crisis. Monroe conveyed his confidence that “a compromise would be found.” Historians have mistakenly taken this exchange to indicate that Monroe was already working for passage of a compromise that traded Missouri statehood for some restrictions on slavery in the territories. Given that Monroe was simultaneously working to defeat any territorial restrictions on slavery, it seems far more likely that the compromise Monroe mentioned to Adams involved Maine statehood in exchange for Missouri statehood without restrictions. Likewise, two days after meeting with Adams, in a letter to Hay, Monroe noted that northerners who had voted against Missouri restrictions sought some kind of territorial restrictions to remain in the good graces of voters. Monroe acknowledged that a constitutional difference existed between restrictions on slavery in unsettled northern territories and slavery in places such as Missouri, but he gave no indication that he supported any restrictions on slavery in the territories. “I take of course no part in these concerns” for swapping unrestricted Missouri for restrictions in the territories, explained Monroe, who then applauded the effects of Hay’s An American essays for putting pressure on northern representatives to admit Missouri without restrictions on slavery in federal territories.27

Through early February, then, Monroe remained committed to seeing Congress admit Missouri without any concessions to northern restrictionists, and he undertook a variety of actions to realize this goal. He flattered Maine’s congressmen with a meeting at the executive mansion on New Year’s Day 1820, and he seems to have shared with them details of his plan to have the Maine and Missouri bills separated and passed. Monroe also met privately with the South Carolinian Charles Pinckney to discuss the best way to defeat northern restrictionists in Congress. They agreed that Pinckney should answer New York senator and leading Federalist restrictionist Rufus King. They also discussed calls to make public the proceedings of the Virginia constitutional ratification convention of 1788, which promised to reveal the founders’ position on the constitutionality of restrictions on slavery in the federal territories. When it became clear that the Virginia convention journals would show that the founders granted Congress power to exclude slavery from territories, Monroe and Pinckney agreed to keep the journals secret. Monroe also encouraged Hay to continue writing essays as An American, suggesting that he write pieces specifically for New England voters. “Through no fault of their own, New England voters did “not understand correctly the condition of the southern states” regarding slavery. Monroe expected that once New England voters recognized the true situation of Virginia slavery and the necessity of expansion, they would place pressure on their representatives to vote for admission without restriction. Hay agreed, promising “to show the cruelty” of restrictions to slaves and the humanity of expansion and diffusion. After reading Hay’s essays, Monroe lauded his “arguments which have been much felt to the east & north.” In early February Monroe cautiously but confidently expected that

the Missouri question would be resolved without any restrictions on slavery, whether in Missouri or in the federal territories.  

Around February 10, however, Monroe sharply reversed course and began frantically building southern support for what would become the Missouri Compromise of 1820: Missouri statehood without restrictions in exchange for a prohibition on slavery north of the 36°30' parallel. What caused the sudden reversal? Monroe feared that the partisan, sectional, and regional dynamics of the Missouri question had shifted dramatically. Monroe foresaw numerous scenarios unfolding, all of which were deeply troubling to Virginia's planter class. By mid-February, Monroe stood convinced that the 36°30' compromise was the best alternative for Virginia and the gentry had long served. He then quietly but firmly communicated his support for the 36°30' compromise and his intention to sign it into law.

By mid-February, Monroe feared that King stood on the cusp of realizing his alleged plan to forestall the admission of Missouri altogether to the next session of Congress, where northern restrictionists would enact a full prohibition on slavery in all future states and territories. Monroe feared that if the 36°30' compromise bill failed to pass the present session, or if he vetoed a compromise bill, the question would be deferred to the next session of Congress. With the question deferred, “every election” in the North, including the presidential election of 1820, “will be regulated with a view” to full restrictions on slavery. Restrictionists would defeat northern compromisers friendly to the South, or northern public pressure would compel northern compromisers to vote to prohibit slavery in all future states and territories. As Monroe warned in a pseudonymous but public letter to the gentry, “if a compromise” prohibiting slavery north of the 36°30' parallel “does not take place” now, “the exclusion” eventually passed by Congress “will be general,” including all states and territories hereafter admitted to the Union. Monroe further warned that “if it does not happen this year,” the “disproportionate increase” of the northern population ensured that “it must eventually succeed.” Monroe supported the 36°30' compromise because he feared that restrictionists were moving perilously close to “restricting” slavery in future “states as well as the territories.” It was better to accept the 36°30' and access to Florida and Texas rather than see Congress prohibit slavery’s future growth and expansion everywhere. Keeping the issue alive promised other calamities. Monroe warned that King and his allies sought to “keep the Missouri question suspended for another year” so that they “may derive every possible advantage from the excitement.” With the Missouri question still open, King or DeWitt Clinton would become president and a united North

