IDEOLOGICAL HISTORY AND THE
SECESSION RHETORIC OF TEXAS
POLITICIANS

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ABSTRACT: This article deals with an episode in the ideological history of Texas. It analyzes the rhetorical strategies employed by Texas politicians during the Secession debate, in order to better understand the political thinking of the people who responded to them. The primary prism through which the strategies of each side are viewed is the extent to which they marshaled analogies from classical history and literature in support of their arguments. Because the unionists in Texas adopted for themselves the role of wise philosophers denouncing mob violence, they often used classical literature and examples from ancient and medieval republican history to support a political position of caution. As their position became more and more untenable, they resorted to this strategy more and argued practicalities less and less. Although familiar with the classics, their secessionist opponents rarely used such allusions, instead focusing on sectional self-interest, anti-northern bias, and fear of slave revolt. Although it made occasional references to recent American history, the secessionist self-narrative was void of broader historical appeals and focused on providing pragmatic, legalistic, and xenophobic justifications for aggression toward the North. As the crisis continued, their rhetoric focused less on pragmatism and legalism and more on simple abstract xenophobia. These texts and roles shed light upon what drove the popular movement for secession and why it succeeded. They are also relevant to the broader question of how people are prodded into war by political leaders and how positions in such a debate become more rigid, more abstract, and less factual. Moreover, the analytical template developed in this article can be applied to better understand other ideological conflicts.

ILLUSTRATIONS/FORMATTING: The author suggests that either photographs of Sam Houston and O.M. Roberts (which have appeared in previous issues), or a cartoon from a contemporary newspaper depicting political debate be used to illustrate this article. The
quotations on the following page are intended as a small sidebar or header in smaller type to illustrate and introduce the thesis of the text: that ideas in politics are powerful and resilient.
IDEOLOGICAL HISTORY AND THE SECESSION RHETORIC OF TEXAS POLITICIANS

“Conquer or die”
Herodotus, Book VII, chap 104, describing the orders of the Spartans at Thermopylae.

“Death is softer by far than tyranny”
Aeschylus, Agamemnon, lines 1360-1370.

“The Irish army then called on their chiefs to lead them to the fight; the intrepid Dalcassians, the body-guard of Brian, raised the sunburst standard of Fingal- the "Gall-Greana," or "blazing sun," marked with arms of O'Brian, the hand and sword, bearing the inscription "Victory or Death."
Irish Saga of the Death of Brian Boru, April 23rd, 1014 A.D.

“Victory or Death”
George Washington’s password upon crossing the Delaware, December 25th, 1776.

“Victory or Death”
William Barrett Travis, To the People of Texas, February 24, 1836.

“At your first leisure, I wish you to read the History of Caius Marius. I think that you will find it in Rollins's, or Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. If not in one of them, you will find it in *Plutarch's Lives*.”
Sam Houston, Writings VIII: 8, Letter to his son, 1860.
Unlike other southern states, Texas had its own national mythology reflected in its own Declaration of Independence. The Texas Declaration oscillated between Locke’s theory of natural rights on the one hand, and Anglo-Protestant attitudes of cultural superiority on the other, including a condemnation of Catholic priests as “the eternal enemies of civil liberty, the ever ready minions of power and the usual instruments of tyrants.”¹ This ideological dichotomy did not disappear with Texas independence, and it would resurface with a vengeance during the Secession crisis. How do such seemingly contradictory ideas coexist and persist in the public mind?

This essay proposes that such a “textual duality” can be usefully analyzed in terms of the Greek philosophical term *perichoresis*. *Perichoresis*, literally a dancing (*choresis*) around (*peri*), indicates a rotating or moving interpenetration of distinct entities or ideas. It was first used by Anaxagoras (ca 450 B.C.E.) to describe physical reality as the chaotic movement of atoms motivated by *nous* ("divine mind" or world-enlivening divine spirit). For Anaxagoras this *perichoresis* produced what we perceive as reality by maintaining the tension between fundamental and oppositional elements, e.g., fire and water. Augustine briefly used the same term to explain how God could be everywhere but also outside visible reality at the same time. He translated the term as "*circumcessio,*" and it thereby made its way into traditional Latin theology. However, it was not until the seventh century that it was first systematically applied by theologians, when the Greek apologist, John of Damascus, used *perichoresis* to explain to his Muslim sovereigns how the Persons of the Trinity exist distinctly but in a dynamic yet perfect union. Later, it was used in a Christological sense with respect to the simultaneous existence within one Person, of both human and divine natures.² In the context of this
article, the term is used to describe an ideological compound involving apparently contradictory interpenetrating and symbiotic elements. It may be understood as a variation on the dialectic view of intellectual history associated with Hegel.

The perichoretic compound evidenced by the Texas Declaration of Independence was an odd recipe from which to brew revolution. The ethnic bias element of this *perichoresis* is sometimes denominated by historians and social scientists as “otherness” or *alterite*. While *alterite* was obviously and strongly felt, the subtler element of the Texian *perichoresis*, republican cultural values, still persisted deep within the public mind. The cry at Gonzales of “come and take it” was a paraphrase of the Spartans’ reply to Xerxes at Thermopylae. When offered safe conduct if his troops would lay down their weapons, “Come and take them!” was the Spartan king Leonidas’ reply. When Travis swore “Victory or Death” at the Alamo, he was repeating this same Leonidas’ battle order to his 300 Spartans: “Conquer or die! (Νικα η πεθαινω!).”

One might wonder if this deep and sometimes unconscious reference to classical republican values also manifested itself in Texas’ next major political conflict, whether to secede from the Union, and what that inquiry might reveal about the overall rhetorical strategy of each side. Did the major protagonists in that controversy support their arguments with appeals to authority from world history or classical antiquity? Why or why not? How and why did the dialectic between lofty classical republicanism and knee-jerk ethnocentrism found in Texas’ 1836 Declaration of Independence change over time?

