Like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison before him, James Monroe deeply feared that sectional conflict would destroy the Union. As he prepared to assume the presidency in 1817, Monroe knew that he would preside over a Union marked by deep ideological, partisan, sectional, and regional divisions: divisions that had riven the Union since its inception, divisions that the recently ended War of 1812 had exposed and exacerbated. Accordingly, when Monroe laid out his main goal for the presidency in a letter to his son-in-law and trusted confidant George Hay, he expressed his “wish to bring about a union of the whole population of our country in support of our republican govt.” Three months after his inauguration, Monroe undertook what would become the first of three national tours. Monroe’s first tour began as an inspection of the coastal defenses, shipyards, and frontier forts that Congress and his predecessor James Madison had adopted in the aftermath of the War of 1812; it quickly became an effort to promote sectional harmony and to quell lingering partisan discord. Monroe’s tour included frequent receptions and speeches throughout the mid-Atlantic states and into New England, and provided powerful symbols of sectional and partisan reconciliation. Though Virginia’s Old Republicans expressed reservations about Monroe’s overtures to New Englanders and Federalists, both Monroe and the northern press judged the tour a resounding success, an homage to the harmonizing effects of union and republican principles. Even the stalwart newspaper of Massachusetts Federalism, the Boston Columbian Centinel, allowed that Monroe’s presidency heralded “an era of good feelings.”

The “Era of Good Feelings” proved short-lived, and Monroe’s worst fears concerning sectional conflict would be realized in a few short years. As the Fifteenth Congress neared the end of its second session in February of 1819, it took up a statehood bill for the Missouri Territory. New York Republican James Tallmadge proposed amending the bill to prohibit the further introduction of slaves into Missouri and to require the emancipation of all slaves born there at the age of twenty-five as a condition of 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 thirty years. After a few days of furious debate, the House passed the Missouri statehood bill with the restrictions on slavery; the Senate rejected the measure; and Congress promptly adjourned with the issue of Missouri statehood and the future of slavery in the Louisiana Purchase unresolved. In the summer and fall of 1820, an unprecedented public consensus emerged in the North that Congress should not only place restrictions on slavery in Missouri, but that it should also prohibit slavery “in all new states and territories hereafter admitted to the Union.” In January 1820, Congress took up the overlapping issues of slavery in Missouri, slavery in the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase, and slavery in any territories that the United States might acquire in the future, namely Spanish Florida and Texas. After nearly three months of heated debate and frantic behind-the-scenes negotiations, James Monroe signed into law what became known as the Missouri Compromise. Under its terms, Missouri was admitted without restrictions on slavery; Congress prohibited slavery in the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase north of 36-30 latitude; an effort to prohibit slavery in Texas in the event of American annexation was defeated, and Congress said nothing about...
slavery in Florida. With that, perhaps the most dangerous sectional crisis in the early republic had passed.  

James Monroe’s worst fears – disunion along sectional lines, the continuing decline of the Virginia gentry both at home and in the Union, and threats to the planter class’s mastery over slaves as persons and sovereignty over slavery as an institution – indelibly shaped his actions in the Missouri Crisis. As the Missouri Crisis came to a head in December of 1819, Monroe had already convinced himself that the crisis amounted to nothing more than a scheme concocted by monarchical New England Federalists who were determined to destroy the Virginia gentry and slavery in a reckless bid to rule over the Union. With this understanding of the Missouri Crisis, Monroe committed himself to vetoing any bill that placed any restrictions on slavery, even in the federal territories.

As threats of disunion escalated, however, Monroe decided that the Missouri Compromise as passed by Congress – which included the same restrictions on slavery in federal territory that Monroe had adamantly opposed – was the least bad alternative for Virginia’s planter class. Monroe then found himself forced to seek the gentry’s approval before signing the Compromise into law. But in working to gain the gentry’s consent, Monroe mainly managed to deepen both his fears and the fears of the Virginia gentry that any measure to address the growing problem of slavery’s expansion would simply aid Federalist schemes to destroy the gentry as part of their plan to rule over the Union. He also confirmed the Virginia gentry’s conviction that any federal action to restrain slavery’s expansion – no matter how mild and no matter how clearly constitutional – amounted to an existential threat to the planter class’s mastery over slaves as persons and sovereignty over slavery as an institution. In the course of the Missouri Crisis, Monroe and the Virginia gentry formulated an understanding of the federal government’s relationship with slavery and planters that de-legitimized any present or future efforts to use the powers of the federal government to take some kind of meaningful action against slavery. With that, they all but insured that Virginia would stop at nothing to frustrate any efforts to regulate or restrict slavery, no matter how mild or constitutional those measures might be.