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28 John Holmes to King, Jan. 1, 1820, folder 11, box 17, King Papers; Monroe to Hay, Jan. 1820, Dec. 20, 1819, Monroe Papers, 1788–1828 (Virginia Historical Society); Monroe to Hay, Feb. 6, 1820 (microfilm: reel 4), box 10, Correspondence, 1772–1836, Monroe Papers (Manuscripts and Archives Division); Hay to Monroe, Dec. 24, 1819 (reel 7), General Correspondence, 1758–1839, Monroe Papers (Manuscript Division); “For the Enquirer. Missouri Question,” Richmond (Va) Enquirer, Jan. 1, 1820; Monroe to Hay, Jan. 10, 1820 (microfilm: reel 4), box 10, Correspondence, 1772–1836, Monroe Papers (Manuscripts and Archives Division).

29 As late as February 7, 1820, Monroe gave no indication that he would support a compromise involving restrictions. See Monroe to Jefferson, Feb. 7, 1820 (reel 51), General Correspondence and Related Material, 1651–1827, Jefferson Papers. On February 9, he denied any “compromitment” on his part involving territorial restrictions. Monroe to Hay, Feb. 9, 1820, GLCO3656 (Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History). On February 10 he wrote an angry letter to Hay detailing how northern restrictionists and New England disunionists were nearing their goal of full restrictions or disunion. Monroe to Hay, Feb. 10, 1820 (microfilm: reel 4), box 10, Correspondence, 1772–1836, Monroe Papers (Manuscripts and Archives Division).
would seek to abolish slavery in Virginia. “Mr Kings doctrines avowed immediate emancipation,” warned Monroe, who traced a direct line from a northern majority passing a restriction on slavery in all states and territories to a King presidency to forced emancipation in Virginia. Lest restrictionists prevail in Congress and King ascend to the presidency in the looming election of 1820, Monroe had to sign the Missouri Compromise into law to protect Virginia and to secure access to a still-significant portion of the West.30

The changing regional and sectional dynamics of disunion also pushed Monroe to support the 36 30’ compromise. In late January recently retired Pennsylvania senator Abner LaCock sent Monroe a letter warning that among Pennsylvania’s congressional delegation, “some prudent & discreet men (in other respects) in Congress have brought themselves to this awful alternative: ‘to dissolve the union, rather than submit to the establishment of slave states over the Mississippi.”’ LaCock strongly advised Monroe to support the 36 30’ compromise and to avoid “irreparable mischief” to the Union. Around the time that Monroe received this letter, he became overtaken by concerns that King and Clinton had forged a deal that would bring Pennsylvania and Maryland into their “northeastern confederacy.” Monroe seemed willing to allow the New England states to leave the Union. He also indicated his willingness to allow the creation of a larger northeastern confederacy with “the Potomoc” and the “Allegheny Mountains” as “the line.” In his correspondence, Monroe hinted at his willingness to accept this particular dismemberment of the Union, as did many other members of the Virginia gentry. But disunion could proceed only if Virginia and the Atlantic slave states could remain in union with the slave states of the West.31

Therein lay Monroe’s problem. Much of the Virginia gentry remained amenable to dividing the Union along sectional lines. Claiborne Gooch, the coeditor of the Richmond (va) Enquirer, preferred “war or disunion” to seeing “the Southern people yield” on any restrictions. Many of the gentry in Richmond for the meeting of the Virginia legislature shared Gooch’s sentiment. However, Monroe and his leading southern advisers expected that the creation of a separate northeastern confederacy would quickly spur disunion in the West. As Monroe explained to one of his many Virginian correspondents, “How long could we calculate on preserving our union with the west,” if Pennsylvania, New York, and Maryland left for a separate northeastern confederacy? With “one sectional division being made,” and “with so many ambitious men rising in the West,” it would be only a matter of time before the western states, led by self-possessed men such as Andrew Jackson, formed their own confederacy. Monroe minced no words in his public statement to