Answering these questions requires looking at how past actors used history and ideology. It may also be seen as an exercise in “historical anthropology,” that is, an effort to reconstruct the thought-worlds of historical actors, and thus both their self-images and
the myths and stories that resonated well enough with their contemporaries to make a difference. This is an approach associated with Clifford Geertz, and more recently, with Rhys Isaac. However, this article’s perspective is better described as what Seth Jacobs and others have called “ideological history,” the type of inquiry anticipated by Hegel and more recently refined by David Brion Davis and Christopher Brown. As Jacobs wrote, “Ideas matter. They can drive people to murder or martyrdom.” The contention here is that the extent to which ideas divide, compete, synthesize and/or impregnate one another is crucial to understanding political and cultural history.

As one example of this kind of inquiry, this essay examines the political rhetoric of the secession debate in Texas by comparing the speeches and proclamations of the major secessionist leaders to those of the unionists. It concludes that although both unionists and secessionists employed historical evidence to support their polemics, they differed in the type of historical evidence they utilized, and in the frequency with which they used it, and this in turn exemplifies the difference between their overall rhetorical strategies. In other words, each side in the debate had a unique and characteristic compound ideology. Each maintained its own perichoresis of ideological elements. The unionists in Texas tended to adopt for themselves the role of ancient philosophers opposing mob violence and to use a number of examples from a broad catalog of classical republican world history and literature to support a political position of caution. The alterite’ element was present in their polemics, both with respect to slaves and, to a much lesser extent, with respect to northerners, but it was subsidiary, little more than an acknowledgement of an accepted prejudice. They also argued pragmatic political
realities, but less and less so as public opinion turned ever more strongly against them. For them, more and more, the wisdom of history clinched the argument.

Although equally well-schooled in the classics, their secessionist opponents rarely used broad historical or literary allusions, instead focusing their arguments on narrow appeals to sectional self-interest and anti-northern bias. Their self-narrative was confined to providing xenophobic and sometimes practical or legalistic justifications for fighting the evil or “black” North. For them alterite was paramount, melded with a subsidiary element of very legalistic, and very recent, political and constitutional history. These texts and roles were self-fulfilling meta-narratives, and since they characterized the secessionist side of the debate, they shed light upon what drove the popular movement to withdraw from the Union. Like their unionist opponents, as the debate grew more and more heated, secessionist leaders increasingly abandoned practicality and legality for an ever more simple and abstract polemic, one that demonized the northern “other.” Then, once the issue was obviously no longer in doubt, abstractions gave way to another round of legalism, this time in the form of post hoc rationalization.

Political argumentation based upon lessons learned from the histories of other nations is peculiarly characteristic of the founding of the American republic. This has not escaped the notice of modern historians and political scientists, who have studied the influence upon the American founders of Greco-Roman history and philosophy. Madison’s Federalist No. 10 is perhaps the best-known resort to ancient and medieval history to explain and argue matters of contemporary American politics. Yet, his work was by no means the only one, as a cursory reading of the remainder of The Federalist shows. Whether, and to what extent, this method of political reasoning retained currency
among 19th century American politicians appear to be much less popular inquiries among contemporary scholars, and very little work of this kind has emphasized specific reference to the Civil War or the period immediately preceding it.

Although historians have often placed the phenomenon of the Southern rebellion in an ideological context, none has focused specifically on the use of historical, biblical, or philosophical texts as rhetorical support for secessionist ideology, and none has asked what the rhetoric of secession reveals about the psyches and ideologies of the speaker and his audience. No one has done for secession what Davis and Brown have done for anti-slavery or what Bernard Bailyn did for the American Revolution. While George Rable has written extensively on the “political culture” of the Civil War South, he followed in the footsteps of Frank L. Owsley’s 1925 book, State Rights in the Confederacy, which posited a political explanation for the South’s failure to win the Civil War. Paul D. Escott’s After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism perhaps comes closer to a rhetorical study by arguing that much state’s rights rhetoric was “cover” for political and economic self-interest. Escott argues that Jefferson Davis used various rhetorical devices as he attempted (unsuccessfully) to find effective ideological justifications for Confederate nationalism. Although these works deal with ideology and politics and accord them great weight in understanding the history of the Civil War, none of them is a specific study of rhetoric and its devices, and none focuses on Secession or on Texas and its unique ideological heritage.

Some books, dissertations, and articles of narrower focus have attempted to deal with issues concerning particular secession debates. For example, there are studies of the politics of Secession in several individual states. There have also been such general
studies of the Texas secession debate. The major works on the subject are Walter Buenger’s *Secession and the Union in Texas*, James Marten’s *Texas Divided: Loyalty and Dissent in the Lone Star State*, and Dale Baum’s *Shattering of Texas Unionism: Politics in the Lone Star State during the Civil War Era*. Books and articles have been written on aspects of the same subject by J.J. Bowden, Randolph Campbell, Roy Sylvan Dunn, John Moretta, Phillip Rutherford, and Frank H. Smyrl.

Although treatments of Texas secession abound, references within these works to specific speeches or proclamations of the protagonists in the dispute are rare and usually limited to official proclamations, such as Sam Houston’s “To the People of Texas” explaining his refusal to take the Confederate loyalty oath. Those in search of the actual rhetoric of the debate are more likely to find it in biographies of the participants than in scholarly articles. There are, however, three significant exceptions.

