Chapter Five

The Third Party

Henry Clay sealed his letter of October 5 and marked it “Confidential.” It was addressed to former Ohio governor Thomas Corwin, then residing in his hometown of Lebanon, seat of Warren County, northeast of Cincinnati. “I have not been unaware of the project of bringing out J[ohn] McLean” as the Whig presidential nominee, “by my retirement either voluntary or compulsively, of Judge [Jacob] Burnett and Judge [John C.] Wright concurring in it,” Clay confided to his old friend. “But I did not suppose that the latter would hold such opposite language in his paper and in his oral communications.”

Thomas Corwin was the member of Clay’s “secret committee” with the closest ties to both the Burnet-McLean coalition and the Mormon leadership of Nauvoo. Following a failed bid for a second term as governor of Ohio, Corwin had recently resumed his Lebanon legal practice in association with Sidney Rigdon’s brother-in-law, Anthony Howard Dunlevy. McLean, Dunlevy, and Corwin attended school together in Lebanon during the late 1790s. All three men maintained homes there.

Corwin was a longtime Clay supporter. The two men first met shortly after Clay’s appointment as secretary of state under President John Quincy Adams. In the summer of 1825, Henry Clay, together with his wife and daughter, left his Ashland estate south of Lexington and set out for Washington City. At Cincinnati twelve-year-old Eliza was struck down by a fever. Unaware of the severity of her illness, the family pressed on to Lebanon, one day-stage to the northeast. There a doctor advised Clay that Eliza required several weeks of bed rest to recover. Anxious to continue his journey to the capital, Clay wrote to President Adams on July 21. “I cannot say when her situation will admit of my continuing the journey,” Clay began, “but I shall resume it, without any unnecessary delay. I regret extremely the occurrence, as it protracts an absence from my post which had been previously extended beyond my expectations.”

Clay used his time in Lebanon to visit the Shaker settlement at Turtle Creek, and met with local politicians to review plans for an east-west canal to intersect

1. Henry Clay to Thomas Corwin, 5 October 1843, Corwin Papers, Warren County (Ohio) Historical Society.
with the Miami Canal at Middletown. Upon Clay’s return to Lebanon one evening, a delegation of southern Ohio’s political leaders headed by Thomas Corwin, Francis Dunlavy, Anthony Howard Dunlevy, and John Woods, met with the newly appointed secretary of state.

Francis Dunlavy, at sixty-four, a former judge and schoolmaster, was the eldest of the deputation. A Revolutionary War veteran, Dunlavy served in the 1802 convention that framed Ohio’s Constitution and was a member of the first state legislature following statehood. Thirty-three-year-old Anthony Howard Dunlevy, oldest son of Francis, had spent much of his early life in Lebanon, where he and Thomas Corwin, one year his junior, were pupils in his father’s school. Dunlevy and Corwin were admitted to the Ohio bar together in May of 1817. In 1825, Anthony Howard became the new editor and publisher of the Western Star and Lebanon Gazette (earlier established by John McLean); Henry Clay was one of his first subscribers. Thomas Corwin was prosecuting attorney for Warren County, and had just completed a term in the Ohio House of Representatives. Twenty-nine-year-old John Woods, proprietor of the Hamilton Intelligencer, was running for a seat in U.S. Congress. His bid would be successful.

Following his local political meetings, and assured by the doctors that Eliza would regain her health, Clay embarked once again for Washington City. When he had nearly reached the nation’s capital, Clay was dismayed to read a notice of his daughter’s death in the national newspaper. She had died on August 11, five days after his departure. Eliza’s funeral was solemn, “attended by a respectable concourse of citizens to the Baptist Church yard [in Lebanon] and there interred.” When, months later, Clay decided to make Lebanon Eliza’s permanent resting place, the secretary of state asked Anthony Howard Dunlevy to supervise the carving and installation of her memorial.4

By the 1840s, the Woods-Dunlevy-Corwin contingent of Clay supporters extended into the next generation. Rebecca and Laomi Rigdon’s only son was named after his grandfather, Francis Dunlavy, who died in 1830. Francis Dunlavy Rigdon graduated from Miami University in nearby Oxford in 1838 and became the junior legal partner of John Woods in 1841. Woods was Hamilton’s foremost citizen, having served as US. representative from Ohio 1825–1829, and the leading member of the Butler County Whig Central Committee. During the 1844 presidential campaign, F. D. Rigdon contributed pro-Henry Clay editorials to Woods’s newspaper and organized the Young Whigs of Butler County.5