By 1819, both northerners and southerners understood that American expansion and the consolidation of the American Union in its western and southern borderlands had entered a new phase. Since the close of the War of 1812, six western territories had either received or applied for statehood. The aggressive negotiations of Secretary of State John Quincy Adams had won from Britain joint-occupation of the Oregon Country and an American outlet on the Pacific. In the years immediately surrounding the Missouri Crisis, the United States was also involved in heated negotiations with Spain over the acquisition of Florida and Texas, which southern politicians had long insisted was included in the Louisiana Purchase. At the same time, in the decade leading up to the Missouri Crisis, the well-being of Virginia slavery became powerfully tied to its continued expansion in the West. Between 1810 and 1820, over 120,000 slaves - the bulk of them hailing from the Chesapeake - were either sold into the new domestic slave trade that fed the emerging cotton kingdom’s nearly insatiable appetite for slave labor, or were forced west with migrating slaveholders. In the decade leading up to the Missouri Controversy, the West became a vast outlet for Virginia’s “excess” slave population and served as a welcoming place for the sons of Virginia’s gentry to make and remake themselves as a new planter class.
For Virginia planters and statesmen, in the aftermath of the War of 1812, the consolidation of the Union in the West became powerfully tied to the well-being of slavery in the east. The Missouri Crisis proved to be so contentious and so prolonged precisely because it forced Congress to address systematically what had been proceeding haphazardly since 1815: massive migration and the growth of plantation slavery, the rapid acquisition of new territories and the consolidation of the Union in once contested southern and western borderlands. The Missouri Crisis revealed that neither time nor expansion had mitigated sectional differences and the tensions that grew out of them, as the founders had hoped. Indeed, time and expansion had instead exacerbated sectional differences and deepened sectional conflict, as manifested not only by the Missouri Crisis, but also by contemporaneous sectional conflicts over protective tariffs, the Bank of the United States, and federal sponsorship of internal improvements.

In the year prior to the Missouri Crisis, northern Republicans had floated various proposals to limit slavery’s expansion in the present and future territories of the United States. In April 1818, New Hampshire Republican Arthur Livermore proposed amending the Constitution to prohibit slavery “in any State hereafter admitted to the Union.” In January of 1819, Pennsylvanian John Sergeant proposed that Congress enact 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,” a covert effort to prohibit slavery in both the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase and in any territories that the United States might acquire from Spain in the future. For northern restrictionists, the Missouri Crisis was part of a larger effort to block or limit slavery’s expansion not just in Missouri, but also in the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase, in the expected future acquisitions of Spanish Florida and Texas, and in any other territory that might be acquired by the United States in the future. As Pennsylvania Republican Jonathan Roberts remarked during the Missouri Crisis, the real question before Congress was “whether freedom or slavery is to be the lot of the regions beyond the Mississippi.” Northern congressmen, then, understood restrictions on Missouri as part of a larger project to forever end slavery’s expansion in a Union that was seeking to shore up its western and southern borderlands through the rapid acquisition and incorporation of new territory.

When Congress took up the question of Missouri statehood for the second time in January of 1820, Congress faced the immediate issue of whether to force restrictions on slavery as a condition of Missouri statehood. Debate, however, quickly degenerated into an inchoate mess involving the distinct but related issues of slavery in Missouri, slavery in the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase, slavery in the looming acquisitions of Florida and Texas, slavery in an ill-defined west, the legitimacy of the Northwest Ordinance’s Article VI ban on slavery, and the place of slavery in the past, present, and future of the United States. As debate dragged on into February with no resolution in sight, select northern and southern congressmen began searching for some type of compromise. The unique circumstance of the Missouri Crisis – Missouri had applied for statehood, leaving it in an ill-defined position between territory and state – allowed congressmen in search of a compromise to make a distinction between the immediate question of Missouri statehood and the separate questions involving slavery’s expansion elsewhere.

According to southern congressmen opposed to restrictions, forcing Missouri to adopt a plan of gradual abolition as a condition of statehood violated the principles of state equality and state sovereignty. It also clashed with the doctrine of equal footing, which held that states admitted to the Union entered with the same rights as the original thirteen states. Thus, incoming states – not Congress – possessed the sovereign right to determine whether to permit or exclude...
slavery. Just as Virginia reserved the right to maintain or abolish slavery, so did Missouri once it had met the constitutional and legal requirements for statehood, which all parties agreed that it had. Southern politicians also alleged that the imposition of conditions on Missouri statehood came dangerously close to justifying some kind of federally sponsored plan of gradual emancipation in the southern states where slavery already existed. If Congress could force a plan of gradual abolition on Missouri, why couldn’t it do the same to Maryland or Kentucky? So went southern reasoning.  

With southern politicians united in their belief that that restrictions on Missouri slavery were both unconstitutional and bad policy, northern restrictions had no hope of gaining enough southern defections to get a Missouri bill with restrictions through the Senate. A handful of northern congressmen – most importantly the four southern-born senators from Indiana and Illinois - agreed that restrictions on Missouri violated the principles of sovereignty, equality, and equal footing. Those four consistently defeated Missouri restrictions in the Senate, and the possibility of adding to their ranks in the House bolstered southern hopes that Missouri could be admitted without restrictions. As for northern congressmen, public pressure continued to force even those who favored compromise to insist on restrictions as a condition of statehood. In private, however, they increasingly conceded that “Congress have left the favourable time pass. They should have prohibited slavery when the Territorial government was formed” in 1804. The most restrictionists could hope for was “to admit Missouri without restriction” but “prevent the further introduction of slavery in the territories.”

By early February of 1820, a majority of northern congressmen accepted that they stood little chance of getting a Missouri bill with restrictions through Congress. At the same time, a majority of southern congressmen, though opposed to prohibiting slavery in the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase, withdrew their objections to the measures’ constitutionality. By late February, a compromise admitting Missouri without restrictions but prohibiting slavery in the northern stretches of the Louisiana Purchase was in reach. As the final details reached the full Congress, a group of northern congressmen in both the House and the Senate tried to add a provision that would have blocked slavery’s expansion into Texas by prohibiting slavery west of the borders of Louisiana and Arkansas. But with Congress on the verge of settling the issues of slavery in Missouri the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase, the restriction on slavery in Texas went down to defeat. As passed, the Missouri Compromise admitted Missouri without restrictions, prohibited slavery north of the 36-30 line, and said nothing about slavery in Florida or Texas.