In 1974, Bob Garner wrote what purports to be a content analysis of the secession rhetoric of Sam Houston. However, Garner’s study did not deal at all with rhetorical style, nor did it attempt to flesh out the sources of Houston’s political philosophy. Garner analyzed 23 different speeches or messages given or written by Houston for the purpose of “periodizing” them chronologically. He also discusses how John C. Calhoun’s position on general southern nullification affected Houston’s views, and he describes how Houston’s stance on aspects of the secession controversy changed over time. However, this is the limit of his study.

More to the point are two dissertations over twenty years old, one on the secessionists and one on the unionists. On the secessionists the relevant content analysis is a 1983 dissertation in Speech and Communications authored by Donna Tobias at
L.S.U. Tobias focused on the state’s rights speeches of Oran Milo Roberts prior to, and during, the secession crisis. Roberts, a Texas Supreme Court Justice, president of the secession convention, and one of Houston’s most influential opponents in the secession debate, presents an interesting study. While Tobias’ article is a useful resource for obtaining substantial samples of Roberts’ rhetoric, it is limited to one important actor in the Secession drama and does not concentrate on the specific stylistic questions emphasized here. Similar articles on other secessionists and unionists in Texas contain references to the speeches or writings of their respective subjects, but without focusing upon the themes common to many speakers on each side.

On the unionist side, the closest facsimile to such a broader focus also lies more in the genre of communications studies than history and it deals only with three individuals. In 1979, Thomas Shuford’s dissertation, *Three Texas Unionist Editors face the Secession Crisis*, billed itself not as ideological history but as “A Case Study on Freedom of the Press.” Its focus was the behavioral responses of three individual editors to the mounting tide of public sentiment against them. Shuford concluded that these three editors were ultimately silenced by public opinion but lasted longer than their sympathizers elsewhere in the South because only in Texas did a governor share their unionism, and because their persistence “is a testament to the sincerity of their support of unionism and to their courage shown in the exercise of First Amendment rights.” While this argument is beside the point here, in examining the writings and political conduct of three important unionist editors, Anthony Banning Norton, Ferdinand Flake, and James P. Newcomb, Shuford mined and documented much in the way of useful rhetorical data on the unionist side.
A fascinating study of Texas’ unionist governor extolled by Shuford also bears mention. Susan Ford Wiltshire’s “Sam Houston and the Iliad” relied primarily on early biographies of Houston by Charles Edwards Lester, William Carey Crane, George Creel, and Marquis James, to document Houston’s familiarity with the classics, specifically the Iliad. Wiltshire provides valuable examples of Houston’s classical rhetoric, but her real emphasis and conclusion is psychological not rhetorical: that Houston’s “willingness to take risks, his grand, sometimes grandiose, perspective of the world were all formed in significant part by his absorption of the Iliad at an impressionable age.” Wiltshire, based upon Lester, reports that Houston claimed that one reason he ran off in his youth to the Cherokee was to study Pope’s English translation of the Iliad in peace.15

Wiltshire and these early biographers established Houston’s familiarity with classical Greek history and literature, but none has focused on its specific influence upon his rhetoric, nor sought to compile similar traces of classicism in the words of his colleagues and opponents in order to construct an ideological history of the secession debate. However, as early as 1928, George Creel did mention in passing the impact of the Greek classics, particularly the Iliad, upon Houston’s particular rhetorical style:

What saved him from illiteracy were the books that the Virginia pioneers brought with them in their saddle-bags—giving color and delight to long winter evenings. Pope’s Iliad came into the boy’s possession by loan or gift, and it was this book, as much as any other one thing, that formed his life and pointed his career. The story of the tremendous struggle on the Scamander plain more than ever turned his mind away from peaceful pursuits, casting it in heroic mold, and the sonorous passages gave lasting color to his written and spoken word.16
It should come as no surprise then that Sam Houston, the primary spokesman for the anti-secession party in Texas, frequently used the classics and ancient and world history as evidence for his political argumentation. But significantly, other less philhellenic unionists also adopted the same tropes, while secessionists rarely used such allusions. Typically, they instead confined their arguments to narrow appeals to sectional self-interest and anti-northern bias, or to appeals to legal arguments and recent American history. Most of the protagonists on each side, including Houston, were trained as lawyers, but the secessionists were much more likely to use legalism and allusions to the Declaration of Independence and the “Spirit if 1776.” Conversely, although some of the secessionists were at least as familiar with world history as was Houston, their rhetoric was much less likely to allude to it. One important reason for this is the difficulty of combining an argument fundamentally based on xenophobia (alterite) with an argument based on the lessons of another ethnicity’s history. Thus, secessionists were forced by the very internal logic of their own arguments to limit their history-based arguments to recent Anglo-American history. Unionists operated under no such ideological constraint and moreover, many of them were German, Tejano, or otherwise not Anglo-American.

While this much may seem clear, Texas’ secession is still, in Walter Buenger’s words, a riddle. While Texans heavily favored joining the Union a mere 15 years earlier and reaped substantial economic benefit as a result, by 1860 secessionism quickly appeared at the grassroots in most counties of the state. And yet, as Buenger has pointed out, the process was simultaneously and “openly led by the pillars of the community.” What rhetorical devices did these “pillars of the community” use in leading this process? Aside from the conclusions to be drawn from internal logic already mentioned, what does
this rhetoric tell us about their self-referential internal narratives as actors and prodders, and about the audience that responded so enthusiastically to their entreaties?

