JOHN QUINCY ADAMS,
THE GAG RULE, AND ANTISLAVERY

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INTRODUCTION

In the United States in the 1830's, the foremost issue that threatened the future of the Union was slavery. The abolition and antislavery societies became much more aggressive in their campaign to attack slavery. Under this new pressure, the South grew extremely sensitive and defensive of its peculiar institution.

In an attempt to still the disruptive debate over slavery, the House of Representatives in 1836 adopted a "gag" rule to stop the flood of petitions calling for abolition. This was passed by the Southerners with the support of the majority of representatives from the North. The leader of the opposition to the gag rule was the venerable ex-President, John Quincy Adams, who was rendering his last years of public service in the House of Representatives.

Adams, in his attempt to rescind the gag rule became, willingly or not, the unofficial leader of the antislavery movement. The struggle against the gag rule was closely connected to but was not quite the same as the antislavery movement. In view of this fact and John Quincy Adams's role in both movements, a question arises as to how much his involvement in the antislavery movement was prompted by his work against the gag rule. Were Adams's attitudes, actions, and associations with the abolition movement influenced by the gag rule?
CHAPTER 1
ADAMS BEFORE THE GAG RULE

In order to determine if John Quincy Adams's behavior was changed by the gag rule, one must first establish what his basic ideas and actions connected to slavery were before the gag rule became an issue. To begin with, let us consider Adams's basic concepts of slavery.

Throughout his life, Adams consistently believed that slavery was morally wrong. He rejected all the Southern arguments that slavery was a positive good, that the Negroes were happy and better off in slavery, and that it produced a better, more equal white society. On the contrary, he felt that slavery had a bad effect on both the slave and the slavemaster. During the debate over the Missouri Compromise, Adams recorded his feelings about slavery in his diary:

It is among the evils of slavery that it taints the very sources of moral principle. It establishes false estimates of virtue and vice; for what can be more false and heartless than this doctrine which makes the first and holiest rights of humanity to depend upon the color of the skin? It perverts human reason and reduces man endowed with logical powers to maintain that slavery is sanctioned by the Christian religion, that slaves are happy and contented in their condition, that between master and slave there are ties of mutual attachment and affection, that the virtues of the master are refined and exalted by the degradation of the slave ....

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Later in life Adams attributed what he felt were unfair political attacks on him by Southerners as further evidence of the degenerate effects of slavery.

As can be seen in the above passage, Adams rejected the idea that slavery and Christianity were compatible; the Christian religion left no room for slavery. To deny a human being his natural right of freedom is "to deny his immortal soul" which is a sin against God.  

Not only did Adams consider slavery as a moral wrong and a sin against God, he also felt that it violated the basic concepts of freedom contained in the Declaration of Independence. However, he believed that these principles had later been compromised in the writing of the Constitution which sanctioned slavery.

Two particular clauses in the Constitution sanctioned slavery. One established the three-fifth's ratio of representation for slave states. The other clause dealt with the requirement that fugitive slaves be returned to their owners. Because these guarantees were in the Constitution, Adams sought to adhere to them in spite of

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3 Leonard Falkner, The President Who Wouldn't Retire (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1967), pp. 75-6. The clause on fugitive slaves states, in part: "No person held to service or labor in one state, under law thereof escaping into another, shall ... be discharged from such service or labor, but shall be delivered up on claim ...." U.S., Constitution, Art. IV, sec. 2.
his personal repugnance to slavery. For example, as head commissioner to negotiate a peace for the War of 1812 and later as Secretary of State, Adams endeavored to secure indemnity for the slaves carried off by the British in that war.\textsuperscript{4} He did this because he believed that it was his constitutional duty.

