Vice Presidents of the United States

George Mifflin Dallas (1845-1849)

Citation: Mark O. Hatfield, with the Senate Historical Office. *Vice Presidents of the United States, 1789-1993* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), pp. 151-161.
Introduction by Mark O. Hatfield.

U.S. Senate Collection

[Except that he is President of the Senate, the vice president] forms no part of the government:—he enters into no administrative sphere:—he has practically no legislative, executive, or judicial functions:—while the Senate sits, he presides, that's all:—he doesn't debate or vote, (except to end a tie) he merely preserves the order and courtesy of business . . . [When Congress is in recess] where is he to go? what has he to do?—no where, nothing! He might, to be sure, meddle with affairs of state, rummage through the departments, devote his leisure to the study of public questions and interests, holding himself in readiness to counsel and to help at every emergency in the great onward movement of the vast machine:—But, then, recollect, that this course would sometimes be esteemed intrusive, sometimes factious, sometimes vain and arrogant, and, as it is prescribed by no law, it could not fail to be treated lightly because guaranteed by no responsibility.

—George M. Dallas, ca. 18451845[1]

George Mifflin Dallas admitted in his later years that his driving force in life was for historical fame. From the 1840s on through the latter part of the nineteenth century, Americans associated his name with the acquisition of Texas and the settlement of the Oregon boundary dispute. Texas memorialized his contributions to the state's history by renaming the town of Peter's Corner in his honor. In the 1850s, when officials in Oregon sought a name for the principal town in Polk County, they settled on the logical choice: Polk's vice president. Thus, while largely forgotten today as the nation's eleventh vice president, George Mifflin Dallas has won his measure of immortality in a large Texas city and a small Oregon town.[2]

For four years at the heart of the Senate's "Golden Age," Vice President George Dallas occupied a center stage seat in the nation's premier political theater. This courtly Philadelphia aristocrat—whose political ambition greatly exceeded his political energy—entered that arena in 1845 filled with optimism for the nation, the Democratic party, and

his own presidential future. He departed in 1849 embittered and depressed, his political chances obliterated. During his term, the nation fought and won a war with Mexico, acquired vast new territories, settled a chronic northwestern boundary dispute, discovered gold, and launched a communications revolution with the invention of the telegraph. In the Senate, where political party caucuses assumed new powers to appoint committee members and distribute patronage, the central debates occurred over the status of slavery in the territories and the very nature of the constitutional union. With increasing frequency, senators faced conflicting choices between the desires of their parties and of their constituencies. When such an unavoidable decision confronted Vice President Dallas in July 1846 on the then searing issue of tariff policy, he chose party over constituency—thereby forfeiting his political future.

Early Years

George Mifflin Dallas was born in Philadelphia on July 10, 1792, the second of Alexander and Arabella Smith Dallas' six children. Alexander Dallas, a politically well-connected Philadelphia lawyer, served as secretary for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and reporter for the opinions of the U.S. Supreme Court and other courts then meeting in that city, which was at the time the nation's capital and leading commercial center. In 1801, as a reward for the elder Dallas' assistance in his presidential election campaign, Thomas Jefferson appointed him U.S. district attorney for the eastern district of Pennsylvania. He remained in that post until 1814, when President James Madison selected him as his treasury secretary. In 1815, Alexander Dallas also served concurrently for a brief period as acting secretary of war. He then resigned the treasury position in 1816 to return to his law practice with the intention of expanding the family's financial resources. However, early the following year, a chronic illness led to his death at the age of fifty-nine, leaving his family without the wealth necessary to support its accustomed style of living.

George Dallas graduated with highest honors from the College of New Jersey at Princeton in 1810. He then studied law and in 1813, at age twenty, was admitted to the Pennsylvania bar. With little taste for legal practice, he sought military service in the War of 1812 but abandoned those plans on the objection of his ever-influential father. He then readily accepted an appointment to serve as private secretary to former treasury secretary and Pennsylvania political figure Albert Gallatin, who was about to embark on a wartime mission to secure the aid of Russia in U.S. peace negotiations with Great Britain. Dallas enjoyed the opportunities that travel to this distant land offered, but after six months orders took him from St. Petersburg to London to probe for diplomatic openings that might bring the war to an end.

In August 1814, as British troops were setting fire to the U.S. Capitol, young Dallas carried a preliminary draft of Britain's peace terms home to Washington and accepted President Madison's appointment as remitter of the treasury, a convenient arrangement at

a time when his father was serving as that department's secretary. The light duties of his new post left Dallas plenty of time to pursue his major vocational interest—politics.[3] In 1816, lonely and lovesick, Dallas left Washington for Philadelphia, where he married Sophia Chew Nicklin, daughter of an old-line Federalist family. (They would eventually have eight children.) His marriage extended his social and political reach but, as his modern biographer reports, "Prestige came without money, a circumstance that was doubly unfortunate because he had developed extravagant tastes as a youth. For this reason he continually lived beyond his means and was constantly in debt, a situation that caused him on more than one occasion to reject otherwise acceptable political posts."[4] At the start of his married life, Dallas achieved a measure of financial stability by accepting a position as counsel to the Second Bank of the United States, an institution his father had helped create while treasury secretary. The 1817 death of Alexander Dallas abruptly ended George's plans for a family law practice. He left the Bank of the United States to become deputy attorney general of Philadelphia, a post he held until 1820.

