SOUTHERN unionists who had left the Democratic party during the crisis of 1850-51 made a valiant effort during the presidential contest of 1852 to prove their loyalty to the Democracy. Many of them were therefore bitterly disappointed with President Franklin Pierce's decision to reward the South by appointing to his cabinet two southern-rights Democrats. Among those who shared this disappointment was Georgia's Governor Howell Cobb. Like many Union Democrats, he believed the President had formed a government by joining fire-eater and abolitionist. To southern unionists like the Georgia Governor it made no sense to entrust the fate of the Union to the perilous adjustments which must of necessity issue from such a combination.1

It was the judgment of Cobb that the sound approach to national policy was to place the affairs of the Union in the hands of its friends. Distressed by the Democratic party's poor showing outside the South in the elections of 1854, he began late that year to plan toward this objective.2 Now in private life for the first time in over a decade, Cobb was just under forty years of age. Except for the part he had played in helping with the adoption of the Compromise of 1850, his public career had been inconspicuous. When the 31st Congress had opened in December, 1849, he was already a veteran of the lower house. Among his colleagues he was known as a conciliator. Largely because of this reputation he had been declared Speaker after a protracted contest. Senator

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1 Horace Montgomery, Cracker Parties (Baton Rouge, 1950), 93; Alex Morton to Cobb, August 17, 1855. Unless otherwise indicated all letters cited herein are in the Cobb Papers, University of Georgia Library.

John C. Calhoun bitterly observed that Cobb's northern associates had chosen him, because of all southerners he was the least loyal to the southern viewpoint. As Speaker some of the luster that came to be attached to the Compromise of 1850 rubbed off on him. It helped to make him governor the next year. It also had the effect during the next few years of rendering him more popular in the North than in Georgia and the South generally, a posture modern southern politicians carefully avoid. Thus by late 1854 Cobb had come to believe that by ending the incongruous Pierce

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combination the Union would be safe and he himself would be in a better position to advance his political fortune.4

Among Pierce's appointees to the foreign service was Pennsylvania's James Buchanan. A friend of Cobb from the days of the Polk administration, the Pennsylvanian confided that he had reluctantly agreed to serve for two years as Minister to England.5 His conservative views were acceptable to southerners, whether unionists or southern-rightists. To Buchanan, Cobb outlined his plan for the nation's political salvation. The renomination of Pierce, he wrote on December 5, 1854, would bring "certain and inevitable defeat"; nor could any member of the President's cabinet save the party. In the South, and indeed the country generally, asserted Cobb, Buchanan was "not only the strongest but perhaps the only man that could succeed in 1856."6

From the castle of the Duke of Leeds in Yorkshire, where he was passing a few of the holidays with his niece, Buchanan framed a lengthy answer to his advocate's plea. "I have uniformly declared to all friends," he wrote, "that I would not again be a candidate for the Presidency; and from this I cannot depart. I have always thought it was a melancholy spectacle to see old men struggling in the political arena for honors and offices, as though this world was to be their everlasting abode. . . . There are several younger men in the United States quite as well qualified as myself to discharge the duties of the Presidential office, among the more prominent of whom without flattery, I would class you; and nothing but the partiality of friendship could point to me as capable of commanding a larger electoral vote than some of them. It is true that as a great portion of my life has been devoted to the maintenance of the Constitutional rights of the South, I may be popular in that region; but for this very reason I should lose votes in the North."7

If Buchanan's declination upset Cobb, the Georgian's private correspondence betrays no such feeling. On the contrary, his letters of the eighteen-month period between January, 1855, and the

4 Horace Montgomery, Howell Cobb's Confederate Career (Tuscaloosa, 1959), 14-16.
5 Buchanan to Cobb, January 3, 1855.
6 Cobb to Buchanan, December 5, 1854, in Phillips, ed., Correspondence, 348-349.
7 Buchanan to Cobb, January 3, 1855.
Democratic National Convention of June, 1856, reveal no sign of any weakening on the issue of Buchanan's candidacy. One would be tempted to ascribe his persistence to naive loyalty were it not for the fact that during the five or six months preceding the convention he was receiving reports that both the President and Senator Stephen A. Douglas were stronger in Georgia than Buchanan.