Soon after his entry in the House of Representatives, Adams developed a dislike for the three-fifths ratio which he felt gave too much representation to the slave-holding interests. However, he would not attack this agreement because it was a pledge given the South at the making of the Constitution and, therefore, must be fulfilled. Adams said, "I am for adhering to that bargain because it is a bargain ... not that I would agree to it if the bargain were to be made over again."\textsuperscript{5}

In view of these constitutional guarantees, Adams believed that the answer to the slave problem must come from the South itself; it could not be forced upon them. Partly for these reasons Adams kept away from the abolition movement and refused to support any move in the direction of abolition before the gag rule controversy.\textsuperscript{6} If emancipation was to come peaceably, he felt that it should


\textsuperscript{5}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 266.

\textsuperscript{6}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 330, 332.
come from the individual states, not Congress. He would support emancipation only if it could be achieved with compensation and the consent of the owners. Any other attempt to arbitrarily force abolition on the South would be tyrannical and unconstitutional. It is true that as early as 1824 Adams thought that Congress might find the constitutional power to emancipate the slaves, perhaps in the preamble or in the war powers; however, he did not publicly suggest these ideas before the gag rule.

Adams's general attitudes on abolition are reflected in his more specific stand on the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia where the federal government had much greater direct power. One of John Quincy Adams's first acts upon entering the House in December, 1831, was to present fifteen petitions that he had received from some Quakers in Pennsylvania calling for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. The ex-President stated that he did not agree with the prayer of the petitions, but he presented them merely to fulfill his duty as a representative of the people; he referred the petitions to the District of Columbia Committee with the

7 J. Q. Adams, Memoirs, IV, 530.
9 Bemis, Adams and Union, p. 64.
expressed hope that they would bring a negative report on the petitions. He further stated that should the subject of the petitions come up for debate, he would oppose the wish of the petitioners.  

The Quakers and abolitionists were dismayed with Adams's position. When asked his justification, he gave three reasons:

1. People in one state could not competently petition Congress to ask certain actions dealing with affairs in another state or in the District of Columbia.

2. Debate would merely stir up needless ill will between the North and South.

3. His actions were in accordance with the feelings of his constituents.  

In February, 1835, about a year before the gag rule, the Massachusetts Representative presented several more petitions for abolition in the District, but he reaffirmed his earlier position on the subject. 

Thus, Adams opposed any suggestion of abolition in the District of Columbia or in the states where slavery already existed, but what about slavery in the territories?


11 Falkner, President, p. 52; Bemis, Adams and Union, p. 331.

Adams transcribed several opinions on this topic in his diary during the Missouri Compromise. He declared that Congress had the power to exclude slavery from any territory such as was done in the Northwest Territory. At the same time, he believed that the prohibition of slavery in a territory, like Missouri, where a great deal of slavery already existed was impractical. On the other hand, it would be a violation of the ideals of freedom in the Declaration of Independence for either Congress or the states to establish slavery in areas where it did not already exist. 13

The federal government also had direct authority over the slave trade, and Adams agreed with those concerned about it and went on record in opposition to it. 14 In spite of this stand, Adams, while Secretary of State, rejected British overtures for close cooperation to stop the slave trade. The problem here was that to effectively limit the slave trade, British ships would have to have the authority to stop and search American vessels. Nationalist Adams would never give the British this authority; he was more concerned about surrendering the right to search American ships than he was about stopping the slave trade. 15

13 Ibid., IV, 530; V, 6.
14 Ibid., VI, 375; Bemis, Adams and Union, p. 331.
While Adams thought slavery was wrong, he would not support abolition. At the same time he felt that the peculiar institution and the ideals of freedom could not exist side by side indefinitely. As has been noted, he thought that slavery existed in violation of the principles of the Declaration of Independence. This incompatibility in turn threatened the future of the Union. Slavery was against the basic principles necessary for a "cohesive social order in America." In 1832 Adams thought that the real problem confronting the country was whether the Union would be able to hold together and that "the question at issue was slavery."

In view of this threat to the Union, he was convinced that emancipation was much more likely to come not from peacefully legislated abolition but rather from a break up of the Union and a reorganization based on total emancipation. He expressed this feeling in his diary in 1820:

A dissolution, at least temporary, of the Union as now constituted, would be certainly necessary .... The Union might then be re-organized on the fundamental principle of emancipation. This object is vast in its compass, awful in its prospects, sublime and beautiful in its issue.