George Mifflin Dallas cultivated a bearing appropriate to his aristocratic origins. Tall, with soft hazel eyes, an aquiline nose, and sandy hair, he dressed impeccably in the finest clothes his fashionable city could offer, wrote poetry, and, when the occasion warranted, spoke perfectly nuanced French. He developed an oratorical style that capitalized on his sonorous voice and protected him from the barbs of quicker-witted legal adversaries. His biographer explains that, whether "by chance or design, his habit of talking slowly and emphasizing each word created the feeling that he was reasoning his way to a conclusion on the spot. Since he also prepared cases carefully in advance, his apparent groping for the right word—and finding it—reinforced the initial impression that a great mind was at work."[5]

Dallas, however, lacked both the intense drive necessary to achieve his high ambitions and a natural politican's gift for warm social interaction with those outside his immediate circle. "A silk-stocking Jeffersonian in an age of egalitarianism," he preferred to remain aloof from the rough-and-tumble world of political deal making. Only once in his public life, when he ran for the vice-presidency, did he submit himself to the decision of the voting public. The Pennsylvania state legislature awarded him his Senate term, and the rest of his offices were given by appointment. At crucial moments, Dallas pulled back from the wrenching political compromises and exhausting coalition building necessary to achieve his lifelong quest for the presidency.[6]

Buchanan Rivalry

Pennsylvania's chaotic political climate in the forty years that followed the War of 1812 promoted, shaped, and ultimately sidetracked Dallas' public career. Two factions within the state's Democratic party contended for power during that time. Led by Dallas, the Philadelphia-based "Family party" shared his belief in the supremacy of the Constitution and in an active national government that would impose protective tariffs, operate a strong central banking system, and promote so-called internal improvements to facilitate

national commerce. In factional opposition to Dallas stood the equally patrician James Buchanan of Harrisburg, head of the rival "Amalgamators," whose strength lay among the farmers of western Pennsylvania.[7] When the Family party gained control of the Philadelphia city councils, its members in 1828 elected Dallas as mayor. Boredom with that post quickly led Dallas—in his father's path—to the position of district attorney for the eastern district of Pennsylvania, where he stayed from 1829 to 1831. In December 1831 he won a five-man, eleven-ballot contest in the state legislature for election to the U.S. Senate to complete an unexpired term. In the Senate for only fourteen months, he chaired the Naval Affairs Committee and supported President Jackson's views on protective tariffs and the use of force to implement federal tariff laws in South Carolina. A longtime supporter and financial beneficiary of the Second Bank of the United States, whose original charter his father had drafted, Dallas reluctantly parted company with the president on the volcanic issue of the bank's rechartering. As one Dallas biographer has written: "There was no question about how the people of Pennsylvania viewed the Second Bank of the United States. The Philadelphia-based institution was Pennsylvanian by interest, location, and legislative initiative."[8] Dallas complied with a directive from his state legislature that he support a new charter, despite Jackson's unremitting opposition and his own view that the divisive recharter issue should be put off until after the 1832 presidential election. When Jackson vetoed the recharter act in July 1831 and Congress failed to override the veto, Dallas—always the pragmatist—dropped his support for the bank. Observing that "we ought to have it, but we can do without it," he mollified the president and angered his state's influential commercial interests.[9] Dallas realized that his chances for reelection to the Senate by the state legislature were uncertain. His wife Sophia, who refused to leave Philadelphia's comforts for muddy and cholera-ridden Washington, was growing increasingly bitter over the legislative and social demands of his life in the capital. Consequently, Dallas chose not to run for a full term and left the Senate in March 1833.[10]

Although off the national stage, Dallas remained active in state Democratic politics. The tension with Buchanan intensified when the latter returned from his diplomatic post in Russia and secured Pennsylvania's other seat in the U.S. Senate. Dallas turned down opportunities to return to the Senate and to become the nation's attorney general. Instead, he accepted an appointment as state attorney general, holding that post until 1835, when control of the state's party machinery shifted from the declining Family party to Buchanan's Amalgamators. In 1837, it was Dallas' turn for political exile, as newly elected President Martin Van Buren named him U.S. minister to Russia. Although Dallas enjoyed the social responsibilities of that post, he soon grew frustrated at its lack of substantive duties and returned to the United States in 1839. He found that during his absence in St. Petersburg Buchanan had achieved a commanding position in the home state political contest that had long engaged the two men.[11]

In December 1839, Van Buren offered the U.S. attorney-generalship to Dallas after Buchanan had rejected the post. Dallas again declined the offer and spent the following years building his Philadelphia law practice. His relations with Buchanan remained troubled throughout this period.

The 1844 Campaign and Election

Favoring Van Buren for the 1844 Democratic presidential nomination, Dallas worked successfully to blunt Buchanan's drive for that prize. Van Buren sought unsuccessfully to have the Democratic convention held in November 1843 rather than late May 1844. He had hoped to capture the nomination before his opposition to the annexation of Texas became public when Congress convened in early December. By April 1844, with Democratic support for annexation intensifying, Van Buren watched helplessly as his chances for regaining the White House slipped away.