In October, 1855, Cobb won his old seat in the House of Representatives. Within three weeks after the 34th Congress convened, he had pledged on the floor of the House, in what he characterized a superior oratorical effort, his loyalty to the "National Democracy." From then until the party's National Convention he openly asserted, both in and out of Georgia, his faith in James Buchanan.

Early in June, 1856, Democrats gathered in Cincinnati to select their party's nominee for President. Cobb was not there. His state's delegation was badly split between the President, Douglas, and Buchanan. The Convention unexpectedly chose as its President John E. Ward of Savannah, who since the early 'fifties had been a close political associate of Cobb. Ward confided to his friend that, while Buchanan was in a very strong position because of "Doughface" support, southern extremists were contriving to defeat him. He went so far as to predict their success. Although Ward proved a poor prophet, his observations from the chair of the Convention, added to his reflections of a month later, support the view of Alexander H. Stephens that the Cincinnati Convention was torn between "Doughfaces" and southern extremists. Because the former had the backing of many southern unionists, Buchanan emerged the victor. This was the combination that

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8 George H. Martin to Cobb, February 16, 1856; Cobb to his wife, March 10, 1856; J. Branham to Cobb, March 13, 1856; Cobb to J. Branham, March 31, 1856; Cobb to A. C. Nevin, April 2, 1856.
9 J. W. Duncan to Cobb, January 16, 1856; W. H. Hull to Cobb, January 23, 1856; John E. Ward to Cobb, March 18, 1856; T. R. R. Cobb to Cobb, March 24, 1856.
10 Cobb to James Gardner, January 4, 1856; Jno. C. Whitner to Cobb, January 25, 1856; George H. Martin to Cobb, February 14, 1856; J. B. Lamar to Cobb, June 18, 1856.
11 Ward to Cobb, June 3, 1856.
13 Stephens to Thomas, June 16, 1856, loc. cit.
Cobb had for months felt would eventuate, once the task of selecting the nominee was begun. Since it worked at Cincinnati, Cobb and other party leaders hoped this posture of moderation would readily become the basis for a popular image of Buchanan. To the task of fostering such an image of the Democratic nominee, Cobb was expected to contribute mightily.

Although Congress remained in session through August, Cobb lost no time in taking the case for Buchanan to the voters. By mid-June he had already spoken in Philadelphia and New York. The Georgian's most significant effort before September, however, was his talk on August 7 at the Democratic ratification meeting in Portland, Maine. Of this address the Maine Free Press declared: "His love for the Union which he poured forth from the bottom of his heart, made every man present feel that our state had a right to claim him as one of her own." Portland's party leaders assured the Georgian that he had "struck a good blow for the Union." Cobb himself wrote his wife immediately after his return to Washington that his trip to the East had given him renewed confidence in the success of Buchanan. "Indeed," he explained, "I do not now entertain a serious doubt on that question and such is fast getting to be public opinion with all parties." To the Democratic nominee, he wrote a short time later: "The prospect there [in Maine] is better than I expected to find it."

In Pennsylvania, John W. Forney, Chairman of the Democratic State Central Committee, was as sanguine as Cobb. On July 19 he wrote his Georgia friend: "Fremont cannot stand discussion, and will soon be dead wood on the stream." On the 30th the Pennsylvania politician wrote again to predict a Democratic victory of from 12,000 to 15,000 votes in his state's October election. He warned, however, that "we shall get some fearful blows in the Wilmot, Erie, Crawford and probably Allegheny districts," adding "we are at work day and night on these points."