18 Ibid., IV, 531.
Later that year he wrote, "If the Union must be dissolved, slavery is precisely the question upon which it ought to break." Eleven years later while contemplating the eventual triumph of democracy over slavery, he thought that this victory would not come "without producing bitter fruits in our own country." 19

While John Quincy Adams was convinced that abolition would come only after disunion and possibly a civil war, he was in no hurry before the gag rule to see such events happen. On the contrary, he opposed any discussion of slavery in hope that this would help soothe sectional feelings and delay the eventual conflict. He supported the Missouri Compromise partly because it was a practical way of putting the slavery question to sleep and because of his "extreme unwillingness to put the Union at hazard." 20

As a member of the House in 1852, Adams replied to a letter asking why, if he abhorred slavery, he did not support abolition:

I had expressed the wish that the subject (abolition) might not be discussed in the House, because I believed discussion would lead to ill will, to heart-burnings, to mutual hatred, where the first of wants was harmony; and without accomplishing anything else. 21

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19 Ibid., V, 12; VIII, 269-70.
Adams continued to oppose any discussion of slavery in the House until the adoption of the gag rule. In 1833 when a Southern member objected to referring an abolition petition to committee, Adams quickly suggested that he withdraw his objection; otherwise, the subject of the petition would be open for debate. Just six months before the passage of the gag rule, the Massachusetts Congressman supported a resolution in answer to a petition that Congress was unable to interfere with slavery in the District of Columbia; here again he supported this partly because of a desire for peace on the subject.

As might be expected from Adams's opposition to any public discussion of slavery, he gave almost no public expression of his own feelings on the subject before the gag struggle. His actions and views were so quiet that his friends were not sure of his position on the issue. In both the presidential elections of 1824 and 1828, he declined to comment on slavery; he did not even answer letters from supporters North and South asking his position. He saw no constructive reason to make an issue over slavery, and he probably kept quiet in order to maintain as much political support as possible in the North and in the South.

22 Falkner, President, p. 79.
24 Clark, "Old Man Eloquent", p. 352.
In addition to keeping his opinions to himself, Adams refused to have anything to do with the abolition and antislavery societies. He believed that they were unrealistic and could not accomplish anything beneficial. In 1835 he wanted to stay clear of the "abolition windmill;" by associating with this movement, he would simply be "loading himself with its political liabilities."

In summary, John Quincy Adams considered slavery a definite wrong and harmful to the nation. However, in view of slavery's constitutional guarantees, he would not support any move toward abolition without compensation and consent of the owners. Realistically, he thought that total emancipation would come only after a temporary dissolution of the Union. However, he would not advance the day of possible civil conflict; therefore, he opposed any public discussion of the slavery issue. He kept his own views of the subject quiet and refused any association with the antislavery societies.

\[26\text{Ibid.}, \text{pp. 330, 334.}\]
During the early history of the House of Representatives, it was the practice to receive petitions and memorials every Monday while in session. This practice became a problem in the 1830's when the increasingly active antislavery societies greatly enlarged the flow of petitions. These petitions were a problem for two reasons. In the first place, the presentation of these numerous petitions threatened to delay the normal business of the House; secondly and perhaps more importantly, the subject of the petitions (abolition) was explosive in the House.

As a practical means of handling these petitions, Henry Pinckney proposed in February, 1836, that a select committee be established to consider the subject of the petitions and to report that Congress had no power to interfere with slavery in the District of Columbia. Adams supported the select committee as a compromise that would protect the right of petition and at the same time stop any debate over slavery and abolition. 1 Otherwise, there was a threat that the petitions would be rejected altogether.