31 LaCock to Monroe, Jan. 30, 1820 (reel 7), General Correspondence, 1758–1839, Monroe Papers (Manuscript Division); “Letter from James Monroe, Washington, D.C., to an Unidentified Recipient.” Emphasis in original. For Monroe’s repeat of the substance of this argument, see “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman in Washington to His Friend in Richmond, Washington, February 12, 1820”; Monroe to Hay, Feb. 10, 1820 (microfilm: reel 4), box 10, Correspondence, 1772–1836, Monroe Papers (Manuscripts and Archives Division); Monroe to Madison, Feb. 19, 1820 (reel 19), General Correspondence, 1723–1859, Madison Papers; and Monroe to Jefferson, Feb. 19, 1820 (reel 51), General Correspondence and Related Material, 1651–1827, Jefferson Papers.
the gentry: “The Western States will become a separate confederacy” if the South and the Northeast formed their own confederacies. Virginia’s separation from the western slave states was a form of disunion that Monroe could not tolerate. With Virginia and the Atlantic slave states isolated from the West, Virginia’s dangerously large slave population would only continue to increase. Worse still, a Virginia isolated with the Atlantic slave states would become more vulnerable to the twin Virginia terrors of British invasion and slave rebellion. In mid-February 1820 Monroe convinced himself that signing the Missouri Compromise into law would save Virginia and the slave states from worse fates: a prohibition on slavery in all new states and territories; a restrictionist-dominated Congress, a Rufus King presidency, and emancipation in Virginia; or, disunion and the isolation of Virginia in a feeble confederacy of Atlantic slave states.32

Before morning church services on February 13, 1820, Monroe convened a discreet meeting with select southern politicians for “private and confidential conversations” on the Missouri question. The attendees included Senator Barbour and “[Secretary of the Treasury and Virginia native William] Crawford [Speaker of the House Henry] Clay [South Carolina representative William] Lowndes and a host of others whose feelings were” similar on the Missouri question and restrictions. (John Quincy Adams was, it seems, deliberately excluded from the meeting.) In the meeting a consensus emerged that the South was losing its northern supporters and that the issue had to be resolved immediately as “a matter of necessity and not of choice.” Otherwise, “Missouri will be restricted and the whole territory to the West of the river will be interdicted to us.” They also discussed disunion along sectional lines but agreed that the process would result in splitting the South and the West and the formation of “three distinct confederacies.” Left with the option of disunion with the North and the West, or a restrictionist majority in Congress and Rufus King as president, they reached an “understanding” that “it would be better to adopt” the 36˚30’ compromise involving minimal territorial restrictions on slavery.33

Much like Monroe, the Virginia gentry took a strong and gloomy interest in the Missouri question. Monroe and the gentry also shared a deep-seated fear of losing their exalted place in Virginia and the Union, fears exacerbated by their conviction that slaves, Federalists, and the British would topple them the moment they let down their collective guard. In turn, they shared a basic unity of purpose in fending off perceived attacks against slavery, no matter how mild or distant. Virginia’s planter class had long been in economic decline, even as Virginia’s economy grew. The decade preceding the Missouri crisis had seen the gentry’s political standing and influence diminish both in Virginia

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33 Memo, Feb. 13, 1820 (reel 7), General Correspondence, 1758–1839, Monroe Papers (Manuscript Division); Barbour to Roane, Feb. 13, 1820, box 31, Miscellaneous Collection; John Quincy Adams, Feb. 13, 1820, diary entry, in John Quincy Adams and the Politics of Slavery, ed. Waldstreicher and Mason, 71–72. John Quincy Adams gave no indication that he knew about the meeting, although Henry Clay cryptically shared the discussions in a conversation between the two after church services. Ibid. North Carolina senator Nathaniel Macon, one of the leaders of the Old Republicans in Congress and an ideological fellow traveler with the Virginia gentry, either attended the meeting or was informed of the discussions. See Nathaniel Macon to Bolling Hall, Feb. 13, 1820, folder 6, box 1, Alexander K. Hall Family Papers, 1839–1917 (Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery).
and in the Union, despite the election of three successive Virginians to the presidency. As Virginia’s economy grew and diversified, fewer white Virginians found themselves dependent—socially, economically, or politically—on the gentry. With gentry influence slipping, they maintained dominance by preserving a grossly unequal distribution of seats for the Tidewater and Piedmont regions in the state legislature. They also rechristened themselves the Old Republicans, claimed that they alone could prevent the decline of republican government, and launched a crusade to control the federal government. The gentry sensed that a growing national economy, an expanding federal union, a rapidly multiplying northern population, and a federal government that chartered banks, financed canals, and established protective tariffs would only further diminish the gentry’s influence.\textsuperscript{34}