Since 1818, a group of northern restrictionists – all of them Republicans and members of Monroe’s party - had sought to halt slavery’s expansion forever. In addition, public opinion in the North overwhelmingly favored the exclusion of slavery from “all new states and territories hereafter admitted to the Union.” For many northern politicians and voters, the Missouri Compromise stood as a rank failure. Nonetheless, northern congressman stood willing to exchange slavery in Missouri for the exclusion of the institution elsewhere. And while the southern extremists who identified with Virginia’s Old Republicans decried the prohibition of slavery north of 36-30, most southern politicians understood that the Missouri Compromise granted overwhelmingly favorable terms to southern slaveholders. When word that a compromise had been reached arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, the City Gazette 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.” In their private correspondence, southern congressman also expressed content with the Missouri Compromise. In justifying his vote for the
Compromise to his governor, North Carolina Senator Montfort Stokes applauded the exclusion of slavery north of 36-30 as a “prudent and proper concession.” He further celebrated that the South had secured the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase (which to southern congressman included Texas), “as an asylum for slaves already too numerous to be comfortably supported in some of the southern states.” By February of 1820, then, a majority of congressmen – including a majority of congressmen from slave states – were willing to accept a Missouri Compromise that excluded slavery north of 36-30. As February turned into March, James Monroe stood as the sole remaining obstacle to the Missouri Compromise becoming law.10

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James Monroe’s actions during the Missouri Crisis would be driven primarily by his concerns for Virginia’s planter class and informed by their shared distrust of New England Federalists.11 In December of 1819, as Congress prepared to revisit the Missouri question, James Monroe had already committed himself to vetoing any bill that placed restrictions on Missouri slavery as a condition of statehood. Monroe believed that restrictions were tantamount to denying Missouri “complete incorporation, and equality, as to rights granted and reserved” to the states. Like other southern politicians, Monroe held that the doctrines of state equality and state rights extended to the right of new states to determine if they would permit slavery; Congress had no say in whether new states would be slave or free. Early in the Crisis, Monroe was also prepared to veto any legislation that placed restrictions on slavery in the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase. Monroe held that the Constitution’s territorial clause – which granted Congress “the power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations” for federal territories – did not extend to prohibiting slavery, even though Congress had done so several times in the past. Monroe further held that even if Congress did possess the constitutional authority to prohibit slavery in federal territories, its use at the present would be improper and unjust to the slave states, especially Virginia. Though Monroe never publicly stated his position on restrictions, in his private correspondence he claimed that he would sooner lose “the union” than sign into law a bill that restricted slavery in any way. If the New England states and New York chose to leave the Union as a result of his vetoing restrictions on slavery, Monroe indicated that he was willing to let them go. Monroe, then, did not fear disunion in the abstract. He did, however, fear disunion if it threatened what he understood to be the best interests of Virginia. By February of 1820, Monroe feared that the particular kind of disunion that the Missouri Crisis promised to unleash would prove especially damaging to Virginia and its slaveholding classes.12

Very much the Virginia planter, Monroe heartily endorsed the theory of “diffusion,” the belief that slavery’s expansion would “diffuse” the Atlantic slave states’ enslaved black population into the West. According to Monroe and other expansionists, to permit slaves “to spread over an extensive country” in the West would “diffuse” Virginia’s dangerously large population of slaves, which by 1819 they were likening to a powder keg ready to explode. By lessening the number of slaves in Virginia, diffusion would decrease the likelihood of a massive slave rebellion. And with fewer slaves less likely to rebel, Britain would also be less likely to invade Virginia should the United States and Britain once again meet in war. Diffusion also promised to “ameliorate” – a favorite term of the expansionists – the condition of slaves. With fewer slaves to care for, whether in the Atlantic or the western states, planters would supposedly better provide for their slaves (who largely provided for themselves, in any case). Not only was diffusion and amelioration the most humane course of action that the federal government could take with regards to slaves, it 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.13
The necessity of expansion went far beyond amelioration. Slavery “will most probably continue to exist through all succeeding time,” explained Monroe’s son-in-law George Hay. Having accepted slavery’s permanence, Virginia slaveholders had to provide for “the proper and effectual management of slaves,” which required unrestricted access to the trans-Mississippi West. As Monroe’s close confidant Senator Philip Barbour noted at the height of the Missouri Controversy, “the real question is, what disposition shall we make of those slaves” in the existing 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?” Slavery in Virginia and slavery in the west had become inextricably linked. Only by maintaining access to the vast regions “beyond the river” could the Virginia gentry maintain their control over slavery at home; permitting Congress to restrict expansion in the West amounted to ceding sovereignty over slavery in Virginia. Indeed, as one slaveholder remarked, 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.” For the gentry, there was no real difference between limiting slavery’s expansion in the West and destroying the planter class’s sovereignty over slavery in Virginia. Preserving mastery and sovereignty required that Virginia also control slavery’s expansion both within and without the limits of the United States. Monroe thus had to veto any restrictions on slavery, “no matter what the northern people may say.”