Under the influence of Van Buren's opponents, the Democratic party's Baltimore convention in May adopted the Jackson-era rule that required a two-thirds vote to select its nominee. After eight deadlocked ballots at the superheated and violence-prone convention, supporters of Van Buren and his chief rival, Michigan's Lewis Cass, united on the unheralded former House Speaker James K. Polk of Tennessee—who thus became the first successful "darkhorse" candidate in American presidential history. To cement an alliance with the disgruntled Van Buren faction, Polk offered to support a Van Buren loyalist for the vice-presidential nomination, New York Senator Silas Wright. Although Wright was absent from the convention, those delegates who had not already left town willingly added him to the ticket.[12]

Four days earlier, Professor Samuel F. B. Morse had successfully demonstrated that his newly invented "Magnetic Electric Telegraph" could transmit messages over the forty-mile distance between the U.S. Capitol and Baltimore. Silas Wright was in the Capitol Rotunda reading other telegraphic reports from the Baltimore convention when news of his nomination arrived. Bitter at the convention's rejection of Van Buren, Wright dictated a response to Morse, who typed out the following message to the convention's waiting delegates: "Washington. Important! Mr. Wright is here, and says, say to the New York delegation, that he cannot accept the nomination." His party's remaining delegates in Baltimore did not fully trust this new invention and repeated their message. Morse replied: "Again: Mr. Wright is here, and will support Mr. Polk cheerfully, but can not accept the nomination for vice-president." The unbelieving convention continued its request until Wright dispatched two members of Congress in a wagon—the evening train to Baltimore had already departed—bearing handwritten letters of rejection.[13]

With Wright out of the picture, and with no New York ally of Van Buren willing to accept the nomination, the convention turned to James Buchanan, but he immediately instructed his allies to withdraw his name. The searchlight then swept across several candidates from New England and came to rest on Maine's Senator John Fairfield, who received an impressive, but inconclusive, 106 votes on the first ballot. At the suggestion of party leader and Mississippi Senator Robert J. Walker (who was married to Dallas' niece), Pennsylvania delegates then sparked a move for Dallas, who was at home in Philadelphia. Dallas' views were generally compatible with Polk's, especially on the key

issue of annexing Texas. His stand in favor of protective tariffs would appeal to northeastern commercial interests and offset Polk's ambiguous position on this sensitive issue. Party strategists realized that Pennsylvania, with its prize of nearly 10 percent of the total electoral votes, which were by no means safely in the Democratic camp, could prove decisive in the election. On the second ballot, the convention gave Dallas the nomination with 220 votes to just 30 for Fairfield.

On May 30, sixty high-spirited delegates left Baltimore for Philadelphia, arriving at the Dallas residence at 3 a.m. As a bewildered Dallas stood by his open door, the nocturnal visitors marched by double column silently into his parlor. Forming a semicircle, the men burst into applause as Senator Fairfield conveyed the surprising news and Dallas, uneasy at the prospect of returning to public life, accepted with less than abundant enthusiasm.[14] The selection also came as news to presidential nominee Polk, whose advisers quickly assured him that Dallas would be an excellent complement to the ticket. Within Pennsylvania, opinion was sharply divided, as resentful Buchanan allies feared that the less-than-dynamic Dallas would cost their party the presidency in a contest against the aggressive and better-known Whig candidates, Kentucky's Henry Clay and New Jersey's Theodore Frelinghuysen.[15] One Pennsylvania Whig dismissively described Dallas as "a gentleman by birth and education, amiable in private life, very bland and courteous in manner . . . a reckless partizan totally devoid of principle and capable of upholding or relinquishing . . . opinions whenever his own or his party's interests require it."[16]

As was customary prior to 1845, the various states scheduled the presidential election on different days during November's first two weeks.[17] When the votes were finally tallied, the Polk-Dallas ticket won fifteen out of the twenty-six states by a comfortable margin of 170 to 105 electoral votes. They were far less convincing, however, in the popular vote, with a margin of only 6,000 out of the 2.7 million ballots cast. Polk narrowly lost his native Tennessee, while Dallas barely carried Pennsylvania. While analysts agreed that victories in New York and Pennsylvania made the difference for the Democratic ticket, no such consensus existed about Dallas's impact on this result.[18]

Preparing for Office

Like many of his contemporaries on the national political stage in 1845, George Dallas wanted to be president. In accepting the Democratic nomination, Polk committed himself to serving only one term, hoping this promise would encourage his party's warring factions to suspend their combat at least until the 1848 campaign.[19] Instead, his pledge instantly prompted maneuvering from many quarters for the 1848 nomination. Four of the nation's ten previous vice presidents had moved up to the presidency and Dallas saw no reason why he should not become the fifth. For his first two years in the second office, Dallas framed his behavior with that goal in mind.

Dallas met Polk for the first time on February 13, 1845, joining the president-elect for the final leg of his railroad journey to Washington. Dallas used the opportunity to follow up

on his earlier suggestions for cabinet nominees he believed would strengthen the party—and his own presidential chances.[20] He particularly sought to sabotage archrival James Buchanan's hopes of becoming secretary of state, the other traditional launching pad to the White House. Buchanan had arrogantly instructed Pennsylvania's presidential electors to recommend him for that post at the time they cast their ballots for the Democratic ticket. This infuriated Dallas, who promised a friend that, while he had become vice president "willy-nilly" and expected to endure "heavy and painful and protracted sacrifices, . . . I am resolved that no one shall be taken from Pennsylvania in a cabinet office who is notoriously hostile to the Vice President. If such a choice be made, my relations with the administration are at once at an end."[21]