Meanwhile, Cobb had concluded that the presidential race "turns upon your October elections," as he put it in a letter to Buchanan on July 27. "... if we lose that election," he forewarned, "I fear

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33 John B. Lamar to Mrs. Cobb, June 16, 1856.
34 Clipping dated August 8, Cobb Papers.
35 John Appleton to Cobb, August 12, 1856.
36 August 11.
37 August 14, 1856, in Phillips, ed., Correspondence, 380.
that all is lost.”20 One week later Cobb wrote to reassure the nominee that he had nothing to fear from the South,21 despite the movement there among unyielding Whigs to stimulate some interest by alleging, as the Raleigh Register did, that the “conservative, union-loving men of the North” would almost to a man vote for Millard Fillmore.22

Late in August, Forney complained to Cobb that all the odds and ends of abolitionism were to be poured into Pennsylvania in September.23 Buchanan’s Republican opponents were planning to make a strong bid for the Keystone state. With Lehigh County Germans reputed to be jeering Republican campaign orators with such epithetical shafts as “Die Negerbosser,” the campaign of 1856 suggests some of the less refined techniques of the 20th century.24 “. . . We should be sustained,” implored Forney, “by our friends from the South in a struggle like this, where their own states scarcely need their personal presence.”25

While Cobb received invitations to speak in all sections of the country, his private correspondence leaves little doubt that among Pennsylvania Democrats he was a special favorite.26 Forney’s plea of late August, invitations from numerous local Democratic leaders, and his own personal interest in Buchanan’s success all helped in influencing Cobb to stump Pennsylvania. Other considerations were the importance of the Keystone state and the decisive Democratic reverses in September elections in Maine, Iowa, and Vermont.27 By mid-September five states had already elected a total of twenty members to the 35th Congress.28 Twelve were Republicans, six were Democrats, and two were Americans.29 In Maine, where Cobb had been so enthusiastically received just one month

20 Ibid., 378.
21 Ibid., 379.
22 August 22, 1856.
23 August 26, 1856.
24 Dollar Weekly Pennsylvanian, August 26, 1856. This paper was published only during the campaign.
25 To Cobb, August 26, 1856.
26 Among the cities sending invitations were these: Portland, Maine; Petersburg, Virginia; Wilmington, North Carolina; Trenton and Mt. Holly, New Jersey; Dayton, Ohio; Dubuque, Iowa; and Detroit, Michigan. Indiana Democrats invited Cobb to spend two weeks in their state. He made several appearances there after leaving Pennsylvania. From Pennsylvania Cobb received at least a dozen requests to speak at party rallies.
27 Washington National Intelligencer, September 13, 1856.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
earlier, the Republicans polled some 17,000 votes more than in 1855, while the Democratic ballot was over 5,000 below the preceding year's tally.  

As Cobb was settling down at Philadelphia's Democratic headquarters, one of Georgia’s leading Fillmore journals inquired: “Can the friends of Mr. Buchanan point out a single State North of the Potomac to be depended upon for him?” The editor followed with a lengthy invitation to old Union men of the South to join and thus assure, in the face of a divided North, the election of the former President. At about the same time another Georgia paper, this one traditionally unionist and strongly pro-Buchanan, explained that Cobb had gone “to raise his warning voice at the North, that the fanatics there may know the consequences which will inevitably follow the election of Fremont, and the attempt to place the country under Black Republican rule.” Thus the campaign of 1856 was rendering impotent the southern unionists of the early fifties. Indeed, some of these earlier unionists were now threatening the Union they claimed to have saved, unless the election results pleased them. With ominous mockery, Cobb's political life was becoming increasingly dependent upon his own and this group's skill in outbidding the fire-eaters.

Cobb had arrived in Philadelphia on September 14. Accompanying him from Georgia was William N. Morton, an old-line Whig recently converted to the Democracy. Morton reported to the Athens Southern Banner his impressions of Cobb's first two appearances before political rallies in the Quaker City. On the day