A reasonable starting point in answering this question is the oratory of Houston’s electoral nemesis, Hardin R. Runnels. Having defeated Houston in the gubernatorial election of 1857, at which time Houston ran as a “Know-Nothing” Independent, and having lost a rematch to Houston in 1859 when Houston ran as a “Union Democrat,” Runnels was a natural bellwether of anti-Houston secessionist sentiment. On Thursday, November 10, 1859, Runnels delivered his written biennial message to the Texas legislature. By this time he had lost the election of August 1859 to Houston. Forty-one days after this written message, on Wednesday, December 21, 1859, Runnels also delivered a valedictory address to the legislature as Texas’ departing governor. Houston and his newly elected lieutenant governor, Edward Clark, were seated in the chamber and heard the address.¹⁸

Runnels spent the first two-thirds of his earlier November 10th “State of the State” address on a variety of policy issues.¹⁹ Before moving to the subject of secession in the last third of this speech, he lamented the deplorable condition of the Texas frontier beset by bandit raids, disclaimed any responsibility for such condition, and then eulogized Senator J. Pinckney Henderson.²⁰ Runnels’ eulogy of Henderson was a logical segue to a subsequent tirade against the North. Henderson had been the first governor of Texas upon its admission to the Union and was a champion of state’s rights. At this point in his address, Runnels deemed himself “fully justified under existing circumstances, in indulging in a few brief allusions to the political history and condition of the times.”
What followed was an anti-northern diatribe based upon a selective history of the founding of the United States.21

The previous two-thirds of Runnel’s address had contained no references to philosophy or broader history. He did make one biblical reference in connection with his report on state asylums, when in justifying state expenditure to restore “the stricken and lost maniac to reason,” he deemed it appropriate for the state to redeem

“her unfortunate children from the abyss of perpetual darkness and ignorance, to light, knowledge, piety, and virtue, and of teaching, if not the blind to see, and the mute to speak – “the finger marks point the way to communion with God and intercourse with their fortunate fellow beings.”22

Runnels’ remarks beginning with Henderson’s eulogy and ending with an exposition of states’ rights are little more than repeated warnings that Texas and the Constitution “are in danger of being overwhelmed by the seemingly resistless tide of sectional and religious fanaticism.” Runnels saw the “Black Republicans” as intellectual heirs to the evil Federalists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries who had always been “at open warfare with the rights of property and the constitutional laws by which it is protected.” His address describes abolitionism as “fanatical pretensions,” resulting from a loose construction of the Constitution claiming “for the General Government more extensive powers than are warranted by that instrument.”23

At the end of his speech he again resorted to nineteenth century American legalism, claiming that the “unconditional submission” to the Union urged by the neo-Federalist Republicans resulted from “a higher law construction” that “makes the agent superior to the principal.” He then referenced the Dred Scott decision, ruing that the
North would not be deterred from abolitionism even by pronouncements from the highest court of the land:

When the courts have intervened and determined the question, the South is not allowed to benefit of that decision, but an appeal is taken to the people with the revolutionary object of depriving us of that protection of the property of our citizens to which the Constitution entitles them.\textsuperscript{24}

His message concluded by recommending a “clear and unequivocal expression of opinion by the legislature on the subject … Equality and security in the Union or independence outside of it, should be the model of every Southern State.”\textsuperscript{25} Runnels justified this conclusion by a complex historical argument that traced the pedigree of the “anti-Democratic” faction within the United States. Beginning with a history of the Federalists, and heaping upon them the charge of treason in connection with the War of 1812 and their pro-British sympathies, he claimed that characteristic policies of these early “Anti-Democrats” included the Tariff, the Bank, and the restriction of slavery.\textsuperscript{26} He described the Whig party as the intellectual successor to the Federalists from the election of 1836 until 1852, at which time arose other incarnations of the opposition, the “other.” As Runnels declared,

“by whatever names the opposition to the regular Democratic organization may have passed for half a century, whether it is Anti-masons, National Republicans, Whigs, Know-Nothings, Union Men or Higher Law Men, the radical difference of opinion which has existed in regard to the nature and powers of the government, has manifested itself in that federal and latitudinous construction of the Constitution, so often and so long repudiated for its dangerous tendencies.”\textsuperscript{27}
In rebuttal to this “federal and latitudinous construction,” he invoked the figures of Jefferson, Franklin, “and other sages and heroes,” reminding his readers that their Declaration of Independence was the reluctant culmination of repeated arguments and entreaties to the British crown for less government and more respect for constitutional rights. “This,” he said, “I regard as analogous to the position of the States’ Rights Democracy of the South and of the Union.”

In his later valedictory address of December 1859, Runnels echoed the same themes of abolitionism as a fanatical politico-religious heresy; Black Republicanism as an outgrowth of anti-Jeffersonian Federalism that threatened the American Constitution and the rights of Southern states and citizens; and the consonance of his own views with the American “Spirit of 1776.” He began his inevitable defense of states’ rights by reminding the legislature of his recommendation two years earlier that it should organize a militia for public defense “in view of the impending sectional difficulties.” He argued that:

“it is now clearly demonstrated by the history of the past five years that a deep unchangeable determination exists in the northern states to assail our dearest political rights, and if possible, destroy our domestic institutions. This determination has its foundations in a difference in the manners, feelings and opinions of the northern people upon the subject of Negro slavery. They believe it to be a moral, social, and political evil. This belief strengthened into a conviction that has been incorporated with and now constitutes the sole of their religion and the mainspring of their morality. In the south, the great mass of the
people entertained opinions entirely opposite in their character, which are equally
irrevocable and equally amalgamated with our religion and morality.”

Runnels, at this climactic point in his address, did make a reference to “the history
of the world.” However, his speeches betray no familiarity with any history prior to the
American Revolution. Although he asserted that “the history of the world affords no
example of two people so divided long remaining under a common government, of their
own voluntary accord,” he gave no specific examples, and immediately began anew to
couch the validity of his arguments in the framers’ wisdom in “leaving this and other
questions of domestic policy to the state government as much as possible, to avoid if
practicable, future cause of disruption.” If Runnels was conversant in the classics, or in
philosophy or history prior to the 18th century, his often inflammatory, sometimes
legalistic, rhetoric in these two speeches gives no such indication. Although legalism,
recent American history, and constitutional libertarianism play a role in these speeches,
they are clearly handmaidens to the overarching theme of fear of “the other,” the
bogeyman of Democratic, southern, political culture.