Several weeks later, learning that Polk had indeed chosen Buchanan, Dallas failed to follow up on his dark oath. Instead, he began quietly to lobby for the appointment of Senator Robert J. Walker—his earlier choice against Buchanan for the state department—for the influential post of treasury secretary. Polk, realizing that he had offended Dallas and Walker's southern Democratic allies, awarded the treasury post to Walker. Dallas continued to be sensitive about the administration's distribution of major appointments, as he sought to strengthen his Pennsylvania political base in order to weaken the Buchanan faction and enhance his own presidential prospects. In his subsequent appointments, however, Polk continued to antagonize Dallas, as well as others in the Democratic party. Again, the president tried to appease the vice president. "I would have been pleased to explain to you some of the circumstances attending the appointments at Philadelphia which were made some time ago, but no opportunity for that purpose has occurred." Dallas responded that it was pointless to discuss these matters "in as much as you have not been able to gratify the few requests I have previously made." Despite his frustration and subsequent patronage losses to Secretary of State Buchanan, who was a far tougher and more persistent operator, the vice president endeavored to remain loyal to his president and party.[22]

President of the Senate

From 1789 to 1845, the Senate followed the practice of selecting its committees by ballot, with the exception of several years in the 1820s and 1830s when the power was specifically given to the presiding officer (1823-1826) or, more pointedly, to the president pro tempore (1828-1833), an officer selected by and responsible to the Senate.[23] When the Senate convened in March 1845 for its brief special session to receive the new president's executive nominations, Democratic party leaders engineered a resolution that revived the practice of having the vice president appoint the members of standing committees. Acknowledging that the vice president was not directly responsible to the Senate, administration allies asserted that his was a greater responsibility, as guaranteed in the Constitution, "to the Senate's masters, the people of these United States."[24] The goal was to pack the Committee on Foreign Relations with members sympathetic to the administration's position on the Oregon boundary question. Vice President Dallas made the desired appointments.

In December 1845, at the opening of the Senate's regular legislative session, party leaders again sought to give the appointment power to Dallas. On this occasion, however, four rebellious Democrats joined minority party Whigs to defeat the resolution by a one-vote margin. This action presented the Polk administration with the unappealing likelihood that, in balloting by the full Senate, Democrats hostile to its specific objectives would take control of key Senate committees. Dallas reported that the return to the usual procedure required him to work "unusually hard . . . to superintend some sixteen or twenty ballotings for officers and chairmen of Committees." He was "much encouraged by the kind manner in which I am complimented on my mode of presiding. But I assure you," he continued, "contrary to my expectations, it is *not* done without a great deal of preparatory labor. Now that [the anti-administration] hostility has shewn itself, I am bound to be ready at all points and against surprizes."[25]

To end this time-consuming process, Senate party leaders took a step of major importance for the future development of legislative political parties. The Democrats and Whigs each organized a party caucus to prepare lists of committee assignments, an arrangement that marked the beginning of the Senate seniority system. As long as committee members had been selected by secret ballot or appointed by presiding officers, a member's experience did not guarantee his selection. After 1845, seniority became a major determinant, particularly in the selection of committee chairmen. Legislative parties, charged with preparing slates of committee assignments, tended to become more cohesive. In this period the tradition also began of seating in the chamber by party—with the Democrats to the presiding officer's right and the Whigs (later the Republicans) to the left.

From his canopied dais, the vice president had the best seat in the nation's best theater. On one memorable occasion, he reported to his wife that "the speech of [Senator Daniel] Webster to-day would have overwhelmed and perhaps disgusted you. He attacked [Pennsylvania's Representative] Mr. C. J. Ingersoll with the savage and mangling ferocity of a tiger. For at least a half an hour, he grit his teeth, scowled, stamped, and roared forth the very worst & most abusive language I have ever heard uttered in the Senate." Dallas later observed that "[v]ast intellect, like Webster's, almost naturally glides into arrogance."[26]

In his brief inaugural address to the Senate, Dallas had acknowledged that he entered into his "tranquil and unimposing" new duties "[w]ithout any of the cares of real power [and] none of the responsibilities of legislation" except in rare instances when he might be called on to break tied votes. If anything, he would stand as "an organ of Freedom's fundamental principle of order."[27] Despite this noble disclaimer of partisanship, Dallas involved himself deeply in the struggle to help the president achieve his legislative agenda. He worked against strong contrary pressures from the party's western faction, led by Senator Thomas Hart Benton, and its southern bloc under the inspiration of Senator John C. Calhoun. In assessing these senators' motives, Dallas reported that Benton

intended to oppose Calhoun wherever possible. "If Mr. Calhoun should support the [Polk] administration, Col. Benton will not be able to resist the impulse to oppose it:—on the contrary, if Mr. Calhoun opposes, Col. Benton will be our champion. Such are, in the highest spheres of action, the uncertainties and extravagancies of human passions!"[28]

At the start of his term as Senate president, Dallas was called on to make an administrative decision that had larger constitutional consequences. Since 1815, senators had received a compensation of eight dollars for each day they were present in Washington. Public opposition routinely frustrated persistent congressional efforts to move instead to an annual salary. In March 1845 several senators hit upon a novel way to supplement their compensation—to collect travel expenses to and from Washington for the special session that the Senate held at the start of each new administration to confirm presidential appointments. The problem was that senators had already been paid for their travel to the final regular session of the Congress that had adjourned the day before the special session began. When veteran Secretary of the Senate Asbury Dickins informed Dallas that "no distinct and controlling decision" had ever been made on this issue, Dallas ruled in a lengthy written opinion that each senator should be paid for travel at the beginning and end of each session "without any enquiry or regard as to where he actually was or how he was actually engaged . . . and without any enquiry or regard as to, where he intends to travel or remain when the Senate adjourns." This decision unleashed a flood of applications from current and former senators for compensation for travel to earlier special sessions, until Dallas advised that the ruling would not be applied retroactively. Several years later, in response to a Treasury Department challenge of the Dallas ruling, the attorney general concluded that the "president of the Senate is the sole judge of the amounts of compensation due and his certificate is conclusive" and that "mileage is part of a Senator's compensation, and not mere defrayment of travelling expenses, and hence actual travel is not necessary."[29]