Clay’s concerns weren’t limited to competition from Judge John McLean. Although unstated in his 1843 letter to Corwin, Clay was also worried about the

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5. Woods Papers, Butler County (Ohio) Historical Society.
emergence of third-party politics. Corwin, Clay knew, was one of its first victims, having lost his 1842 gubernatorial re-election bid due to the unexpected strength of what Whigs described as the “Ultra-abolitionist” Liberty Party. In that campaign, Corwin received 117,902 votes to the Democratic candidate’s 119,774. The Liberty Party polled 5,134 votes, many from former Whig supporters. Two percent of the electorate had decided the election and prevented Corwin from retaining the governorship. Corwin’s defeat was sobering; the rise of a third party posed a constant threat to the predictable symmetry of a two-party race. Presidential candidates in the 1844 campaign feared their election might suffer a similar fate at the hands of the Liberty Party or some other political upstart. Their apprehension was well-founded.6

Henry Clay received his long-awaited answer from Judge John McLean within days of sending his confidential letter to Tom Corwin. It arrived in the form of a widely published letter, “not written for the press,” in which McLean unofficially withdrew from the 1844 presidential race. “The friends of Mr. Clay, in consideration of his eminent qualifications and long public services, are looking with no ordinary solicitude to his nomination,” wrote McLean. “I do not desire and would not receive the presidency, if within my reach, as an instrument of a party . . . To bring back the government to its old foundations, to restore its character, its former purity, energy, and elevation would be an achievement second only to that of Washington . . . And short of this object, no honest man can desire the presidency.”7

Kentuckian Leslie Combs, longtime Clay associate and political advisor, wrote to the judge in mid-October. “Henry Clay for President & John McLean for Vice Prest,” the letter began, “and then John McLean . . . would be President in 1848.” Combs was suggesting that in four years McLean would be rewarded the prize he sought simply by agreeing to serve as Clay’s running mate in 1844. It was a tempting offer.8

McLean did not take long to reply. “On my return yesterday, after an absence on my circuit of four weeks I received your letter and feel greatly obliged by the kind interests expressed in it.” Even so, McLean had to decline. “So long as I remain in public life, I greatly prefer a position which requires action.” He believed it would be injurious to their common cause to “select a candidate for the second office from a state adjoining that in which the candidate for the first office resides.”9

With McLean publicly withdrawn from the 1844 presidential race, Henry Clay still faced one remaining obstacle. Clay understood that in order to have any hope of


7. John McLean to A. L. G. Fischer, 10 August 1843 (New York Daily Tribune, 4 October 1843), original in McLean Papers, Library of Congress, with longer introductory not included in published version: “Your letter of the 24th of May arrived at this city [Cincinnati] while I was absent on my circuit [in Springfield, Illinois] and was not received by me until my return a few weeks ago.” See also Weisenburger, John McLean, 104.


9. John McLean to Leslie Combs, 26 October 1843, in McLean Papers, Library of Congress. See also John McLean to John J. Hardin, 18 April 1844, in Hardin Papers, Chicago Historical Society, where he responds, once again, to a Whig request to run as VP to Henry Clay.
a Whig triumph in 1844, the McLean and Clay camps would have to combine their political fortunes. The alliance, as a marriage of convenience, would be fragile. If it could hold together through the Whig nominating convention in May, a Clay victory in November was practically assured.

By late October, most likely at the urging of Thomas Corwin and Anthony Howard Dunlevy, McLean finally agreed to place “such influence as he had,” referring to the political clout of Jacob Burnet, behind Clay’s candidacy. The Kentucky senator was especially relieved that Burnet’s “schemes . . . are now abandoned” and that the Cincinnati businessman would publicly (and privately, he hoped) advocate Henry Clay as the only viable Whig candidate for president of the U.S. in 1844.10

In mid-November Henry Clay received a letter postmarked Nauvoo, Illinois. It began simply enough. “We understand you are a candidate for the Presidency at the next election.” The letter next informed Clay that “the Latter-day Saints (sometimes called Mormons, . . . now constitute a numerous class in the school politic of this vast republic).” The correspondence was signed, “Most respectfully, sir, your friend and the friend of peace, good order, and Constitutional Rights, Joseph Smith. In behalf of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.” These opening and closing words signaled the emergence of a new and formidable constituency in the American body politic.