In the immediate aftermath of the War of 1812, the Old Republicans took up the fight against the rechartering of the Bank of the United States and federal funding for internal improvements such as canals and roads (they fully supported federal funding for defensive measures to protect the Chesapeake region from a British invasion and the slave rebellion they expected to follow in its wake). According to the Old Republicans, banks and canals threatened a consolidation of the federal government, which would inevitably feed the growth of federal power, strengthen New England Federalists, and further attenuate the gentry’s influence in Virginia and the Union. Monroe’s growing reputation as a nationalist, which seemed implicit in his national tours, in his attempts to reconcile with New England Federalists, and in his efforts to create an “amalgamation” of parties, added to the gentry’s worries that their influence and power would continue to decline. More immediately, the panic of 1819 devastated Virginia’s economy and promised economic ruin to gentry who had recklessly borrowed against their land and slaves over the previous decade.\textsuperscript{35}

The gentry feared that a federal government that could build canals and pass protective tariffs posed an existential threat to their personal mastery over slaves and their political sovereignty over slavery as an institution—concerns deepened by the flight of thousands of slaves from Virginia during the War of 1812. By then, the gentry stood convinced that the Union had failed to protect slavery during the war and would likely prove unable to do so in the future; that the Union had strayed from Virginia’s true republican principles; and that the Union no longer served the gentry’s interests. The gentry, in turn, instinctively sensed that the Missouri crisis was the inevitable outcome of consolidation. For the gentry, the purpose of government—whether at the local, state, or federal levels—was to empower the gentry who then ruled over others. The Missouri question, conversely, empowered northerners, undermined the gentry’s influence in the Union and in Virginia, and undercut their mastery of others, particularly their slaves and lesser whites.\textsuperscript{36}

The general direction of economic and political life in Virginia and in the United States after 1815 proved especially unnerving to the gentry. Unlike the gentry’s experiences, however, Monroe’s left him disinclined to see banks and canals as a threat to either the gentry or slavery. The War of 1812 made manifest to Monroe the necessity of a na-

\textsuperscript{34} On the decline and concerns of the gentry, see Taylor, \textit{Internal Enemy}; Burstein and Isenberg, \textit{Madison and Jefferson}; and Gutzman, \textit{Virginia’s American Revolution}.

\textsuperscript{35} Taylor, \textit{Internal Enemy}; Burstein and Isenberg, \textit{Madison and Jefferson}; Gutzman, \textit{Virginia’s American Revolution}.

\textsuperscript{36} Taylor, \textit{Internal Enemy}; Burstein and Isenberg, \textit{Madison and Jefferson}; Gutzman, \textit{Virginia’s American Revolution}. 
tional bank and internal improvements. Yet if Monroe and the gentry differed on matters of economic policy, Monroe nonetheless remained sympathetic to their economic and political difficulties, and he shared their fears of outside interference with slavery. The Missouri crisis confirmed the gentry’s fears and heightened Monroe’s suspicions of New Englanders that stretched back to 1786. New England Federalists—“in their lust of dominion and power”—sought to destroy both the Union and republican government. But to do that, they first had to destroy the Virginia gentry and slavery. As one member of the gentry wrote to Monroe at the height of the Missouri crisis, “if anything could add to the calamitous condition of the country, in having such men as King & Co. for our rulers, it would be, that the principles of 1799 are trodden under foot, and our slaves incited to insurrection.” Monroe agreed, railing against “Mr Kings doctrines,” which “avowed immediate emancipation.”

The lawyer and would-be professor Francis Walker Gilmer exemplified the overinflated sense of importance and privilege, self-pity, and vulnerability that infected Monroe and the gentry. Prior to the Missouri crisis, Gilmer expected “the banks of the Missouri” to “present a preferable theatre to any in the old dominion” for men of talent and distinction. Gentry such as Gilmer deserved to remake themselves in the West, which he considered his birthright as a Virginian. However, Gilmer’s sense of foreboding came to the fore with the Missouri crisis. Gilmer bemoaned that “the times are ominous to public morality, there is no virtue extant & what Henry Lee seems to consider as nearly as bad, very little money.” Every gentry family Gilmer knew was broke. Why had the gentry become so poor? The Bank of the United States had sucked wealth out of Virginia. Like Monroe, Gilmer tied matters back to Federalists and slavery. In tandem, the Bank of the United States and the Missouri crisis were simply the means by which Virginians would be “taxed to support the Yankees & make [Rufus] King President.” At that point, the gentry could either submit to northern domination “or have our throats cut” by slaves incited to rebel. One year after Monroe signed the compromise into law, Gilmer was still consumed by fears of northern domination. “We may boast of the Chesapeake bay, and think we are a great people, but we are from this day forth, tributary to northern shoe makers” and “potato, pumpkin, and Ruta-bega” farmers. Rather than ruling themselves, their slaves, and the Union, Virginia’s gentry were becoming tributary slaves of northern artisans and farmers. Monroe might have been more confident in the gentry’s ability to fend off attacks, but both shared a conviction that a host of enemies sought to undermine the gentry’s rightful place at the head of Virginia and the Union.