Monroe’s understanding of the regional, sectional, and partisan politics of the Missouri Crisis also deepened his opposition to any restrictions on slavery. By December of 1819, Monroe had convinced himself that efforts to restrict slavery were part of a larger Federalist conspiracy to either rule over the Union or to destroy it. According to Monroe and other leading Virginians, northern Federalists sought to make either New York Senator Rufus King or New York Governor Dewitt Clinton president of the United States by dividing the Union along sectional lines for the upcoming presidential election. Once elected president, King or Clinton would finish off the Virginia gentry by destroying slavery. Monroe further alleged that if King and Clinton failed to rally the North for the upcoming election, they would create a separate New England and New York confederacy that would crown one of them president. As Monroe understood matters, the origins of the Missouri Crisis stretched all the way back to the “same spirit which prevailed in 1786” and 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, allegedly 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. According to Monroe, the same “dormant spirit” of New England domination now drove Federalist actions during the Missouri Crisis. Monroe alleged that New England and New York Federalists had no interest in the well-being of slaves, the future of slavery’s expansion, or the Union. Instead, they had “seized on a popular topic” – slavery– “which gives them the command of the best affections of their constituents.” Enjoying popular backing at home for the first time since the war, the Federalists now sought either to “dismember the Union” or to rule over it. Like so many other members of Virginia’s planter class, Monroe stood convinced that the true republicans of Virginia’s planter class were all that stood between a federal union based on their principles of republicanism and a consolidated empire ruled by monarchical New England Federalists and their allies.

Monroe’s conviction that the entire Missouri affair was little more than a regional plot deepened as Congress took up the Missouri bill for the second time; in response, he redoubled
his commitment to defeating congressional restrictions on slavery’s expansion in the territories.\textsuperscript{16} While Monroe was prepared to veto any bill with restrictions, he hoped to absolve himself of any responsibility for doing so by having Congress defeat restrictions on its own. To this end, Monroe worked in private to have any restrictions on slavery defeated in Congress. Monroe encouraged his son-in-law George Hay to write a series of essays arguing against restrictions. Monroe also provided Hay with a healthy dose of assistance in formulating the series of letters that Hay published under the penname of “An American.” Again reflecting his misunderstanding of the politics of the Missouri Crisis in the North, Monroe naively believed that northern popular opinion on restrictions could be swayed with Hay’s gentlemanly letters that would place the true situation of Virginia and slavery before northern voters, who would then pressure their representatives to defeat restrictions.\textsuperscript{17}

Monroe also worked behind the scenes with leading southern politicians to formulate a strategy to defeat restrictions in Congress. Sometime in late January he met in private with South Carolina Representative Henry Pinckney, where they discussed the efficacy of Hay’s essays. They also decided that publication of the Virginia Ratification Convention of 1788’s journals would hinder their cause, as it revealed that the founders agreed that Congress did indeed possess the authority to restrict slavery in the federal territories. He also met with Virginia Senator James Barbour to plot strategy on the effectiveness of holding Maine statehood hostage to Missouri. He and Barbour also corresponded on the best arguments for Barbour to make in the Senate for admission without restriction. Finally, Monroe had at least one meeting with the southern members of his cabinet where they discussed strategies for defeating restrictions in Congress. Though James Monroe might have been president of an immense, diverse, and divided Union, during the Missouri Crisis he acted like Virginia’s ambassador to the federal government, charged with protecting the interests of Virginia slaveholders by defeating any bill that included any restrictions on slavery.\textsuperscript{18}

Monroe’s position on restrictions began to change as the regional and sectional dynamics of disunion seemed to change in late January of 1820. By then, Monroe feared that King and Clinton had struck a deal that would bring Pennsylvania into their Northeastern Confederacy, and that Maryland would follow Pennsylvania. 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” of western Pennsylvania and Maryland as “the line.” In his correspondence, Monroe indicated his willingness to accept this particular dismemberment of the Union, provided that Virginia and the slave states could remain in union with the slave states of the West. But therein lay Monroe’s problem. Monroe expected that the creation of a separate Northeastern Confederacy would quickly spur disunion in the Southwest. 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 union? With “one sectional division being made,” and “with so many ambitious men rising in the West,” Monroe expected that it would only be a matter of time before the western slave states, led by men such as Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay, formed their own separate confederacy. Virginia’s separation from the slave states of the West was a form of disunion that Monroe could not tolerate. With Virginia and the Atlantic slave states isolated from the West, Virginia would continue its economic decline. Likewise, Virginia’s dangerously large slave population would only continue to increase. Worse still, a Virginia isolated with the Atlantic slave states would
become even more vulnerable to the twin Virginia terrors of British invasion and slave rebellion.19

Other scenarios detrimental to Virginia abounded, further pushing Monroe toward signing the Compromise into law. Monroe expressed fears that if he vetoed the Compromise bill, the question would be deferred to the next session of Congress. With the question deferred, public pressure would compel the northern compromisers who had worked with the South to gain admission for Missouri to vote to prohibit slavery in all future states and territories. From there, it was only a matter of time before King or Clinton became president and a united North sought to abolish slavery in Virginia. Indeed, Monroe increasingly feared that unless he signed the compromise into law, thus ending the Crisis, “Mr King[’]s doctrines [of] avowed[,] immediate emancipation” would become a reality in Virginia, one way or another. Though Monroe remained adamantly opposed to signing any compromise that restricted slavery in the West, by February of 1820 he had convinced himself that he had to sign the Missouri Compromise into law to save Virginia from worse fates: disunion and the isolation of Virginia in a feeble confederacy with the Atlantic slave states; or, a Rufus King presidency, a united antislavery North, the prohibition of slavery in all new states and territories, and emancipation in Virginia. With Monroe now committed to signing the compromise forged by Congress into law, one obstacle remained: the Virginia gentry.20