Joseph Smith had written to the five major candidates for the United States presidency to “enquire what their feeling[s] were or what their course would be towards the Saints if they were elected.” In addition to Clay, copies of the letter were sent to John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky, Lewis Cass of Michigan, and former president Martin Van Buren. A postscript was added to Van Buren’s letter: “Also whether your view or feelings have changed since the subject matter of this communication was presented you in your then official capacity at Washington, in the year 1841, and by you treated with a coldness, indifference, and neglect, bordering on contempt.”11

Each candidate was requested to provide “an immediate, specific and candid reply” to the question of how to properly redress Mormon losses in Missouri. “What will be your rule of action, relative to us as a people, should fortune,” that is, the Mormon vote, “favor your ascension to the chief magistracy?”12

Calhoun, Johnson, Van Buren, and Cass were Democrats. Clay was the only Whig. It was universally understood that the Whig ticket would be headed by the old

Kentucky senator. The Democratic ticket was less settled, although Van Buren, as a former president, was frequently held up as the only Democratic candidate who could successfully oppose Clay.

Clay wanted the Mormon vote yet was uncertain how to respond to Joseph’s inquiry. Just weeks before, the Latter-day Saint newspaper *Times and Seasons* (published in Nauvoo) had posed the question, “Who shall be our next President?” It assured its readers that the Mormons would “fix upon the man who will be the most likely to render us assistance in obtaining redress for our grievances” arising out of Mormon losses in Missouri. The editor promised the Saints would “not only give our own votes, but use our influence to obtain others; and if the voice of suffering innocence will not sufficiently arouse the rulers of our nation to investigate our case, perhaps a vote from fifty to one hundred thousand may rouse them from their lethargy. We shall fix upon the man of our choice, and notify our friends duly.”

Clay knew from Abraham Jonas’s experience that the Mormons had successfully supported a Whig candidate in the past. Joseph’s interview published in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* was dramatically pro-Clay. And yet Cyrus Walker’s defeat three months earlier betrayed the inconstancy of the Mormon vote.

Clay sought a middle ground. Writing from his Ashland estate on November 15, he evaded the vital question of favors for votes posed by the Mormon prophet. “Should I be a candidate, I can enter into no engagements, make no promises, give no pledge to any particular portion of the people of the United States,” Clay responded. “If I ever enter into that high office I must go into it free and unfettered.” At the same time Clay wanted the Mormon prophet to understand he was not unaware of the plight of the Saints and their recent trials. “I have viewed with lively interest the progress of the Latter-day Saints,” Clay assured Joseph, “I have sympathized in their sufferings under injustice . . . which have been inflicted upon them; and I think, in common with other religious communities, they ought to enjoy the security and protection of the Constitution and the laws.”

Joseph did not reply. Only after the Whig national convention the following May would Smith respond to Clay’s inability to take a firm stand on the Mormon question.


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Davis would be employed as a corresponding editor “until the termination of the pending contest for the next Presidency.” Above the notice was a declaration, “For President, HENRY CLAY.”

Bailhache had moved to Alton, Illinois, from Columbus, Ohio, in 1837 to promote William Henry Harrison’s presidential campaign in the West. Harrison was one of Bailhache’s political heroes; the men first became acquainted when the General passed through Chillicothe (Ohio’s capital at the time) during the War of 1812. Bailhache’s other political idol was Henry Clay, whom he met in 1821. The two men became regular correspondents.

As a newspaper editor, Bailhache recognized the political realities of his business, yet never allowed the lack of monetary support to interfere with his personal convictions. In 1836, unlike the majority of Ohio Whigs, Bailhache was unwilling to support Judge John McLean in his bid for the presidency, favoring instead Senator Henry Clay. This reluctance probably factored into Bailhache’s decision to rid himself of the Ohio State Journal, which he had successfully and ably edited for ten years.

After serving as mayor of the city of Columbus, Ohio, and heartbroken at the death of his last surviving daughter in early 1836, Bailhache determined to find a better position. Following a failed attempt to purchase a working interest in the Missouri Republican (he had relatives living in St. Louis), Bailhache was encouraged to buy the Alton Telegraph, represented as “being in a most prosperous state.” At the time Bailhache took over the Telegraph, in May of 1837, not only did he discover the precarious condition of the finances associated with the press, but he was also faced with a general economic downturn in which specie payments were suspended throughout the country. The survival of the newspaper would depend upon generous support from Illinois Whigs.