Gilmer’s fears were widespread among the gentry and shared by Monroe. At the height of the Missouri crisis, sketching out scenarios predicting northern domination of Virginia and the Union was the gentry’s favored literary pursuit. The gentry filled the columns of the Richmond (va) Enquirer with articles decrying a litany of offenses against the gentry. The thread uniting all these columns: “sniveling, sanctimonious” Yankees sought to rule the Union, but to do so they first had to undermine the Virginia gentry by destroying slavery. The Virginia congressman and future president John Tyler whined that Virginians “are abused and deeply aggrieved by the grossest” slanders, “which newspaper editors

37 Roane to Monroe, Feb. 16, 1820 (microfilm: reel 4), box 10, Correspondence, 1772–1836, Monroe Papers (Manuscripts Division); Monroe to Madison, Feb. 19, 1820 (reel 19), General Correspondence, 1723–1859, Madison Papers.

38 Gilmer to Peter Minor, May 31, 1818, Feb. 22, 1820, March 25, 1821, Correspondence, 1784–1826, Frances Walker Gilmer Collection, ACC38-58 (Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville).
and writers can bestow upon us and to reach us and affect us vitally.” Tyler remained convinced that “Missouri is the scapegoat” for “Rufus King and DeWitt Clinton,” “fools” whom Tyler wished to see “unmasked and exposed as objects of derision and scorn.” The always-apoplectic Richmond \((\text{va})\) Enquirer warned that northerners sought to “tax us to raise up their hot-bed manufactures; or to abolish the slave representation feature in our constitution,” so that they could “ride us forever.” The masters of blacks would become the slaves of northern whites. For Monroe’s close confidant Dr. Charles Everett, the future looked especially bleak. If northern restrictionists prevailed, “we shall be delivered” over to a fate “worse than Federalism”: “universal emancipation.” Monroe’s son-in-law, who spent his days in Richmond commiserating with the gentry, insisted that “the whole affair” of Missouri was simply “a base and hypocritical scheme” concocted by Federalists “to get power.” Monroe’s letters to his Virginia correspondents rang similar tones. Nearly all of Monroe’s difficulties in office could be traced back to “the same spirit which prevailed in 1786.” New England monarchists-cum-Federalists who sought to destroy the gentry and slavery in their never-ending quest to rule over the Union.39

Rather than become slaves—tributary or otherwise—in the aftermath of the Missouri crisis, Monroe and the gentry vowed to secure their fair share of the West. “If this compromise be adopted,” then the South must receive just compensation, including immediate ratification of “the Florida Treaty.” They further insisted that they “would not consent to be cooped up by the line of the West” and that they would never “yield Texas.” Monroe shared their concerns and abided their demands. He quietly continued with plans to ensure that “the acquisition of Florida may give no new stimulus to the spirit excited by the case of Missouri.” Monroe would see to it that Florida’s incorporation into the Union would not excite another controversy over slavery. Monroe also sought to strengthen American claims to Texas, even as he acknowledged that the sectional animosities created by the Missouri controversy made impossible the acquisition of Texas at the moment. Monroe posited to Jefferson that “as we thought just, & without war,” the United States “might take Florida as an indemnity, and Texas for some trifle as an equivalent.” “No European power could prevent this,” explained Monroe. But “the difficulty” in creating an American Texas was “altogether internal,” stemming from the New England Federalists behind “the Harford convention” and “the proposition for restricting Missouri.” Like the gentry, Monroe sought new territory for slavery’s expansion; but also like the gentry, he could hardly think of expansion without brooding concerns about Federalist perfidy and looming attacks on slavery.40