Dallas followed the custom of members of Congress who rented rooms, for the duration of a congressional session, either on Capitol Hill or closer to the White House. During the regular session of the Twenty-ninth Congress, from December 1845 through August 1846, he resided at Henry Riell's boardinghouse within a short walk of the Capitol at Third Street and Maryland Avenue, NE. For the first session of the Thirtieth Congress, from December 1847 to August 1848, he lived at Mrs. Gadsby's on President's Square across from the White House. For his final session, from December 1848 to March 1849, he moved several blocks to Mr. Levi Williams' boardinghouse on the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue, between 17th and 18th Streets, Northwest.[30]

At the beginning of his first regular session in December 1845, Dallas set a daily routine in which he arrived at the vice president's office in the Capitol at 9 a.m., remained busily engaged there receiving visitors and presiding until 4 p.m., adjourned to his lodgings for lunch, and then returned to the Capitol until 9 or 10 p.m. For a diversion, he would stroll around the Capitol grounds or walk down Pennsylvania Avenue.[31] The newly refurbished Senate chamber he pronounced "redeemed from a thousand barbarisms." But he confided

to his son that he expected the coming session to "be one of the most important, disturbed, and protracted" in the nation's history and feared that the weakness of administration supporters in the Senate "may exact more exertion from me than would otherwise fall my share."[32]

Dallas regularly complained about the inconveniences and demands of his daily life as vice president. His wife disliked Washington and remained in Philadelphia except for rare visits. He dined frequently with Treasury Secretary Robert Walker and his nephew U.S. Coast Survey Superintendent Alexander Dallas Bache (a great-grandson of Benjamin Franklin). His biographer reports that during these years, the vice president allowed himself one luxury—a stylish African American coachman who wore a distinctive black hat with broad band and steel buckle. Dallas was ill a great deal and complained of digestive disorders and sore feet, which he routinely bathed in hot water augmented with mustard or cayenne pepper.

Always concerned about earning enough money to support his desired social position and his wife's easy spending habits, Dallas supplemented his $5,000 government salary by maintaining an active law practice during his vice-presidency. He handled several high-profile cases against the federal government, including a claim against the Treasury Department for $15 million. The decision would be made by his close friend and relative by marriage, Treasury Secretary Robert Walker. Dallas, whose cocounsel in the case was Senator Daniel Webster, considered that "unless Walker has lost his intelligence and fairness, [the case] will be a lucrative one." To Dallas' dismay and veiled anger, Walker decided against his client.[33]

At the mid-point in his vice-presidency, Dallas accepted a $1,000 fee for a secondary role in representing wealthy Philadelphian Pierce Butler in his celebrated divorce from the Shakespearean actress Fanny Kemble. Fearing that the nation's top legal talent would be attracted to Kemble's side, Butler preemptively purchased much of that talent, including Dallas and Daniel Webster. Despite intense criticism by political opponents for cashing in on his national prominence, the vice president tossed off these attacks as the "hissing and gobbling" of "snakes and geese" and spent his final months in office arranging an expanded legal partnership with his son Philip.[34]

Tariffs and Westward Expansion

Dallas determined that he would use his vice-presidential position to advance two of the administration's major objectives: tariff reduction and territorial expansion. As a Pennsylvanian, Dallas had traditionally supported the protectionist tariff policy that his state's coal and iron interests demanded. But as vice president, elected on a platform dedicated to tariff reduction, he agreed to do anything necessary to realize that goal. Dallas equated the vice president's constitutional power to break tied votes in the Senate with the president's constitutional power to veto acts of Congress. At the end of his vice-presidential term, Dallas claimed that he cast thirty tie-breaking votes during his four

years in office (although only nineteen of these have been identified in Senate records). Taking obvious personal satisfaction in this record, Dallas singled out this achievement and the fairness with which he believed he accomplished it in his farewell address to the Senate.[35] Not interested in political suicide, however, Dallas sought to avoid having to exercise his singular constitutional prerogative on the tariff issue, actively lobbying senators during the debate over Treasury Secretary Walker's tariff bill in the summer of 1846. He complained to his wife (whom he sometimes addressed as "Mrs. Vice") that the Senate speeches on the subject were "as vapid as inexhaustible. . . . All sorts of ridiculous efforts are making, by letters, newspaper-paragraphs, and personal visits, to affect the Vice's casting vote, by persuasion or threat."[36]