Bailhache eventually succeeded in producing one of the most widely respected (and quoted) Illinois Whig newspapers. Early on in the 1840 campaign, Bailhache described himself as “warmly attached to Gen. Harrison — whom I have personally known for upwards of a quarter of a century — and I flatter myself competent to defend and support him during the ensuing campaign.” His reasons were strictly ideological. “I have uniformly acted with the Whig party, in the full persuasion that it was not only composed of the best men in the Union . . . but also, that the measures for which it has contended were for the most part judicious and patriotic.” A sometime politician himself, Bailhache was elected to the Illinois House of Representatives during the 1842–1843 session, where he served with Abraham Jonas, O. H. Browning, and other prominent Illinois Whigs.

George T. M. Davis, Bailhache’s new editorial associate, was a passionate Whig, “a man of great activity and enterprise” often criticized for the “rather unscrupulous . . . means he employed” to achieve his political objectives. Following his arrival in Illinois in 1832, Davis established a successful law practice in Alton, and would be elected mayor of the city in 1844. Davis managed some of Henry Clay’s land holdings across the river in Missouri, and was a devoted admirer of the elder statesman. “Henry Clay was the Gamaliel at whose feet I had been taught the political principles that I then and now profess,” Davis would later write, referring to Paul’s New Testament teacher. “My heart was bound up in seeing him made the . . . President of the United States.” Davis was equally strident in his opposition to Mormonism, and described his attitude toward “this evil sect” as “remorseless and implacable hatred.” Indeed, Davis claimed that “From the day of their coming to that of their final exodus from the State [in 1846], I never ceased to raise my voice, or employ my pen against them.”

Bailhache and Davis were preparing to launch the journalistic campaign in Illinois to promote Henry Clay as the Whig candidate for president of the U.S. in 1844. Their partnership would allow Davis to travel throughout the state advocating the Whig cause.

In early December 1843, the Illinois Whig State Convention convened in Springfield’s Hall of Representatives. About 140 delegates were present. G. T. M. Davis was among those in attendance. Archibald Williams of Adams County was elected president of the convention. Forty-two-year-old Williams, a native of Kentucky, moved to Quincy in 1829. He served with fellow Quincy attorney O. H. Browning during Illinois’s Black Hawk War of 1832; the two men later rode the circuit together as they represented opposing sides in land title disputes. (This practice was not considered a conflict of interest for either party but a matter of convenience and companionship in the sparsely populated Military Tract.) Williams was elected to the Illinois state legislature for several sessions and became president of the Board of Trustees of Quincy upon its incorporation in 1834. In the late 1830s Archibald was active organizing the Whigs of the state (working closely with Browning, Abraham Lincoln, and Edward D. Baker) in preparation for the 1840 presidential campaign. Archibald was respected as a “sound lawyer” of “high moral character.” Williams addressed the assembly of Illinois Whigs, “promising to discharge the duties that devolved upon him with the strictest fidelity and impartiality.”

The business of the convention included the appointment of state senatorial and district delegates to the Baltimore Convention for the nomination of president and vice president of the United States, which was to be held the following May. “The gentlemen selected as Electors are men of high character and standing, and the best

stump speakers in the State,” exulted Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune, “and are devoted heart and soul to the election of Henry Clay.”

The State Central Committee, chaired by Anson G. Henry, oversaw the Central Committees for each congressional district in Illinois. In the Fifth District, Archibald Williams was elected chairman, assisted by Abraham Jonas and others.

John J. Hardin had already reached Washington, D.C. by the time of the Whig State Convention, and was finalizing plans for the 1844 contest. George T. M. Davis reported on the Springfield meeting to the Congressman. “It is admitted upon all hands to have been the best [convention] ever held by the Whigs in Illinois. We have gone into a thorough systematic organization, and every Whig that had been here this winter has left determined to conquer in 1844 or perish in the effort.”

Davis outlined the Whig program for Illinois. “We have instructed our congressional central committees that they must raise at least twenty five dollars in each of their districts to be transmitted to you for Junius tracts and other publications for general distribution,” he said. “If a life of Mr. Clay with the leading views of his public policy gotten up in a succinct form is printed in German,” Davis informed Hardin, “we will order and pay for at least a thousand copies.” The convention had already agreed to sponsor the publication of a campaign paper in German to attract the immigrant vote.

Davis was concerned about the weight of responsibility upon Hardin. “I am well aware of the arduous and almost insupportable labor you are called upon to perform as the only Whig Representative from this state. And while I am too sensible of the vast efforts you will make in the Whig cause, [I] must urge upon you the absolute necessity of not undertaking too much. I tremble for your health.”

“Another source of excitement,” Davis told Hardin, “has grown out of the kidnapping of two Mormons by the Missourians from the neighborhood of Nauvoo . . .”

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