When the Pinckney Committee reported on May 18, 1836, it proposed three resolutions. The first stated that

1Bemis, Adams and Union, pp. 336-7; Falkner, President, pp. 125-8.
Congress had no power to abolish slavery in any of the states. This Adams could have supported with certain reservations. Secondly, the committee proposed that slavery ought not be interfered with in the District of Columbia. As might be assumed from Adams's long opposition to abolition in the District, he could easily have supported this resolution. However, he was violently opposed to the third resolution which he believed abridged the right of petition. This stated in part that all petitions relating in any way to abolition should, "without either being printed or referred, be laid upon the table, and no further action whatever be had thereon."

By quick parliamentary moves, the Massachusetts Representative was kept from voicing his objections to the committee report. He voted against the first; he did think that Congress could find the constitutional power to free the slaves. He was excused from voting on the second of the resolutions; it is probable that he was not willing to go on record totally against emancipation in the District of Columbia. On the third which imposed a "gag" on abolition petitions, Adams when called to vote replied: "I hold the resolution to be in direct violation of the Constitution of the United States, of the rules of this House, and of the rights of my constituents."

However, this new rule was supported and passed by a majority of the Southern and Northern representatives.²

²Falkner, President, pp. 130-1, 135.
The gag rule was renewed for every session until 1840 when it became a standing rule of the House; this was the strongest rule yet, prohibiting even the introduction of any petitions relating in any way to slavery. Adams continued to struggle against this denial of the right of petition until December 3, 1844, when the gag rule was rescinded.

John Quincy Adams's persistent struggle to defeat the gag rule is seen as the last great contribution in his long public career. This is also recognized as a valuable contribution to the antislavery movement. This is an interesting interpretation in view of Adams's earlier attitudes and behavior regarding slavery and abolition. Did Adams change his stand and actions on slavery after the passage of the gag rule? To answer this question, his behavior and positions must be compared with his conduct before the gag rule.

As was mentioned earlier, Adams privately believed that Congress could find the power to free the slaves in a loophole in the Constitution, but he had carefully kept these feelings to himself. The day following the passage of the first Pinckney resolution which stated

3"No petitions, memorials, resolutions or other papers, praying for abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, or any state or territory, or the slave trade between the states and territories of the United States in which it now exists, shall be received by this House, or entertained in any way whatsoever." Ibid., p. 242.
that Congress had no power over slavery in the states, Adams, who had been excluded from the previous debate, rose to speak to a joint resolution dealing with refugees of the Seminole Wars. By careful maneuvering he was able to turn the subject of debate to the war powers of Congress.4

He drew a distinction between the peacetime and wartime powers of Congress. Naturally, Congress had more extensive powers during a war; it would then be possible to interfere with local affairs for the welfare of the country and the war effort. Included in this interference would be the power to free the slaves. In a speech before the House in April, 1842, Adams extensively explained his theory on the war powers:

Do you imagine that your Congress will have no constitutional authority to interfere with the institution of slavery in any way in the States of this confederacy? Sir, they must and will interfere with it—perhaps to sustain it by war, perhaps to abolish it by treaties of peace; and they will not only possess the constitutional power so to interfere, but they will be bound in duty to do it by the express provisions of the Constitution itself. From the instant that your slaveholding States become the theatre of war, civil, servile, or foreign, from that instant the war powers of Congress extend to interference with the institution of slavery in every way by which it can be interfered with, from a claim of indemnity for slaves taken or destroyed, to the cession of the State burdened with slavery to a foreign power.5

The ex-President went on to state that in war not only the Congress but also a military commander had the power to emancipate the slaves. These theories of Adams were later used by President Lincoln as the basis for the Emancipation Proclamation during the Civil War. The Massachusetts Congressman continued to express his ideas on the war powers over slavery for the rest of his life. These episodes show a definite change after the gag rule in his expression of constitutional powers.

Adams was of course concerned about the gag rule limiting the right of petition and the accompanying resolutions stating that Congress lacked any power over slavery. Because of these concerns he introduced a resolution in December, 1838, which stated that no resolution of the House could add to or detract from the constitutional powers of Congress. As he had expected, this resolution was defeated, but it served to put his stand on the record.