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29 Ibid., September 16, 1856.
30 Milledgeville Southern Recorder, September 16, 1856; letter of William N. Morton, September 16, 1856, quoted in Athens Southern Banner, September 25, 1856.
31 Ibid.
32 Athens Southern Banner, September 18, 1856.
33 John B. Lamar, Cobb's brother-in-law and a leading unionist of the early 'fifties, wrote from New York in July, 1856: “... all fraternity between the N & South is gone & the sooner we separate the better.” Lamar to David Barrow, July 22, 1856, in Barrow Papers, University of Georgia Library. In August, Mrs. Cobb wrote her son, who was traveling with his uncle in the North, to inquire whether it was safe for them to be moving about in the land of the abolitionists in view of the feeling against southerners. Mrs. Cobb to her son, August 31.
34 The summary presented here is based on Morton's letter of September 16. It appeared in the Athens Southern Banner, September 25, 1856. In 1853, Morton had been the Whig nominee for Congress in Georgia's sixth district. This was the district Cobb represented before he was elected governor. In
of his arrival, Cobb called at Democratic headquarters in the Merchants Hotel. Party leaders decided he should speak that night. Dispatches were immediately sent out announcing two talks. The first was presented before a gathering in Walnut Street. Here Cobb talked for well over an hour. Immediately afterwards he was taken by carriage on a four-mile trip to another part of the city. This time he spoke over two hours. “When he concluded,” wrote Morton, “he was surrounded by the crowd with such expressions of devotion to their Southern brethren as would have done your heart good to witness.” Morton confessed that he had often heard of the “soundness” of northern Democrats, but never before had he realized what this meant. Quaker City Democrats, he emphasized, “are ready to fight your battles, and swear to the Union, in fact, they have more feeling of contempt for the negro worshippers if possible than the south have, from the fact, that, they witness more of their blind folly.” In conclusion, this former Whig praised Cobb’s two speeches, repented for his own earlier political aberration, and predicted that if “our beloved country is to be saved, it is through the Democratic party.”

According to the Dollar Weekly Pennsylvanian, 50,000 Democrats gathered in Philadelphia’s Independence Square on Constitution Day in 1856. They resolved freely and listened politely to hours of florid oratory, Howell Cobb supplying a goodly share of the latter. “When I place my foot on the soil of Pennsylvania,” he boasted, “though Georgia born, I feel that I tread ‘my native heath’—America is my country.” Then came an appeal to what the Georgian considered the great principles of the Founding Fathers. These were equality of the states and the right of all the republic’s citizens to self-government. In Kansas there was no self-government, complained Cobb, because some who had opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act later contrived to defeat its legitimate operation. They had subscribed money and called upon fellow citizens to act. Speaker Nathaniel P. Banks and the Emigrant Aid Society were accused of complicity in this effort to defy law and prevent

1855 the district returned him again to Congress. Cobb was then in Congress during the presidential race of 1856. He resigned from this body early in 1857 to accept the post of Secretary of the Treasury in President Buchanan’s cabinet.

26 September 20.

27 Cobb’s speech quoted ibid.; Philadelphia Public Ledger, September 18, 1856.
self-government in Kansas. It was true that the aggrieved planters had struck back. At this point Cobb provoked some jollity by remarking that he wondered whether the Fremont men thought he looked like a Missouri ruffian.

A capable performer before an audience, Cobb was also a skillful and ambitious politician. His was not a blustery threat to challenge the Union, if his candidate failed of election. Such was the role given Georgia’s Governor Herschel V. Johnson on this Constitution Day.88 Cobb, on the other hand, concluded his long speech with a plea for obedience to law. In doing so, he explained that the Senate had offered a remedy for the Kansas debacle, only to have Fremont’s men in the House head it off.89 After describing the Senate proposal, he asked: “. . . ought the bill to have been passed? Would it not have given calm to the country?” His query as to who was responsible for these troubles produced a loud cry of “Republicans,” the perfect response to conclude with the compliment: “You are right, my friends.”

On September 18, Cobb carried his campaign for Buchanan to Chester County.41 For two hours he spoke to a large audience in West Chester’s Horticultural Hall.42 Again there was his romantic call for the Union and the Constitution. They were the promise of the joint destiny of North and South. Among Cobb’s listeners were many “zealous and active” Republicans, whose request to

88 The Dollar Weekly Pennsylvanian, September 20, 1856, quoted Johnson as having said: “I tell you that my deliberate and calm opinion is, that if Fremont is elected . . . the day on which his election is announced will close the history of the Union.” Cobb himself did not use such language during the campaign of 1856, though there is little doubt that he wished to convey the opinion Johnson expressed. Interestingly enough, Johnson did a complete political turn and in 1860 was one of Georgia’s leading unionists. Cobb, on the other hand, had become a confirmed disunionist, left the cabinet, and contributed mightily to organizing the secession movement on Georgia. Of Johnson’s speech quoted above, the Washington National Intelligencer, September 20, 1856, observed: “That the birthday of the Constitution should have . . . been chosen as the very day on which to . . . predict its death can hardly fail to strike every mind with a ludicrous sense of its incongruity. . . .” The editor was careful to add that Buchanan did not share such views.