39 [Nathaniel Beverley Tucker], “To the Editor, Letters from St. Louis,” Richmond \((\text{va})\) Enquirer, May 21, 1819; John Tyler to Henry Curtis, Feb. 5, 1820, General Correspondence, 1710–1861, John Tyler Papers (Manuscript Division); “Missouri Compromise,” Richmond \((\text{va})\) Enquirer, Feb. 10, 1820; Everett to Monroe, Feb. 20, 22, 1820 (microfilm: reel 4), box 10, Correspondence, 1772–1836, Monroe Papers (Manuscripts and Archives Division); Hay to Monroe, Feb. 17, 1820 (reel 7), General Correspondence, 1758–1839, Monroe Papers (Manuscript Division); Monroe to Everett, Feb. 11, 1820, in James Monroe Papers in Virginia Repositories.

40 “Missouri Compromise”; Monroe to Madison, Dec. 28, 1820 (reel 7), General Correspondence, 1758–1839, Monroe Papers (Manuscript Division); Monroe to Jefferson, May 27, 1820 (reel 51), General Correspondence and Related Material, 1651–1827, Jefferson Papers. For Monroe’s intent to annex Florida and Texas, see Jefferson to Monroe, May 14, 1820, \textit{ibid.}; Andrew Jackson to Monroe, June 20, 1820 (microfilm: reel 4), box 10, Correspondence, 1772–1836, Monroe Papers (Manuscripts and Archives Division). For connections between the Missouri question and southern interest in Florida and Texas, see, for example, William Short to Jefferson, Dec. 1, 1819 (reel 51), General Correspondence and Related Material, 1651–1827, Jefferson Papers; “Missouri Question—Continued,” Frankfort (\(\text{ky}\)) Argus of Western America, March 9, 1820; “Missouri Question,” Providence \((\text{ri})\) American, March 24, 1820; and “Extension of Slavery,” Washington National Intelligencer, March 20, 1820.
To battle perceived Federalist intransigence against expansion and the gentry, Monroe took a leading role in forging a bisectional Democratic-Republican party that would protect southern interests by silencing northern antislavery politicians. To give but one example, in 1824 Monroe sought to undermine the antislavery factions of New England Federalists and Republicans by encouraging southern congressmen to support federal payment of the War of 1812 claims from Massachusetts. As Monroe explained, “the southern members” of Congress “ought to take the lead in sustaining” those claims. This would “not only, give a strong & powerful support to the republican party in that & all the Eastern States, but contribute much to the support of our institutions. If our southern people, will act with magnanimity on the occasion, it will render any further attempts, by artful leaders, to annoy us, on the principle of slave population, as the Missouri question, vain and abortive.” Monroe was not above using federal patronage to protect Virginia’s interests, readily supporting efforts to use federal monies to strengthen prosouthern northern allies. Hardly a disinterested statesman who put Union above state and section, Monroe was, above all else, a Virginia planter intent on protecting the interests, privileges, and powers of his class.41

In fetishizing statesmanship in service of union, and in searching for a less proslavery Virginian counterpart to Jefferson, historians have constructed a Monroe that is safe for historians: moderate and moderately antislavery, a nationalist committed to putting the Union ahead of state and section, party, and self. Frequently decrying the troubles of slaveholding, Monroe and other southern politicians deceived contemporaries—and more than a few historians—into believing that circumstances might someday produce a protean moment that would fulfill the Revolution’s antislavery promise. That moment never occurred. During the Missouri crisis, Monroe and the cohort of Virginians he had spent his life protecting were as determined as anyone to ensure it never would. Monroe’s actions should be unsurprising. Slave owning and white supremacy created an enormously powerful set of material and ideological interests that proved nearly impossible to overcome, no matter the extent of one’s virtue or disinterestedness. No disinterested statesmanship existed among southern slaveholders dealing with slavery, only calculations about how the Union could serve their interests, if at all. Like nearly every other southern politician and planter, Monroe remained committed to “the best course for our union” so long as it was “that also of the southern states.”42

41 Monroe to Madison, April 1824 (reel 20), General Correspondence, 1723–1859, Madison Papers; Monroe to Jefferson, April 6, 1824 (reel 54), General Correspondence and Related Material, 1651–1827, Jefferson Papers.
42 Monroe to Barbour, Feb. 3, 1820, box 1, James Barbour Correspondence, 1792–1848. On proslavery unionism in the antebellum period, see Matthew Karp, This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy (Cambridge, Mass., 2016).