The chief secessionist leader, Oran Milo Roberts, had a long career in Texas
politics prior to Secession. He was born in South Carolina, moved to Alabama in
infancy, and studied Greek and Latin in grammar school. He began studying the law with
a local practitioner in Ashville, Alabama when he was only 17. After attending college
and studying law, Roberts moved to Texas in 1841, at age 26. He was an outstanding
debater in college, and he used these skills in his East Texas law practice, centered upon
the city of San Augustine.
In 1844, he was appointed district attorney and then, in 1846, state district judge, and it was from this position that he conducted his political activities. He was thoroughly involved in Democratic Party politics throughout the 1840’s and 1850’s, having run unsuccessfully for congress in both 1851 and 1853. Around 1855 he became involved in criticizing the rising “Know-Nothing” Party in Texas, including its eventual leader, Sam Houston, and he was ultimately elevated to the position of Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of Texas in 1857.32

Although Judge Roberts was well schooled in the classics, at this point in his career, contemporary observers marked him for his intelligence, clear-cut argumentation, and lack of bravado, rather than any mastery of history. He sought most to emulate the sermons of ministers, and the clear cogent argumentation of lawyers. One commentator concludes that Roberts may not have been considered eloquent, but he attempted “to communicate his state’s rights messages in a simple, clear and effective manner…. As a political agitator for state’s rights and secession, Roberts appears to have been guided by his regional prejudices and his personal political philosophy. In his speeches, and in his court decisions, he quoted constitutional law often.”33

As early as his first years in Texas, Roberts wrote articles on educational and religious subjects.34 In 1858, he wrote an essay refuting the tenets of Mormonism. His traditional Anglo-Protestant thesis would reappear in his later works:

“The society of Europe and America is based on a few leading ideas generally regarded…as axiomatic truths. Some of these are First, the Christian Religion; Second, a man shall have one wife; Third, every male person shall look out and provide for himself and his family.”35
An undated article titled “Primitive Christian Education,” probably written long after the Civil War, testifies to its author’s familiarity with the classics. Roberts quoted St. John Chrysostom and was familiar with the biographies of Saints Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa. His familiarity with ancient church history is truly astounding. In the same manuscript, he makes specific reference to *The Didache*, an early Greek patristic work that had not yet been translated into the English language. The following pages of his manuscript mention the “Classical Age of Pericles,” Greek colleges of rhetoric, the academy of Plato, and the peripatetic followers of Aristotle. He also demonstrates knowledge of Pythagorean philosophy and the Alexandrian library. 

A subsequent chapter of the same work shows Roberts’ familiarity with the Renaissance of classical republicanism among the city-states of central Italy. He makes reference to a great awakening in the 15th Century when the human mind “so long enslaved by dogmatic and formalistic hindrances” broke from its shackles. It is therefore somewhat odd that Roberts’ wide-ranging knowledge of ancient and medieval republican history does not manifest itself in his antebellum political speeches.

The appearance of Know-Nothingism in the late 1850’s provided Roberts his first opportunity to speak out publicly in behalf of the Texas Democratic Party against any form of “whiggishness.” The other major leaders of the state’s rights Democrats in the 1850’s were Runnels, his Lieutenant Governor F.R. Lubbock, U.S. Senator J. Pinckney Henderson, Lewis T. Wigfall (also a United States Senator), John H. Reagan, and Thomas Rusk. As early as the late 1850’s, the anti-Unionist rhetoric of these
individuals and Judge Roberts set the pattern for the oratorical style of later secessionists. For example, in 1855, Rusk made a speech condemning the North as follows:

“Well, their secrecy is highly objectionable. No party can be safely trusted with power who does not openly avow their principles, the oaths which it is understood they take are illegal, tyrannical, and at open war with the fundamental principles of our government … at the north, as all elections show, they are abolitionists. At the south they profess to be pro-slavery men…The whigs are disorganized if not disbanded; no one can mistake the rock upon which they split.”

Speaking to Democrats, he recommended that, “If we desire to succeed as a party…we must drive out of our ranks that cursed faction of freesoilers and abolitionists who, determined to rule or ruin, have…jeopardized the Union.” While this early speech only accused the Know-Nothings of being abolition-tolerant chameleons and former Whigs, demonization of the North would intensify in the years to come. As to his own party, Rusk clearly wanted any quasi-abolitionists out, even though Democratic Presidents James K. Polk and Franklin Pierce had coddled them.39

Roberts gave a similar anti-Know-Nothing speech in Henderson, Texas on August 24, 1855. In it, there is no indication that he relied upon his vast knowledge of ancient history or the Greek and Roman classics. In conformity with his religious bent, he did, however, quote Macaulay’s essays in comparing Puritans and Pharisees to Know-Nothings. He used this analogy to create fear in his audience that Massachusetts, “the breeding ground for Federalism and Puritanism,” was responsible for the Know-Nothings blurring the distinction between church and state. However, he quickly moved on from
this brief historical analogy to demonize “the north, the Puritans, the Federalists, Massachusetts, northern preachers, and the Know-Nothings.”

A substantial portion of this speech was dedicated to drawing distinctions between the Democratic Party and the Federalist/Whig/Know-Nothing opposition. In this, Roberts referred to recent history in an eerily similar precursor to the ideological pedigree of Know-Nothingism suggested by Runnels to the Texas Legislature four years later. Like Runnels’, Roberts’ targets included the National Bank, Federalists, domestic manufacturers, loose interpreters of the Constitution, and abolitionists. He portrayed these elements of society as traitors to the separation of church and state, repeating that, “Know-Nothingism is an off shoot from this same old stock of Puritan nationality.”