As noted above, Adams disliked the three-fifths ratio for representation in the South; he felt that it gave undue power and voice to the South. Yet it was a bargain that must be fulfilled. Later he particularly resented this ratio since it helped the South put the

8 J. and J. Q. Adams, Selected Writings, pp. 394-5.
gag rule through the House. Afterwards he suggested several times a constitutional amendment that would abolish this clause; this would have helped break the South's influence in the House of Representatives.\textsuperscript{9}

On some of these issues Adams's basic thinking may not have changed much, but he did give much freer public expression to them. On the issue of abolition he continued to support abolition only with compensation and consent of the slaveholders. However, to clarify his position in February, 1839, he introduced three constitutional amendments to end hereditary slavery and to gradually phase out the remaining slavery. These amendments stated that after July 4, 1842, there would be no further hereditary slavery; every child born on or after that day would be free. Also, no territory would be admitted to the Union as a slave state with the exception of Florida. He did not seriously expect his proposals to be adopted, but again he wanted his stand on emancipation to go on the record. He continued to consider immediate and peaceful abolition as impractical and highly unlikely.\textsuperscript{10}

As before, Adams maintained that Congress had more direct authority over the District of Columbia. In January, 1840, he rejected the idea that Congress had no

\textsuperscript{9}Falkner, President, p. 285.
\textsuperscript{10}Bemis, Adams and Union, pp. 374, 381.
constitutional power to abolish slavery in the District. However, he continued to feel that in the District "immediate abolition was absurd." He took a dim view of William Lloyd Garrison, his American Anti-Slavery Society, and their campaign for abolition in Washington; he thought that "its main achievement had been to increase the hostility of the South." Most of the antislavery petitions that were flooding the House dealt with slavery in the nation's capital. The ex-President tried to discourage these particular petitions and suggested they turn their attentions to work against the annexation of Texas as a slave state; this would be a more practical and worthwhile venture. Thus, Adams did not change his opposition to immediate abolition in the District of Columbia; yet, after the gag rule he was clearly and publicly stating that Congress did have constitutional authority over slavery in the District.

Congress also had power to control the interstate slave trade. On this particular issue Adams told supporters that he would use all his influence to bring an immediate end to this slave traffic. On October 23,

13 Falkner, President, pp. 174, 198.
14 Ibid., p. 198.
1837, he recorded in his diary: "The prohibition of the internal slave-trade is within the constitutional power of Congress, and, in my opinion, is among their incumbent duties." Unfortunately his previous attitude on the interstate slave trade does not seem to have been recorded; however, in view of his previous lukewarm opposition to the external trade, perhaps it can be assumed that Adams strengthened his stand against the slave traffic after the gag rule.

John Quincy Adams continued to believe that peaceful emancipation was unlikely, and as he grew older, he became more certain that the problem would be resolved by civil conflict. Naturally, as time elapsed and mankind progressed, slavery was bound to come in conflict with the basic ideas of freedom. At this point his thinking altered very little except that he became more convinced of the eventuality of conflict and believed that it was getting ever closer. Before he had done all that was possible to retard the division of the Union; now after the gag, he stopped resisting the process. This shows another alteration in Adams since he had come to look on a temporary division as the only means of eradicating slavery and as a prelude to a more unified nation. In his interpretive biography of the sixth

\[15\] J. Q. Adams, Memoirs, IX, 418.
President, George Lipsky commented on this change:

From an early period he thought that the union could not endure on the basis of slavery. At first he opposed attempts to move against slavery in the face of its constitutional safeguards, but, as he grew older, he came to believe that a civil war should be sought as a means of rooting out the evil.16

Another subject which reveals a change in Adams's thinking was Texas. He was a strong nationalist, and before as President he had tried to buy Texas from Mexico; nevertheless, after the start of the gag rule controversy, he became one of the foremost opponents of the annexation of Texas. Mexico had already abolished slavery in Texas, and the ex-President would have been glad to receive Texas as a free state. The major obstacle for him was that all the proposals would bring Texas into the Union as a slave state; he considered it a grievous sin to reestablish slavery where it had ceased to exist.17 This turn about in Adams came during his struggle against the gag rule; it is possible then that he became concerned about the threat of slavery in Texas partly as a result of the gag rule.