The Virginia gentry took a particularly strong and gloomy interest in the Missouri Crisis. While Virginia’s overall economy grew, the planter class had long been in economic and political decline. The two decades proceeding the Missouri Crisis had seen their political standing and influence diminish both in Virginia and in the United States, despite the election of three successive Virginians to the presidency. The diversification of Virginia’s economy and the rapid growth of a white population with no real financial, political, or social ties to the old gentry resulted in a steady decline of their control of state politics, which they maintained only by preserving a grossly unequal distribution of seats for the Tidewater and Piedmont in the state legislature. The gentry rightly sensed that a growing national economy, an expanding federal union, and a federal government that took a more active role in doing things such as chartering banks, building canals, and establishing protective tariffs would only diminish the gentry’s influence even more.

In the immediate aftermath of the War of 1812, the Old Republicans took up the fight against the re-chartering 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 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 wealth and influence in Virginia and in the Union. Monroe’s growing reputation as a nationalist that 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 in Virginia and over the Union would continue to decline. More immediately, the Panic of 1819 devastated Virginia’s economy and promised economic ruin to the planter class that had recklessly borrowed against their land and slaves over the previous decade.

Even prior to the Missouri Crisis, the Old Republicans sensed that a federal government that could charter banks and build canals posed a growing threat to their personal mastery over
slaves as persons and their political sovereignty over slavery as an institution at the federal level, concerns that were deepened by the flight of thousands of slaves from Virginia during the War of 1812. The gentry, in turn, immediately 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 level – was to empower the gentry who then ruled over others. Consolidation, on the other hand, empowered Federalists in the North and New England, undermined the gentry’s influence in the Union and in Virginia, and undercut their mastery of others, particularly their slaves and lesser whites. The general direction of economic and political life both in Virginia and in the United States after 1815 proved especially unnerving to the Virginia gentry. The Missouri Crisis simply confirmed their worst fears: New England Federalists sought to destroy both the Union and republican government; but to do that, they would first destroy the Virginia gentry by destroying slavery.  

According to the gentry, the Missouri Crisis had nothing to do with the enslavement of blacks; it was simply the “sniveling, sanctimonious” Yankees’ latest attempt to destroy the Virginia gentry by attacking slavery. As one member of a gentry family whose fortunes had declined precipitously explained, the Bank of the United States and the Missouri Crisis were simply the means by which the Virginians are “to be taxed to support the Yankees & make [Rufus] King President or have our throats cut” by slaves incited to rebel. Virginians could either consent to restrictions on slavery expansion, a Rufus King presidency, and taxes to pay for banks and canals, or the Federalists would incite slave rebellions in Virginia. Virginian Francis Walker had an equally gloomy reading of the Missouri Crisis and consolidation: “We are from this day forth, tributary to northern shoe makers,” and “potato[,] pumpkin, and Ruta-bega men,” a dig at the exalted political place enjoyed by working class northerners. With consolidation, Virginia’s gentry would henceforth be the tributary slaves of northern artisans and farmers, rather than ruling themselves, their slaves, and the Union. For Monroe’s close confidant, Dr. Charles Everett, the future looked gloomier still: unless the assault on “Virginia principles” – including efforts to restrict slavery’s expansion in the territories - was stopped, “we shall be delivered” over to a fate “worse than Federalism:” “universal emancipation.”

Unlike the gentry, however, Monroe’s experiences left him disinclined to see banks and canals as a threat to either the gentry or slavery. While serving as Secretary of War and State, the War of 1812 made manifest to Monroe the necessity of a Bank of the United States and federally sponsored internal improvements. Yet if Monroe and the gentry differed on matters of economic policy, Monroe nonetheless remained deeply sympathetic to their economic and political difficulties. He also shared their fears that outside interference with slavery threatened to undermine the gentry’s mastery over enslaved blacks as persons and their sovereignty over slavery as an institution, as had happened during the War of 1812. Finally, Monroe remained politically dependent on the planter class who played king-makers through their control of the Republican party caucus, which amounted to little more than an off-the-books meeting of the planters who filled the ranks of the Virginia legislature. Possessing at least some of the fears of Virginia’s Old Republicans, and dependent on them politically, Monroe immediately assumed the role of a Virginia planter when he sensed a threat to Virginia and its planter class during the Missouri Crisis.  