With one biblical exception, his historical analogies did not extend back further than the first European immigration to America, and those analogies were designed to demonstrate a continuous lineage of evil political ideology from the repressive Puritans, through the big government anti-democratic Federalists and Whigs, to the Know-Nothing “American Party” of the 1850’s. Roberts invoked The Bible only to warn that the issue of abolition: “sooner or later, like Aaron’s serpent, will swallow up all the rest.”

Roberts’ efforts in 1855, along with those of the other Democrats, including moderately unionist Democrats like John Reagan, soundly defeated the Know-Nothing candidate for governor, sitting Lieutenant Governor David C. Dixon. In 1855 and 1856, Sam Houston was toying with national politics and a run for President on the 1856 American (Know-nothing) Party ticket. This came to naught in the party’s nomination of Millard Fillmore by an overwhelming majority. Fillmore was then trounced by James Buchanan, the Democratic candidate, and 1857 saw the Know-Nothings refocus on state
politics. This time, they were able to convince Sam Houston to be their gubernatorial candidate. In his only electoral defeat, he was badly beaten by Runnels by a margin of 9,000 votes.43

By the time Houston came back to win the 1859 election as an Independent Union Democrat, Secession as a political agenda had progressed rapidly from the inchoate ruminations of states rights Democratic Party leaders to a grassroots movement. That movement was touched off by Lincoln’s election in 1860. By then, Oran Milo Roberts had decided to vie for leadership of this groundswell of public sentiment. In 1860, he gave his first blatantly secessionist speech in Austin, at the end of a day’s work as associate justice of the Texas Supreme Court. The speech came about as a result of an odd combination of circumstances, in that the other associate justice of the court, James H. Bell, had announced at a Unionist meeting in Austin three days earlier that he intended to make a pro-Union speech on December 1. Roberts took this as an opportunity to rebut the speech of Bell, and announced that he would give a similar speech against the Union “at the same time and place.”44

Roberts’ speech promptly assailed “the revolutionary party of the north” that has “advanced step-by-step toward the destruction of our domestic institutions.” The several pages of handwritten text continue along the same lines as the speech former Governor Runnels had given to the legislature a few months before. 45

Unlike Roberts’ oration, Judge Bell’s anti-secession speech is full of literary analogies. Bell, like Houston, had just defeated a firebrand Democratic Party machine candidate, Constantine W. Buckley. Hence Houston and Bell were already allies. Bell quoted Edmund Burke’s observation that “Timidity where the welfare of one’s country is
concerned, is heroic virtue.” He even mentioned republican Rome at length, quoting Calpurnia’s ominous speech from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*:

> “We do not indeed behold those signs and wonders which agitated the superstitious minds of the Roman people ‘a little ere the mightiest Julius fell.’ We do not see
> ‘Fierce, fiery warriors fighting on the clouds,
> In ranks and squadrons and right form of war,
> Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol.’

but we do see approaching convulsion.”

In addition, he cited the opening Canto of Shelley’s *Revolt of Islam*, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, and the rabble-rousing demagogues Jack Cade and Wat Tyler from Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*. While Tyler was never a character in any Shakespeare play, Cade’s character in *Henry VI* is an amalgamation of himself and England’s other famous medieval Jacobin, Tyler. It was Wat Tyler who, in the rebellion against Richard II in 1381, actually proposed “killing all the lawyers,” although Shakespeare had this line spoken by “butcher Dick” to Cade in *Henry VI*, a dramatization of the similar rebellion against Henry’s rule. Judge Bell’s point was to discourage hasty mob rebellion against the rule of law.46

Roberts’ speech of December 1, 1860, on the other hand, had no need of similar culture. It simply ran through the traditional litany of legal and constitutional arguments in favor of a state’s right to secede from the Union. Characteristically, Roberts did not reach for historical support more remote than his own Anglo-Saxon origins. In a passage echoing his essay on Mormonism, he set forth his familiar personal ethic:
“European society, since the extinction of villenege and serfdom, has assumed
and rests upon this basis. That every person of lawful age must provide for
himself and the liberty and means of doing…is controlled by the few-the
governing class.”

The rest of the speech refers to the need for cooperation with Texas’ “sister southern
states, whether it be in or out of the union,” to the northern “virulent antipathy” towards
slavery, to the north as “a set of fanatics,” to the dangers associated with “an infuriated
mob of free Negroes,” and to an evil liberal construction that “induces a continual effort
to find powers in the constitution that are, in fact, not expressed.” Roberts also invoked
the Declaration of Independence and the philosophy that “all political power is inherent
in the people.” There are no references to ancient history or even The Bible. Rather, as
Tobias concludes, “constitutional legitimation was Roberts’ chief modus operandi.”

In November, shortly before this speech, Roberts drew up the “First Call upon the
People of Texas to Assemble in Convention” with a group composed of W.P. Rogers,
Attorney General George Flournoy, and Col. John S. “Rip” Ford. This “Call” was copied
by Roberts and sent later in the month to Rogers, who had left for Houston to organize a
mass meeting. At that meeting, a resolution passed endorsing the Call. Roberts mentioned
these events briefly in his December capitol speech, and the Call was printed and
published shortly thereafter. The Call, like the secessionist pronouncements before it,
made no appeals to lessons of the ancient past, but merely listed the affronts recently
suffered at the hands of the Black Republicans of the North. In response, a convention
was indeed convoked by the Texas Legislature over Governor Sam Houston’s
objection.
Subsequent speeches and official pronouncements of the pro-secession party in Texas are contained within the journal of that secession convention that convened in January of 1861, and in the resolutions of the Texas State Legislature that immediately preceded it. The convention began, after some preliminary matters, by asking its president, O.M. Roberts, to appoint a committee to confer with Governor Houston on “the subject of federal relations.” The committee was composed of Representatives John Reagan, John Stell, Peter W. Gray, William P. Rogers, and Thomas J. Devine. They reported the response of Houston, which was oblique. While Houston assured the committee that “whatever will conduce to the welfare of our people will have my warmest and most fervent wishes,” his written reply of January 31, 1861 to the committee insisted that a vote by the citizens of Texas was necessary before any decision could be made about “federal relations.”