In considering whether the gag rule might have influenced Adams's basic philosophy, it is evident that he must have altered his thinking on the public discussion of the peculiar institution. Previously, he had been


fearful of any discussion of the issues surrounding slavery; the gag resolutions forced him to make an about face on this policy too. Although at first his "new" public stand on slavery was unpopular not only in the South but in the North as well, he continued to speak for the right of petition and attack the "slavocracy" at the same time. The Massachusetts Congressman saw the gag as an attempt to silence himself and "all other representatives from the free states who might speak against slavery and the slave power in this Union."\(^{18}\) He did not speak out against slavery until after the gag resolution was introduced.

Adams had been forced into the slavery debate by the circumstances surrounding his defense of the right of petition. He pointed this out in a letter to a constituent in 1836: "I did not start the question whether in the event of a servile insurrection and war Congress would not have complete unlimited control over the whole subject of slavery ...."\(^{19}\) Perhaps he did not start the issue but once it had been started by the first Pinckney resolution accompanying the gag rule, Adams proceeded to fully expound his views. After the start of the gag rule until his death, he spoke out quite freely on slavery. In fact he declared in his

\(^{18}\)Bemis, Adams and Union, p. 444.

\(^{19}\)J. and J. Q. Adams, Selected Writings, p. 383.
diary on August 10, 1843, that he hoped his opinions regarding the abolition of slavery would be declared and made known. William H. Seward in his biography of John Quincy Adams suggested that the ex-President's motive for speaking out was to raise a debate on slavery in order to show how wrong slavery was and thereby convince people to change their minds. While Seward's interpretation of Adams's motives may be doubtful, it is obvious that after the adoption of the gag rule Adams became an active participant in the debate over the peculiar institution.

Before Adams had viewed abolition with a wary eye, as something to be avoided as a political liability. How did the gag rule affect his association, or perhaps disassociation, with the abolition and antislavery movements? Although John Quincy Adams and the abolitionists had many of the same goals in mind, he was motivated primarily by the defense of the right of petition. He considered the various gag rules as a devious, if not an outright, denial of the right of petition.

Adams's high regard for the right of petition can be seen in the following statement in 1832 about the presentation of petitions in the House:

21 Seward, Adams, p. 293.
a most tedious operation in the practice, though to a reflecting mind a very striking exemplification of the magnificent grandeur of this nation and of the sublime principles upon which our Government is founded.22

He believed the gag rule was a violation not only of the rights guaranteed in the Constitution but also of a basic right interwoven with the very nature of government and any form of government, including a monarchy.

Petition is supplication—it is entreaty—it is prayer! And where is the degree of vice or immorality which shall deprive the citizen of the right to supplicate for a boon or to pray for mercy? Where is such a law to be found? It does not belong to the most abject despotism. There is no absolute monarch on earth who is not compelled, by the constitution of his country to receive the petitions of his people, whosoever they may be.23

John Quincy Adams was alarmed that the House would reject petitions due to the subject matter. He saw quite realistically that this rule endangered all petitions, not just those on abolition. He told the House in 1840, "I say you cannot specify any one class of excluded petitions without claiming the right of extending your interdict to all other classes of them."24

He considered it the duty of congressmen to present every petition that they received. The member's personal

22J. Q. Adams, Memoirs, VIII, 475.


opinion on the subject of the petition was immaterial. Adams lived up to this ideal by presenting all petitions he received. Most of these were in favor of abolition; however, many were against abolition or attacked the Massachusetts Representative; nevertheless, he presented all and fought for their consideration. While presenting one such petition calling for all free Negroes to be sold as slaves, he commented:

I had long hesitated whether I would present this petition—to the prayer of which, nothing could be more abhorrent to my disposition. My respect for the right of petition was my only motive for presenting this.25

He refused to withdraw any petition which he presented since this to him would have been sacrificing the right altogether. He did concede that the House could reject a petition but only if it was not properly and respectfully written and only after it had been presented.26

Not only must the House receive all petitions, but it must also refer them to committees for consideration. If the House merely received petitions but did not actually consider their prayers, this would be an indirect denial of the right of petition. Regardless of the rules, Adams always attempted to have his petitions referred to the proper committees, considered, and reported.