By February of 1820, Monroe had convinced himself that he had to sign the Compromise into law to save Virginia and slavery from a fate far worse than congressional restrictions on slavery in the northern reaches of the Louisiana Purchase. Virginia’s gentry, on the other hand, had already convinced themselves that Congress had to be denied the authority to place any
restrictions on slavery in any territory, no matter how ill-suited that territory might be for slavery. Thus, when word reached Richmond that Congress had struck a compromise and that Monroe was prepared to sign the bill into law, the gentry nearly revolted against Monroe. Though neither the Virginia gentry nor the Virginia assembly had any legal or constitutional authority over the matter, Monroe nonetheless felt compelled to gain their consent before he signed the compromise into law. Further compelling Monroe to take his case to the gentry, the Republican Caucus that was expected to nominate Monroe for the presidency in the upcoming election of 1820 was set to meet just as Richmond received word of the Compromise. Monroe’s supporters had to adjourn the meeting of the caucus out of fears that the Old Republicans would deny Monroe the nomination, and the Old Republicans made clear that they would nominate someone else if Monroe went through with the Compromise. Over the next three months, Monroe and his son-in-law George Hay corresponded extensively with major and minor members of the gentry to explain that he had to sign the Compromise into law - not to save the Union - but to save Virginia. After received the guarded blessings of Madison and Jefferson, and after Hay managed to gain the gentry’s grudging consent, Monroe signed the Missouri Compromise into law on March 6, 1820.24

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Monroe and Hay’s engagement with the gentry deepened their shared fears that the Missouri Crisis was really about sectional political power and the enslavement of Virginia republicans rather than a genuine effort to limit slavery’s expansion. Monroe validated their shared conviction that there never was and never could be a legitimate effort to restrict slavery’s expansion. All such proposals originated in “the Spirit of 1786,” which drove designing New England Federalists to destroy the Virginia gentry, the only group in the United States who stood between the republicanism of the Constitution and the monarchism of the Federalists. With this understanding of the politics of slavery and sectionalism, the Virginia gentry and Monroe convinced themselves that in fighting against even the mildest of proposals to restrict slavery, they were really fighting to preserve republican government and the Union.

In seeking the Virginia gentry’s approval of his signing the Missouri Compromise bills into law, Monroe not only stoked their worst fears, he also legitimated their increasingly radical positions on the relationship between the federal government and slavery. Monroe and the Virginia gentry walked away from the Missouri Compromise convinced that the interests of the Union in restricting slavery’s expansion had to yield to the peculiar needs of the Virginia gentry. Thus, federal coercion on slavery of any kind – even the mildest of coercions, barring slavery from unsettled territory – had become strictly off limits in the future. In both the short and the long-term, Monroe and the Virginia gentry mandated that the federal government could never take any kind of meaningful action to restrict slavery’s growth and expansion without provoking threats of disunion.25

But the federal government did take action. However limited it may have been with the Missouri Compromise, further expansion became a necessity. While The Richmond Enquirer loudly demanded acquisition of Texas, Monroe quietly continued with plans to strengthen American claims to the region between Louisiana and the Rio Grande River, even as he acknowledged that the sectional animosities created by the Missouri Controversy made it impossible to acquire Texas in the near future.26 Those deep sectional divisions forced southern expansionists to put off acquiring Texas in the 1820s, but the issue would arise again in the 1830s. Then, in 1841, John Tyler – who had served as a Virginia congressman during the Missouri Controversy – unexpectedly assumed the presidency with the death of William Henry
Harrison. After appointing a number of the Virginia gentry to important offices, he immediately sought the acquisition of Texas, fulfilling the long-dashed hopes of the Virginia gentry and setting the Union on a course towards disunion.27

Many of the founders had hoped that time and expansion would ameliorate the sectional differences that had threatened the Union since its inception. The Missouri Crisis, however, demonstrated to contemporaries that time and expansion had only deepened and exacerbated sectional conflicts and the threat they posed to the Union. Ultimately, the Missouri Compromise failed to address the bigger, more intractable issue that would ultimately lead to disunion and Civil War. What was the place of slavery in an extended Union intent on conquering a continent? Monroe and the Virginia gentry had forged their answer in 1820; it would guide later southern extremists in the debate over Texas annexation and the place of slavery in the Mexican Cession, Kansas, and – with the Dred Scott decision – in all of the federal territories. When northern restrictionists countered southern expansionists by electing Abraham Lincoln president in 1860, southern slaveholders did exactly what Monroe and the Virginia gentry had counseled in 1820: they broke apart the Union to preserve their personal mastery over slaves as persons, and their sovereignty over slavery as an institution.

I would like to thank Peter Onuf, Robert McDonald, Joe Dooley, and the Sons of the American Revolution for hosting a conference in honor of Lance Banning. Special thanks to Mike McManus, who shared with me his copies of many of the Monroe letters used in this chapter, and Dave Nichols and George Van Cleve for their close readings of this chapter.
Monroe to Hays, in Daniel Preston and M.C. DeLong eds., A Documentary History of the Presidential Tours of James Monroe, 1817, 1818, 1819 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2003), 424; Noble E. Cunningham, jr., The Presidency of James Monroe, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 30-40; Columbian Centinel, July 12, 1817. Historians once accepted that an outpouring of nationalism followed the War of 1812. However, Alan Taylor, The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772-1832 (New York: Norton, 2013), 395-398, shows that nationalism was confined mainly to the North and the West, and that the main effect of the war in Virginia was to deepen the gentry’s conviction that the Union had strayed from Virginia’s true republican principles, that the Union failed to protect slavery during the war and would likely to continue to do so in the future, and that the Union no longer served Virginia’s interests.


3 Historians have long praised and decried both Monroe’s involvement and lack of involvement in forging the Missouri Compromise. Rather than focusing on Monroe’s statesmanship during the Missouri Crisis, this article examines how Monroe’s identification with the Virginia gentry influenced his understanding of the Missouri Crisis and his actions in shaping its outcome and consequences. For evaluations of Monroe’s statesmanship in the Missouri Crisis and Compromise, see, for example, Cunningham, Presidency of James Monroe; Forbes, Missouri Compromise; McManus, “James Monroe’s Domestic Policies.”