89 The Senate bill would have put five “disinterested” men in charge of Kansas elections. Cobb charged House Republicans with defeat of the measure on the “miserable” ground that it vested appointment in a Democratic President.

90 Dollar Weekly Pennsylvanian, September 20, 1856.

41 Philadelphia Public Ledger, September 20, 1856.

42 This account of the West Chester speech is based on clippings from the Daily Pennsylvanian, Cobb Papers.
put questions and state objections was granted. According to the friendly *Daily Pennsylvanian*, two of the most prominent local Republicans undertook this assignment. They were courteously listened to, and by their adherents lustily cheered. Cobb's replies were extravagantly praised as having come "down with a crushing conclusiveness that left nothing further to be said." His was one of those rare performances "which exhibited the majestic march of truth trampling down the errors of passion and prejudice, and compelling partisan blindness itself to see and acknowledge its excellence." That Chester County Democrats had a fondness for the Georgian is attested to by a resolution they adopted months after his visit. It read in part as follows: "No man deserves to stand higher in the confidence and affections of the sound national, union-loving, and constitution-abiding citizens of the whole country, and we feel confident the Democracy of Pennsylvania, without a dissenting voice, would hail with great satisfaction, his elevation to a prominent position in the Cabinet of President Buchanan."43

After his West Chester visit, Cobb returned to Philadelphia.44 His itinerary for the next two weeks was now completed. Nine major engagements were scheduled.45 First on the list was Frankford on September 22. There he was reported to have spoken to the largest assemblage, political or otherwise, that had ever met in that neighborhood.46 In the audience were some 300 women, not advance agents of the suffragettes but Yankee beauties cheering this southern knight-errant on his mission for bachelorhood. If Cobb is to be trusted, his chivalry did not fail him: he kissed them all.47

The next day "the great Union champion," as he was being heralded by his adherents, spoke twice in Lancaster, each time to large crowds which responded with "long and deafening cheers."48 From Lancaster Cobb went to Harrisburg, and thence to Carlisle. He was now speaking daily, traveling much, and sleeping as few as four hours a night.49 From Carlisle he wrote his wife on Sep-

43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.; Cobb to his wife, September 25, 1856.
48 *Dollar Weekly Pennsylvanian*, October 4, 1856.
49 Cobb to his wife, September 24, 25, 1856.
tember 25 that “the Fremonters do not spare me . . . which I regard as a favorable sign.” He also confessed that some days he was confident of success and then “my heart fails me.” His audiences were “large, respectful, and enthusiastic.” Whether he would go west was at this time uncertain, “as there is such a preference for me to spend all my time in Pa.—which is regarded by every one as the battle ground. . . .”

On September 27, Cobb stopped in York long enough to deliver a two-and-one-half-hour speech in the local courthouse. Before an audience described as “most attentive and delighted,” he repeated his favorite theme: the Union of equal states which was intended to protect the right of the people to govern themselves.50 Overwhelmed by the Georgian’s oratory, the presiding officer declared that in settling his account with his God he would not like to confess he had warred against the doctrines of “that great and pure man.”51 The York Gazette boasted of its admiration for “the giant intellect of the eloquent and able champion of the Union and the Constitution.”52

Cobb’s itinerary called for speeches in Venango, Crawford, and Erie counties.53 No account has been found of appearances he may have made in Venango County. On October 1, John Van Buren and former Governor William Bigler of Pennsylvania shared with Cobb the speaking at Meadville.54 The Crawford Democrat boasted that it was a “proud day” for the Democrats, despite a snowfall that commenced early in the morning and continued until midday.55 Neither this paper nor the Dollar Weekly Pennsylvanian would estimate the number of voters on hand.56 Both journals, however, claimed over 120 teams, some of four horses, had brought wagonloads of visitors to the public square to listen to the first round of talks. In the evening the crowd gathered in the courthouse. There Van Buren was frequently interrupted by Fremont supporters, Bigler defended the South against the charge of aggression and denounced Know Nothings, while