Despite Dallas' efforts to avoid taking a stand, the Senate completed its voting on the Walker Tariff with a 27-to-27 tie. (A twenty-eighth vote in favor was held in reserve by a senator who opposed the measure but agreed to follow the instructions of his state legislature to support it.) When he cast the tie-breaking vote in favor of the tariff on July 28, 1846, Dallas rationalized that he had studied the distribution of Senate support and concluded that backing for the measure came from all regions of the country. Additionally, the measure had overwhelmingly passed the House of Representatives, a body closer to public sentiment. He apprehensively explained to the citizens of Pennsylvania that "an officer, elected by the suffrages of all twenty-eight states, and bound by his oath and every constitutional obligation, faithfully and fairly to represent, in the execution of his high trust, all the citizens of the Union" could not "narrow his great sphere and act with reference only to [Pennsylvania's] interests." While his action, based on a mixture of party loyalty and political opportunism, earned Dallas the respect of the president and certain party leaders—and possible votes in 1848 from the southern and western states that supported low tariffs—it effectively demolished his home state political base, ending any serious prospects for future elective office. (He even advised his wife in a message hand-delivered by the Senate sergeant at arms, "If there be the slightest indication of a disposition to riot in the city of Philadelphia, owing to the passage of the Tariff Bill, pack up and bring the whole brood to Washington.")[37]

While Dallas' tariff vote destroyed him in Pennsylvania, his aggressive views on Oregon and the Mexican War crippled his campaign efforts elsewhere in the nation.[38] In his last hope of building the necessary national support to gain the White House, the vice president shifted his attention to the aggressive, expansionist foreign policy program embodied in the concept of "Manifest Destiny." He actively supported efforts to gain control of Texas, the Southwest, Cuba, and disputed portions of the Oregon territory. The joint United States-British occupation of the vast western territory in the region north of the forty-second parallel and south of the boundary at fifty-four degrees, forty minutes, was scheduled for renewal in 1847. Dallas seized the opportunity in 1846 to call for a "settlement" at the 54 40' line, even at the risk of war with Great Britain. For several months early in 1846, the vice president pursued this position—seeking to broaden his national political base—until President Polk and British leaders agreed to compromise on a northern boundary at the forty-ninth parallel. This outcome satisfied Dallas, as it

removed his earlier fear that the United States would be caught in a two-front war, with Great Britain over the Oregon boundary and with Mexico over control of Texas. Now the nation would be free to concentrate on war with Mexico, a conflict that Dallas hoped would serve to unify the Democratic party and propel him to the White House. As the Mexican War continued into 1847, Dallas expanded his own objective to the taking of all Mexico. Again, a moderate course advanced by more realistic leaders prevailed and forced Dallas to applaud publicly the result that gained for the United States the Mexican states of California and New Mexico.

The events of 1846 extinguished Dallas' presidential fire. Although he remained strong in Philadelphia and its immediate precincts, Buchanan sapped his strength throughout the rest of their state. The vice president, incapable of the intense and sustained personal drive necessary to secure the nomination, nonetheless sought to bolster his political standing by advocating popular sovereignty as a solution to the crippling issue of allowing slavery in the territories. This stance only hardened the opposition against him and he soon abandoned his presidential quest.[39] Democratic party leaders originally looked to Mexican War hero Zachary Taylor as their 1848 standard-bearer. When the general cast his lot with the Whigs, Democrats turned to Michigan's Lewis Cass, who took the nomination at the Baltimore convention on the fourth ballot. They chose General William O. Butler as the vice-presidential candidate. With Martin Van Buren's third-party candidacy eroding the Democratic vote, Taylor and his running mate Millard Fillmore easily won the election.

By the end of the Mexican War in 1848, relations between Polk and Dallas had deteriorated to the point that the two men rarely spoke to one another. From the first days of his vice-presidency, Dallas complained to his wife Sophia and others that the president cared little for his advice on either small matters or major affairs of state. At the outbreak of the war with Mexico, Dallas confided, "In making the officers of the new Regiment of mounted riflemen, the tenant of the White House has maintained his consistency of action by excluding every one for whom I felt an interest." When Polk summoned the vice president to the White House for "a most important communication," Dallas told Sophia that Polk had a habit of "making mountains out of molehills." and that the meeting was "another illustration of the mountain and the mouse. I am heartily sick of factitious importance." Dallas considered Polk to be "cold, devious, and two-faced." When he received Thomas Macauley's newly published *History of England*, he noted that the author's description of Charles I's "defects of character"—faithlessness and cunning—"are so directly applicable to President Polk as almost to be curious."[40]

Last Session

Dallas entered the sunset of his vice-presidency at the three-month final session of the Thirtieth Congress, beginning on December 4, 1848. On the following day at noon, the Senate convened for the reading by its clerk of President Polk's State of the Union message. Dallas listened for a while, until boredom compelled him to turn the chair over

to Senator William King. "It was insufferably long, and some of its topics, a dissertation on the American system and one on the Veto Power especially, were almost ludicrous from their being misplaced and prolix."[41] This "lame duck" session, with its contentiousness and inaction, proved particularly frustrating as the Democrats sought to defer action on the volatile issues. "The great party project of the Session is to try hard to do nothing:—leaving all unsettled questions, and especially the free soil one, to harass Genl. Taylor next winter."[42]

Dallas was constantly aware of his responsibilities for maintaining order on the Senate floor. During the contentious final session, Mississippi's Henry Foote constantly baited Missouri's Thomas Hart Benton. While Benton never hesitated to bully other adversaries, he inexplicably refrained from challenging the diminutive Mississippian. As the Senate adjourned for the day on February 10, 1849, Benton approached Dallas and, in a whisper, asked whether he intended to act on his earlier request that alcoholic beverages be banned in the Senate. Dallas responded by asking whether any drinking had been taking place in the chamber. "Yes, in quantities, in every part, and at all times," responded the agitated Missourian. Dallas, believing that Benton's concern stemmed from an effort to curb Foote's behavior and "to excuse his own silent disregard of it in that way," instructed the sergeant at arms to ban liquor on the Senate side of the Capitol, except for members claiming to require it for medicinal purposes.[43]