5 Ohman, “Convergence of Crisis.”


7 For the southern position on Missouri restrictions, see Van Cleve, Slaveholders’ Union; Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion.*

8 William Trimble to Ethan Allen Brown, January 29, 1820, Ethan Allen Brown Papers, Ohio Historical Society. For the votes and divisions that beset Congress during the Missouri Crisis, see McManus, “James Monroe’s Domestic Policies.”

9 For the votes on slavery west of Louisiana and Arkansas, see *Annals,* 16th Cong., 1st sess., 424, 426-428, 469, 1587-88. In addition to the proposals to prohibit slavery in Texas, Samuel Foot of Connecticut proposed that Congress require all territories and incoming states to exclude slavery as a condition of statehood. See *Annals,* 16th Cong., 1st sess., 1171-1172. John Tyler of Virginia also alleged that northern congressmen were considering blocking the Missouri statehood bill, which would have left Missouri at the territorial stage of government. Then, Northern congressmen would pass a bill prohibiting the further introduction of slavery in all present and future territories, which would have ended the further growth of slavery in Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, and Florida. See John Tyler to Spencer Roane, February 14, 1820, Gilder Lehrman Institute, New York, GLC 03670. The best account of the deals, pressures, and politics that went into the making of the Compromise is McManus, “James Monroe’s Domestic Policies.” McManus’s forthcoming work on the Missouri Crisis should be definitive.

10 Hammond, *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion,* 161; “The Question Settled,” Charleston City Gazette, March 10, 1820; Montfort Stokes to John Branch, February 27, 1820, Slaves and Slavery Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

11 Monroe aggressively acquired and sold slaves throughout his adult life. The inheritor of a single slave in 1774, Monroe owned at least seventy-five slaves by 1820. Monroe also carried the financial burden of caring for his large, extended family, making him heavily dependent on the labor of his slaves. For Monroe’s extensive land and slaveholdings, see Gerard W. Gawalt, “James Monroe, Presidential Planter,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 101 (April 1993), 251-272. Monroe’s concerns about maintaining planters’ personal mastery over slaves and the gentry’s political sovereignty over slavery as an institution were also shaped by his experiences as governor and as Secretary of War and State. Monroe had served as governor of Virginia during Gabriel’s Rebellion in 1800. While serving as Secretary of War and State during the War of 1812, Monroe frequently dealt with the flight of Virginia slaves to British forces. See Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802*
12 James Monroe to [George Hay], December 20, 1819, James Monroe Collection, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond. Though Monroe remained publicly silent throughout the Missouri Crisis, he communicated his positions on restriction and expansion through a series of essays penned by his son-in-law George Hay. The essays, written under the penname “An American,” appeared in the Richmond Enquirer. Hay wrote the letters with Monroe’s assistance and encouragement. For the Hay-Monroe correspondence on the “American” essays, along with Monroe’s position on restrictions and disunion, see Monroe to Hay, December 20, 1819, JMC, VHS; Hay to Monroe, Dec. 24, 1819 JMP, LOC; Monroe to Hay, Jan. 10, 1819; JMP, NYPL; Monroe to Hay, [late] January. 1820; JMC, VHS. Monroe also expressed his position on the unconstitutionality of territorial restrictions in a public letter written either by him or on his behalf, see “Missouri Question – Compromise, &c.” and “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman in Washington to his friend in Richmond,” Richmond Enquirer, February 17, 1820.

13 Monroe to Hay, December 20, 1819, JMC, VHS. For diffusion and amelioration, see Ford, Deliver Us from Evil. For Virginians deep-seated fear of slave rebellion, see Taylor, Internal Enemy.


16 The best analysis of claims that the Missouri Crisis involved an “Eastern” or New England conspiracy is in Van Cleve, Slaveholders’ Union, 238-241. As Van Cleve demonstrates, there was no plot to put Clinton or King in the presidency, or for disunion. However, Clinton, King,
and other northerners argued to their colleagues in private that the North had to act as a party or voting bloc on important sectional issues such as tariffs, internal improvements, and slavery’s expansion. King also expressed concerns that the Union had been dominated by southern interests since its inception. In short, Federalists and Clintonians certainly sought to exploit the Missouri Crisis for their personal and sectional political gain, but there was no plot to destroy the Union or to make King or Clinton president, though both would have welcomed the prospect of rising to the presidency. Historians have uncritically accepted the Virginians’ allegations that the Missouri Crisis was at root a political power play by Federalists, but fail to distinguish between the motives that drove northern Federalists and Republicans. While Federalists sought to exploit the Crisis for their own gain, northern Republicans primarily sought to bring an end to slavery’s expansion for its own sake. Furthermore, historians have incorrectly alleged that the political ambitions of northern restrictionists somehow sullied and undermined northern efforts to restrict slavery’s expansion, as if principle and political advancement were somehow mutually exclusive.