50 Dollar Weekly Pennsylvanian, October 11, 1856; York Gazette report of speech quoted in Athens Southern Banner, October 16, 1856.
51 Ibid.
52 November 4, 1856.
53 Clipping from Daily Pennsylvanian, Cobb Papers.
54 Meadville Crawford Democrat, September 30, 1856.
55 Ibid., October 7, 1856.
56 Ibid.; Dollar Weekly Pennsylvanian, October 11, 1856.
Cobb concluded the speaking with what was described as “a thrilling appeal in favor of the Union.”

The next day Cobb and Van Buren appeared in Erie. The Weekly Gazette of that city, a staunch Republican journal, gave the pair a chilly reception. They would, its editor predicted on the day of their arrival, doubtless “spread” themselves on the Union. “By this worn out application,” he continued, “these travelling orators hope to reach those unreckoning, timid souls who are fain to believe that Slavery will bite its own nose off in order to spite the National Countenance.”

Of the Democratic rally on October 2, the Weekly Gazette’s account was that of a partisan. It claimed that half the 800 or so people who had gathered in the city’s east park to hear the Democratic orators came from the fairgrounds. They had been drawn to the park out of curiosity. The editor reminded readers of his prediction by pointing out that Cobb and his companion had talked “lugubriously about the condition of the Union in the event of Fremont’s election, intimating the belief that it will be dissolved.”

Cobb had spoken eloquently and had been well received, thought the editor, who then offered the judgment that the Georgian was an ingenious fellow. He had invented a “spurious argument” on the assertion that the Compromise of 1850 had repealed the Missouri Compromise. If this were true, the editor wondered why it had not been spoken of until after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill. Moreover, why had Cobb united with some forty Senators and Congressmen from North and South to declare the Compromise a fair arrangement based on settlements formerly agreed upon? On the contrary, insisted the editor, the Compromise of 1850 “instead of repealing, re-affirmed the Missouri Compromise.”

As for Van Buren, he had disappointed even the Democrats by directly opposing Cobb in saying Congress had the power to prohibit slavery in the territories. The editor took a parting shot at the visitor from Georgia by charging that he had spoken for Buchanan but acted with the Know Nothings. Specifically, he had

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57 Meadville Crawford Democrat, October 7, 1856.
58 Erie Weekly Gazette, October 2, 1856.
59 Ibid., October 9, 1856.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
come to Erie to reorganize the Know Nothing lodges, "so as to prevent any fusion of the Fillmore men with the friends of Fremont."62

From Philadelphia to Erie, Howell Cobb had sought to create the image of moderation and reasonableness. Frequently another image was just as deliberately unveiled. It was the image of a man prepared to unleash the forces of ruin, if the election returns proved disappointing. Indeed, for this ambitious politician there was no other choice. By the settlement of 1850 he had pledged himself to no further concessions on slavery. What he encountered in Pennsylvania frightened him. Normally a sanguine competitor, he confessed at the halfway point of his canvass that Republicans were numerous, formidable, and confident.63 He was to return to Georgia a prisoner of his ancient foes, the fire-eaters. Thus men like Cobb, who comprised the conservative core of Buchanan's southern following, were to find themselves drifting helplessly toward disunion. Their "battle cry of freedom" for the states had been tried before a national audience in 1856. Cobb had rendered it, in fair weather and foul, all the way from Walnut Street to Lake Erie, sometimes in overtones and as often in a kind of off-key harmony with Forney, Bigler, and Van Buren. It looked like a "hit tune," so it was to be revived four years later. Singing it with crusading zeal, the South was to go marching out of the Union when the "battle cry of freedom" for persons received a higher rating.

62 Ibid., October 16, 1856.
63 Cobb to his wife, September 25, 1856. The Erie Weekly Gazette, October 16, 1856, declared: "Thank God, it is not for Northern or Southern rights that we contend, but for the rights of men."