Dallas told his wife that he was tempted to return home, leaving his Senate duties to a president pro tempore, but he felt obligated to remain at the Capitol for the important business of receiving the presidential electoral ballots, addressed to his attention, that were then arriving from the individual states. He explained that his duty was to "mark on each [envelope containing a state's ballots] the day and manner of receiving it, and file them with the Secretary [of the Senate], of course without breaking the seals. If a messenger hand me the list, I give him a certificate to that effect, on which he is entitled to be paid his expenses, at the Treasury Department."[44]

The president expressed to the vice president his ambivalence about his plans for the forthcoming inauguration of Zachary Taylor. If the planners reserved a place for him, he would attend, otherwise he would follow Van Buren's 1841 precedent and simply go home. Dallas said he would try to "follow the proper courtesies of public life," unless he too was intentionally slighted. He examined the practice of his predecessors and found Richard M. Johnson to be the only vice president to have attended the swearing in of his successor.

On March 2, 1849, Dallas followed the vice-presidential custom of delivering a farewell address to the Senate and then stepping aside so that the Senate could elect a president pro tempore to bridge the transition between administrations. In remarks more exalted in phrasing than the observations of his personal diary and correspondence, Dallas praised the Senate for the "elevated principle and dignified tone which mark [its] proceedings; the frank and yet forbearing temper of its discussions; the mutual manifestations of

conciliatory deference, so just and appropriate among the delegates of independent States; and the consequent calmness and precision of its legislative action," which he believed had "attracted to it a very large share of veneration and confidence." He noted that, on occasion, tempers flared into "sudden impulses of feeling," but these "transient disturbances" were rare and passed "over the scene like flashes which do but startle, and then cease, [serving] only to exhibit in stronger relief the grave decorum of its general conduct."[45]

To a standing ovation, Dallas left the chamber in what he believed would be "the last scene of my public life." He recorded in his diary that "Mr. Filmore [sic] called at my chamber in the Capitol today, shortly I had left the Senate, and remained for an hour, making enquiries as to the forms of proceeding and the general duties annexed to the office he was about assuming. He was good enough to say that every body had told him I eclipsed as a presiding officer, all of my predecessors, and that he felt extreme diffidence in undertaking to follow me. Of course, after this, I took pleasure in answering all his questions."[46]

Dallas left Washington largely embittered about the price of success in public life, which he believed led "almost invariably to poverty and ignorance. Truth, Courage, Candour, Wisdom, Firmness, Honor and Religion may by accident now and then be serviceable:—but a steady perseverance in them leads inevitably to private life."[47] His only regret about leaving the Senate was that he would miss the "strange political tableau [that] would present itself on the floor of the Senate Chamber . . . on the 6. of March next [if] Mr. Clay, Genl. Cass, Mr. Van Buren, Mr, Calhoun, Mr. Webster, and Col. Benton were grouped together! Such a convocation of self-imagined gods could not fail to be followed by much thunder and lightening." But, he consoled himself, "All this galaxy, in the order of nature, may disappear in the course or two or three years. When then? Why, the Sun will still shine, the earth still roll upon its axis, and the worms of the Capitol be as numerous and phosphorescent as ever."[48]

Later Years

Dallas returned to private life until 1856, when James Buchanan resigned as minister to Great Britain to launch his presidential campaign challenging President Franklin Pierce for the Democratic nomination. Pierce, seeking to remove another potential rival for reelection, named Dallas to that prize diplomatic post. Philadelphia journalist John Forney, a longtime Buchanan ally who had once described Dallas as "below mediocre as a public man," thought the sixty-four-year-old Dallas fit the part. "I do not know anything more charming, always excepting a lovely woman, than a handsome old man—one who, like a winter apple, is ruddy and ripe with time, and yet sound to the heart. Such a man was George M. Dallas."[49] After Buchanan won the presidency, he retained Dallas at the Court of St. James but conducted sensitive diplomatic relations with Great Britain from the White House. Tired and longing for the comforts of home and family, Dallas resigned his post in May 1861. As a states' rights Unionist, he was deeply saddened by the eclipse

of his Democratic party and its failure to prevent civil war. He died at the age of seventy-two on December 31, 1864.

Notes:

1. George M. Dallas to unknown addressee, 1845 [?], in Roy M. Nichols, "The Library: The Mystery of the Dallas Papers (Part I)," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 73* (July 1949): 373 [hereafter cited as Nichols-I].
2. Lewis A. McArthur, *Oregon Geographic Names*, 5th ed. (Portland, OR, 1982), p. 205.
3. John M. Belohlavek, *George Mifflin Dallas: Jacksonian Patrician* (University Park, PA, 1977), pp. 13-14.
4. Ibid., p. 4-5.
5. Ibid., p. 15.
6. Ibid., p. 5.
7. Ibid., p. 27.
8. Ibid., p. 37.
9. Quoted in ibid., p. 43.
10. Bruce Ambacher, "George M. Dallas and the Bank War," *Pennsylvania History 42* (April 1975): 135.
11. Belohlavek, p. 77.
12. Charles Sellers, "Election of 1844," in *History of American Presidential Elections*, edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Fred L. Israel (New York, 1971), 1:759-72.
13. John Arthur Garraty, *Silas Wright* (New York, 1949), pp. 280-82.
14. Belohlavek, pp. 86-88; Sellers, pp. 772-73.
15. Belohlavek, p. 88.
16. Sidney George Fisher quoted in ibid., p. 89.
17. By the time of the presidential elections of 1840 and 1844, states were increasingly selecting presidential electors by popular vote, rather than by vote of their legislatures. With presidential elections scheduled on a variety of days throughout the states, conditions were ripe for election fraud. Both political parties organized gangs of voters who moved from state to state in an attempt to boost tallies in close elections. Finally, in 1845 Congress established a uniform date for presidential elections--the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Congressional elections were not similarly standardized until 1872. Peter H. Argersinger, "Electoral Processes," *Encyclopedia of American Political History* (New York, 1984), 2:496.
18. Sellers, p. 795; Belohlavek, p. 97.
19. Paul H. Beregeron, *The Presidency of James K. Polk* (Lawrence, KS, 1987), pp. 16-17.
20. Dallas to Polk, December 15, 1845; Dallas to Sophia, February 14, 1845 in Nichols-I, pp. 355-60.
21. Dallas to Robert J. Walker, November 6, 1844, quoted in Belohlavek, p. 100.
22. Belohlavek, pp. 105-10.
23. See Chapter 7 of this book, "John C. Calhoun," pp.10-12.
24. U.S. Congress, *Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 1st sess., p. 20.
25. Ibid., pp. 19-22; Belohlavek, pp. 107-9; Dallas to Sophia, December 9, 1845, Nichols-I, p. 370.
26. Ingersoll had accused Webster of corruption and embezzlement while serving as secretary of state. Dallas to Sophia, April 7, 1846, Nichols-I, pp. 375-76; Roy F. Nichols, "The Library: The Mystery of the Dallas Papers (Part II)," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 73* (October 1949): 480 [hereafter cited as Nichols-II].
27. U.S. Congress, Senate, *Journal*, 29th Cong., Extra Session, Appendix, p. 274.
28. Dallas to Sophia, November 27, 1845, Nichols-I, p. 366.
29. Ruth Ketring Nuermberger, "Asbury Dickins (1780-1861): A Career in Government Service," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 24 (July 1947): 311-12; Dallas to Sophia, March 17, 1845, Nichols-I, p. 365. On March 3, 1851, the president approved a statue (Chapter 42) ending the practice of paying members of the previous Congress for mileage to attend the Senate special session beginning on March 4, 1853, and every four years thereafter.

30. Nichols-I, p. 391; Nichols-II, p. 475.
31. Dallas to Sophia, December 2, 1845, Nichols-I, p. 369.
32. Dallas to Sophia, November 27, 1845, ibid., p. 367.
33. Belohlavek, pp. 134-35.
34. Ibid., pp. 135-36; Dallas to Sophia, December 10, 1848, Nichols-II, p. 483.
35. *Senate Journal*, 30th Cong., 2d sess., March 2, 1849, p. 294. Nineteen of the thirty votes that Dallas claimed to have cast have been identified in records of Senate floor proceedings. If Dallas' figure is accepted, he would hold the record among vice presidents for exercising this constitutional prerogative (although some scholars have credited John Adams with casting as many as thirty tie-breaking votes--see Chapter 1, note 1). If the lower figure is accurate, it still places him just behing John Adams--and just ahead of John C. Calhoun-- for the number of ties broken in a four-year period. For a list of vice-presidential tie-breaking votes, see U.S., Congress, Senate, *The Senate, 1789-1989*, by Robert C. Byrd, S. Doc., 100-20, 100th Cong., 1st Cong., 1st sess., vol. 4, *Historical Statistics, 1789-1992*, 1993 pp. 640-46.
36. Dallas to Sophia, July 17, 1846, Nichols-I, pp. 384-85.
37. Dallas' public letter quoted in Charles John Biddle, *Eulogy upon the Hon. George Mifflin Dallas Delivered before the Bar of Philadelphia, February 11, 1865* (Philadelphia, 1865), p. 36; Belohlavek, pp. 113-14; Dallas to Sophia, July 30, 1846, Nichols-I, p. 386.
38. Belohlavek, p. 118.
39. Charles McCool Snyder, *The Jacksonian Heritage: Pennsylvania Politics, 1833-1848* (Harrisburg, PA, 1958), pp. 205-7; Frederick Moore Binder, *James Buchanan and the American Empire* (Cranbury, NJ, 1994), p. 91.
40. Dallas to Sophia, June 7, 1846, Nichols-I, pp. 381-82; Dallas diary, January 14, 1849, Nichols--II, pp. 492-93; Belohlavek, pp. 132-33.
41. Dallas diary, December 5, 1848, Nichols-II, p. 475.
42. Dallas to Sophia, December 7, 1848, ibid., p. 477.
43. Dallas diary, February 10, 1849, ibid., pp. 512-13.
44. Dallas to Sophia, December 7, 1848; Dallas diary, December 8, 1848, ibid., pp. 477-78.
45. *Senate Journal*, 30th Cong., 2d sess., March 2, 1849, pp. 293-94.
46. Dallas diary, March 2, 1849, Nichols-II, pp. 515-16.
47. Dallas diary, January 28, 1849, ibid., p. 501; Dallas diary, March 2, 1849, ibid., pp. 516-17.
48. Dallas diary, January 28, 1849, ibid., p. 502.
49. Belohlavek, p. 107; John W. Forney, *Anecdotes of Public Men* (New York, 1881), 2:102.