The convention met the next day, February 1, 1861, and promptly passed a resolution seceding from the Union by a vote of 166 to 8. Convention President Roberts signed it first (a la John Hancock), followed by the remaining secessionist delegates. The legislature, in convoking the convention, had already agreed to Houston’s demand that even if secession passed the convention, it should still be submitted to a popular referendum. On February 2nd, in anticipation of the election, a resolution was introduced and passed endorsing “a declaration of the causes which impelled the state of Texas to secede from the federal union” drafted by John Henry Brown, George Flournoy, John Wilcox, M.D. Graham, and A.P. Wiley. The document occupies several pages of the journal of the convention, but nowhere does it mention any event of human history prior to the Constitution of the United States. Unlike Jefferson’s majestic 1776
document, this declaration includes only a chronological examination of those recent grievances “and other wrongs we have patiently borne in the vain hope that a returning sense of justice and humanity would induce a different course of administration” in the federal government. Texas, having surrendered national sovereignty in its pact to become part of the Union, “was received a commonwealth holding, maintain and protecting the institution known as Negro slavery.” The secession declaration thus opted for the xenophobic side of the double edged 1836 Texas Declaration of Independence, away from the philosophical ambience of 1776, and towards the visceral provincialism and resentment that ultimately led to civil war.51

The declaration’s complaints continue over prohibiting slavery in “all of the immense territory owned in common by all the states on the Pacific Ocean,” and over “the disloyalty of the northern states and their citizens and the imbecility of the federal government.” Mention is then made of the laws passed in several northern states that undermined the recapture of fugitive slaves. The customary xenophobic polemic against northern invaders and their dangerous and “debasing doctrine of the equality of all men, irrespective of race or color” is also present. The convention made clear that the final straw was that the northern states “by the combined sectional vote of the 17 non-slave holding states … elected as president and vice president of the whole confederacy two men whose chief claims to such high positions are their approval of these long continued wrongs.” In a bizarre and nightmarish construction of the principles behind the Declaration of Independence, the convention held it as undeniable that American governments “were established exclusively by the white race, for themselves and their posterity,” and that in such “free” governments “all white men are and of right ought to
be entitled to equal civil and political rights.” This “Declaration of Causes” was again signed first by Roberts as president of the convention. \footnote{52} The convention then recessed on February 4th in order to organize the popular vote. The arrangements for the vote were made in secret session under the watchful eye of O.M. Roberts. \footnote{53}

After the electorate overwhelmingly approved secession, the convention reconvened and produced an “address to the people of Texas” dated March 30, 1861. This proclamation, authored by a committee of three members of the convention, Pryor Lea of Goliad, John Henry Brown of Bell, and John D. Stell of Leon, recapitulates the same arguments made previously by Roberts and others. Although it is ten pages, there are no references to classical political theory, ancient history, classical literature, or even to the Bible. Rather, this address blandly states that, “the political crisis arose from an irreconcilable diversity of opinion between the northern and southern portions of the United States of America as to relative rights.” In support of this, the convention committee assembles the same examples from recent history and the same theories of interstate compact and Constitutional Law repeated before. By this late date in 1861, Secession was treated as a political fact requiring only legal and procedural justification. Much ink is spent describing the legality of the convention’s activities and the validity of the secession plebiscite. \footnote{54}

At the federal level, another leading Texas secessionist was Senator Lewis T. Wigfall. On December 11, 1860, just ten days after Roberts’ speech at the capitol, Wigfall delivered his own secessionist manifesto to the United States Senate. On January 19, 1861, the friendly Clarksville Standard, one of the most influential newspapers in the state, reprinted the Congressional Record of the speech. In it, Wigfall’s basic thesis was
that “we cannot save the Union … the cotton states are dissatisfied with the present
government as it is about to be administered by the president-elect. There is nothing that
can satisfy them except amendments to the constitution and those amendments must be
made by the northern states.” In briefly reprising the familiar litany of southern
complaints against the aggressive North, Wigfall purported to want peace, but told his
audience that war was more likely, concluding that:

…when you laugh at these impotent threats as you regard them, I tell you that
cotton is king!

Uncharacteristically for a secessionist, Wigfall did include one clear classical
analogy interspersed between the usual constitutional and xenophobic arguments.
Wigfall accused the Republican members of Congress of tyranny:

“Previous to the election and the anticipated inauguration, you organized a
praetorian guard. In Rome, it was not until liberty had fallen, that
Augustus, their emperor, inaugurated that military body. A few years
rolled on, and the empire was put up by the praetorian guard, and sold for
money. Who is to be the Dedius Julianus that will purchase this empire, I
cannot divine.”

Perhaps it was Wigfall’s sophisticated audience of Senatorial colleagues that produced
this uncharacteristic fit of classical analogy.