18 James Monroe to George Hay, January [2-], 1820, LMC, VHS; Barbour to Spencer Roane, Feb 13, 1820, W.L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

19 James Monroe to [Spencer Roane?], February 14, 1820, James Monroe Collection, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York; Monroe to Madison, February 19, 1820, James Madison Papers, LOC; Abner LaCock to Monroe, January 30, 1820, Monroe Papers, LOC. Monroe was not alone in resigning himself to the possibility of disunion; the Virginia gentry seemed particularly inclined towards the dissolution of the Union between the southern and northern state as a result of the irreconcilable differences the Missouri Crisis had exposed. See, for example, C[laiborne]W[atts] Gooch [editor, along with Thomas Ritchie of the Richmond Enquirer] to David Campbell, February 16, 1820, Box 4, Campbell Family Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

20 James Monroe to [Spencer Roane?], February 14, 1820, JMC, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York; Monroe to Madison, February 19, 1820, James Madison Papers, LOC; (quotes). See also, Abner LaCock to Monroe, January 30, 1820, Monroe Papers, LOC; Monroe to Hay, February 6, 1820, February 10, 1820; JMP, NYPL; Monroe to Madison, February 19, 1820, James Madison Papers. LOC; James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, May 27, 1820, TJP, LOC; “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman in Washington to his friend in Richmond…February 12,” Richmond Enquirer, February 17, 1820. For Monroe and the gentry’s fear of both a British invasion in a future war and slave flight if not rebellion see Taylor, Internal Enemy, especially, 354.

21 Spencer Roane to James Monroe, February 16, 1820, JMP, NYPL. For recent work on the Virginia gentry’s decline within Virginia and the Union, see Eva Sheppard Wolf, Race and Liberty in the New Nation; Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner’s Rebellion (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Kevin R.C. Guzman, Virginia’s American Revolution: From Dominion to Republic, 1776-1840 (Lanham, MD:

22 “To the Editor, Letters from St, Louis,” *Richmond Enquirer*, May 21, 1819; Francis Walker Gilmer to Peter Minor, February 22, 1820; Gilmer to Minor, March 25, 1821, Correspondence of Francis Walker Gilmer, 1784-1826, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA; Charles Everett to James Monroe, February 20, 22, 1820, JMP, NYPL. For the gentry’s conviction that “the whole affair” was simply “a base and hypocritical scheme to get power under the mask of humanity,” see for example, George Hay to Monroe, February 17, 1820, James Monroe Papers, LOC.

23 Exemplifying Monroe’s concerns that outsiders weakened the gentry’s control over slaves and slavery, in the immediate aftermath of the War of 1812, Monroe personally organized several missions to recover slaves who had fled to the Caribbean or Canada with the British. See Taylor, *Internal Enemy*, 360 – 365. The gentry threatened to deny Monroe the nomination if he signed the Compromise into law. For their threats and the responses of Monroe and his subordinates, see, for example, Burrill Bassett to James Monroe, February 7, 1820, JMC, Monroe Museum, Fredericksburg; George Hay to Eliza Hay, February 12, 1820, Monroe Papers, LOC; Thomas M. Bayley to Monroe, February 15, 1820, JMP, NYPL.

24 For the gentry’s criticism of Monroe and their initial disbelief that he would sign the Compromise into law, see, for example, Burrill Bassett to James Monroe, February 7, 1820, James Monroe Collection, Monroe Museum, Fredericksburg. VA; “Missouri Resolutions,” *Richmond Enquirer*, February 10, 1820; Thomas M. Bayley to Monroe, February 15, 1820, JMP, NYPL; John Tyler to Spencer Roane, February 14, 1820, Gilder Lehrman Institute, New York, GLC, 03670; C.W. Gooch to David Campbell, 16 February 1820, Campbell Family Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. For Monroe’s efforts to convince the gentry that signing the Compromise into law was in the best interests of Virginia, see for example, James Monroe to Charles Everett, February 11, 1820, University of Virginia Library Microfilm Publication No. 7, James Monroe Papers in Virginia Repositories; Hay to Monroe, February 16, 1820, Monroe Papers, LOC; Monroe to Madison, February 19, 1820, James Madison Papers, LOC; “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman in Washington to his friend in Richmond,” *Richmond Enquirer*, February 17, 1820. Madison gave Monroe his blessing to sign the compromise into law on the grounds that even with a prohibition on slavery in the Louisiana Purchase, Virginians could still control legislation on slavery at the state and federal level. See James Madison to James Monroe, February 23, 1820, James Madison Papers, LOC.

25 For southern efforts to frustrate any federal efforts to legislate on slavery in the 1820s, including Virginians’ efforts to create an effectively pro-slavery Democratic party is Forbes, *Missouri Compromise and its Aftermath*. Monroe directly sought to undercut the growth of a Republican faction with anti-slavery tendencies in Massachusetts and New England by encouraging southern congressmen to support payment of Massachusetts’s claims stemming
from the War of 1812. See Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, April 6, 1824, TJP, LOC; Monroe to James Madison, April [], 1824, JMP, LOC.

26 Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, May 14, 1820; James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, May 27, 1820, TJP, LOC; Extracts of Several Letters from Andrew Jackson to James Monroe, Re. The treaty of 1819 with Spain, June 20, 1820, JMP, NYPL; “Missouri Resolutions,” Richmond Enquirer, February 10, 1820. The gentry would also devote themselves to creating a political party that they could use to protect slavery and gain influence over the federal government. The best account of the politics of slavery in the 1820s, including Virginians’ efforts to create an effectively pro-slavery Democratic party is Forbes, Missouri Compromise and its Aftermath.