It is the right of the petitioner, and the duty of this House, that, when a petition is presented to it, the House should inform itself what that petition contains—should then consider, and then answer it.27

Since the gag rule was closely connected to abolition and since Adams was the leader of the opposition to the rule, he came to be regarded by the people as the leader of the antislavery movement. His efforts against the gag had focused national attention as nothing else before on the evils of slavery.28 The ex-President realized this new position of leadership in which he found himself; however, he said that he had "no such ambition."29 To see Adams as the leader of the abolition and antislavery cause should come as some surprise in view of his attitudes and opposition to abolition.

Although he advanced the abolition movement indirectly and was seen as the popular leader, the abolitionists knew where he stood. William Lloyd Garrison complained that Adams had been "zealous in protesting against an effect, and yet was resolved not to strike at the cause."30 The disappointed abolitionists continued


29 Falkner, President, pp. 199-200.

to disavow Adams as their leader. One group even ran a "highly charged" abolitionist candidate of the Liberty Party against him during one of the congressional elections.31

Adams's views on emancipation put him outside of the abolition sphere. He considered himself an abolitionist only in the sense that he hoped all slaves would eventually be freed. He supported the same overall goal as the abolitionists, but he rejected immediate freedom for the slaves and the methods of achieving it. He never officially joined the antislavery movement and he continued to watch his public associations with them for sometime.32

In a speech in 1839 Adams attempted to clarify his position for the nation. He fully stated his views on immediate and eventual emancipation. He also attacked certain antislavery societies, particularly the American Anti-Slavery Society. He looked on their efforts as merely stirring up hostility and "pouring oil into the summit of a smoking crater."33

Many times Adams seemed to be at complete odds with the abolitionists. In the gag controversy the abolitionists

31Bemis, Adams and Union, pp. 373, 474-5.
had finally found an issue that had captured the attention and concern of many people in the North. While they were calling for more and more petitions on slavery or the gag rule itself, the Massachusetts Representative, on the other hand, suggested at times that it would be wise to reduce the number of petitions. Other times he proposed that they turn the subject of their petitions from the District of Columbia to Texas. Also, because the petitions were clogging the business of the House, Adams proposed a compromise rule. This rule would have had the Speaker refer the petitions to the proper committees.34 This proposal, which was rejected, would have cleared the House for business, would have protected the right of petition, and would have robbed the abolitionists of their issue.

While the abolitionists and John Quincy Adams never fully accepted the other, they used each other for their own purposes. The ex-President in his fight against the gag rule looked for any support he could find; the abolitionists were the only ones willing to aid him early in his struggle. On the other hand, the abolitionists,

34"Every petition presented by the Speaker, or by any member, with a brief verbal statement of its contents, shall be received, unless objection be made to its reception for special reason; and whenever objection shall be made to the reception of a petition, the name of the member objecting, and the reason of the objection, shall be entered upon the journal." U.S., The Congressional Globe, 26th Cong., 1st sess., VIII, 745.
who were more concerned about slavery, used Adams's national prestige and spectacular struggle against the gag to alarm the North about slavery.

Two historians, Avery Craven and Gilbert H. Barnes, maintain that Adams was actually an abolitionist. Craven in his book, *The Coming of the Civil War*, matter-of-factly states that the ex-President was a "thoroughgoing abolitionist who concealed the fact in order to increase his effectiveness ...."\(^\text{35}\) Barnes suggests a theory that Adams was an ardent abolitionist and sectionalist. Adams wisely cloaked himself with arguments on constitutional rights to secure as broad a base of support as possible; meanwhile, he shrewdly and quietly advanced the cause of abolition.\(^\text{36}\) These arguments run counter to almost all interpretations of Adams. It also fails to explain adequately all of the motives for his behavior and particularly some statements in his diary.

Although slavery was a secondary issue to Adams, he and others in the North became more and more alarmed about the peculiar institution. Just as he was worried that the precedent of the gag rule might be extended to any and all petitions, he was also concerned that the slavocracy might attack other basic rights in order to perpetuate


slavery. The ex-President saw the gag rule as an attack not only on the right of petition but also on his freedom of speech in the House. After the death of Elijah Lovejoy at the hands of an anti-abolition mob in Illinois, Adams wrote the following in an introduction to the family biography of Lovejoy:

That an American citizen, in a state whose Constitution repudiates all slavery, should die a martyr in defence of the freedom of the press is a phenomenon in the history of this Union.\textsuperscript{37}

It is significant that Adams saw the murder of Lovejoy as an attack by the slavocracy on another basic American right—freedom of the press. Slavery was a threat not just to the Negro but to the rights of everyone. The alarmed people of the North responded by altering their attitudes and cooperating more with the abolitionists.

Adams also changed in his association with the abolitionists after the gag rule. In the first place, he was closer to them because he needed their support. Yet, in the first several years he still avoided public connection with them; he turned down numerous invitations for antislavery meetings.\textsuperscript{38} However, later Adams did begin to meet and correspond privately with all elements of the abolition movement. Some of his closest companions

\textsuperscript{37}Alice Felt Tyler, Freedom's Ferment (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1944), p. 504.

\textsuperscript{38}J. Q. Adams, Memoirs, IX, 302, 349; X, 128.
were abolitionists; he described himself to them as a "fellow sufferer in the same holy cause." As the gag struggle progressed, he became more open in his association. He worked with the small abolition group that developed in Congress, and he frequented their Washington boarding house which was dubbed the "abolition house." A further sign of his closer connections occurred several years after the debate on the gag rule when the Massachusetts Congressman presided over a public antislavery meeting in Boston in 1846 to protest the return of a fugitive slave.

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39 Filler, Crusade, p. 101; Bemis, Adams and Union, p. 349.
40 J. Q. Adams, Memoirs, XII, 272-5.
CONCLUSIONS

What can now be concluded about how John Quincy Adams was influenced by the gag rule? In the first place, his view of slavery remained basically the same throughout his life. He always considered it a great moral wrong in conflict with the principles of freedom on which the nation was founded. Also, his opposition to immediate abolition and support for gradual emancipation with consent and compensation of the slave owners likewise remained steadfast. Therefore, in these two aspects Adams was not influenced one way or the other by the gag rule.

Likewise the gag rule did not sway the ex-President's basic interpretation of constitutional power over slavery. Although he did not publicly express his theory of the war powers of Congress until after the rule, it is likely that he had long considered this theory in private; therefore, he did not actually change his interpretation. In fact in all his basic thinking on these issues—the morality of slavery, abolition, constitutional powers over slavery—Adams remained consistent. It is then impossible to maintain that the passage of the gag rule and his struggle against it influenced him in any way in these aspects.

The story seems to be different on Adams's specific policies and actions in the controversies raised by slavery. The most obvious change came in his freer
discussion of slavery and the war powers of Congress after the adoption of the gag rule. Also, he became closer and closer in his relationships with the abolitionists. Another area where he changed his mind was in the case of Texas. Both Texas and the gag attack showed him that slavery had more of a degrading effect on the Union than he had supposed. The gag rule made him realize that slavery was a greater threat to freedom than he had thought.

In conclusion, the gag rule did not influence John Quincy Adams's basic ideas, but his behavior and specific policies did change as a result of his fight against the gag rule. In addition, he developed a new concern about the threat of slavery. It would be unwise to assume that the gag rule was solely responsible for these changes in Adams; however, it is reasonable to conclude that the gag rule was a major influence in his behavior.
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