What is clear from the tenor of these secessionist speeches is the particular
perichoretic combination of alterite and the lessons of republican history adopted by their
makers. Even on those rare occasions where secessionists raised the level of their
rhetoric to the classical and historical references common among educated gentlemen of
the time, it was clear that fear-mongering was the real crux of the argument. While they could not escape their classical educations and class-conscious erudition, these thought worlds were always subordinated to the power of *alterite*. As the looming election of 1860 intensified southern fears, the rhetoric of Secession became less constitutional and more *ad hominem*. But by March 1861, with public support for Secession rampant, the polemics retreated to mere legalistic justification. At the height of the crisis, when the issue may still have been in some doubt, the whole force of the secessionist argument was the threat posed by the North to southern Democratic tradition.

On the unionist side, the major Texas leaders were Houston and his friends James Throckmorton, Ben Epperson, D.B. Culbertson, and most significantly, U.S. Congressman A.J. “Colossal” Hamilton and newspaper editor George W. Paschal. John H. Reagan, a moderate Democrat, originally sought to defuse talk of secession, and had generally unionist sympathies, but like Thomas Rusk, he quickly gave way to the popular will and became a secessionist. By virtue of his massive political stature in Texas, Houston was by far the primary exponent of the Unionist position. Sam Houston bestrode antebellum Texas like a colossus, with one foot in the Texas Revolution and the other in the Civil War. According to one scholarly account, his nearest competitors for leadership of the Union faction were Hamilton and Paschal, the editor of the pro-Houston *Southern Intelligencer* in Austin.

James Throckmorton was a member of the Texas Legislature and one of the mere handful of delegates to the convention who voted “no” on the ordinance of secession of February 1, 1861. His statement at the time was:
Mr. President, in view of the responsibility, in the presence of God and my country and unawed by the wild spirit of revolution around me, I vote no!

When spectators hissed him from the gallery, he added, “When the rabble hiss, well may patriots tremble.”58

Throckmorton went on to fight in the Civil War as a captain in the Sixth Texas Cavalry, putting his Unionist views behind him. Throckmorton, Epperson, and many of Houston’s other lieutenants exemplified the historical evolution of naturally whiggish politicians into Know-Nothings and then Unionists, in just the fashion O.M. Roberts and Harden Runnels had denounced. They represented the loyal opposition in the Democratic South. Unfortunately, few ready examples of their oratorical skills during the height of the secession debate survives.

The speeches and writings of Hamilton and unionist editors like Paschal were somewhat better chronicled, and several examples of Houston’s unionist oratory survive. In the election of 1859 that seemed fleetingly to endorse his unionist platform, Houston gave only one formal campaign speech. It was on his home turf in Nacogdoches, Texas, and Paschal’s friendly Southern Intelligencer published the entire text in a July 23, 1859 special edition appropriately titled The Campaign Intelligencer. The newspaper described the speech as “a stunner from which the secessionist and reopen the African slave trade opposition cannot recover. They have no man with the brains to answer it.” With respect to the gubernatorial election, The Intelligencer was right, but as to secession, “brains” would soon hold little sway.59

Early on in this speech, Houston, perhaps unwittingly, foreshadowed his liberal use of analogy to ancient history by his humble observation that: “My career is not
disconnected with history.” In criticizing the old-line Democratic Party conventions that nominated Constantine W. Buckley in 1858 for the Texas Supreme Court and had just endorsed other political enemies for other high offices in 1859, Houston declared

“The people know what democracy is and they have declared that this is not democracy, for in the face of a majority of thousands, this man was defeated. Conventions, then, say the people of Texas, is not democracy.

“There was a democracy in Greece; but there was also a confederation. Where the people cannot all act, they must delegate their authority. This is republicanism (emphasis added).”

In defending the presidential candidacy of James Buchanan and his support of it, Houston turned to the Bible:

“Ought not Texas, which gave him such a unanimous support, to stand as stood Aaron and Hur, by the side of Moses, and hold up his hands while he labors for the country (emphasis added)” 60

Almost immediately after his election to the governorship in August of 1859, the agitation in favor of states rights escalated. By the fall of 1860 there were already moves afoot in the legislature to call a convention approving secession. Unionists were forced to speak out publicly and as persuasively as possible. The tide was fast turning against them. While Houston maneuvered against Roberts and the legislature for more time, he was quietly recruiting surrogates like Justice James H. Bell to speak out and encouraging his other friends in politics and the press to do likewise.

Some were already stumping against the party machine, however, and needed no encouragement from Houston. For example, Andrew Hamilton gave a speech in Austin
on July 31, 1858 in support of Bell’s independent campaign for the Supreme Court, the rhetorical style of which presaged the language both he and Bell would later use to defend the Union. In both situations, it was necessary to attack the Democratic Party machine, in the first instance because it had nominated the incompetent party hack Constantine Buckley for the Court, thus precipitating Bell’s independent candidacy, and in the latter because it endorsed Breckinridge, the schismatic secessionist “Democratic” candidate in the presidential election of 1860. On this particular occasion in the summer of 1858, Hamilton showed up at a picnic/barbecue sponsored by the party regulars and began to speak against them and their candidate Buckley.  

Editor Paschal of the friendly Intelligencer reported that the “organizer” clique of the Party, whom he also referred to as “organ-grinders,” underestimated Hamilton’s eloquence and lungpower. They had erected a “temple of liberty” too near the organ…ever ready to grind out denunciations against all who will not bow the supplicant’s knee to Baal.” Paschal, in extolling Hamilton here and later, often referred to his strong manly physique, built by proudly tilling fields “which the silk-stocking gentry think degrading to all but an imported African.” Hamilton began the speech by congratulating his listeners for having the courage to gather within sight of the “organizer” meeting and to “question the infallibility of the Star Chamber” of this “self constituted junto.” Paschal himself then rose to speak in support of Hamilton, but wearing his editor hat a few days later, reported tongue in cheek that “It becomes us not to chronicle that gentleman’s (his own) speech…And the speaker is too hoarse this morning to prompt us.”
Hamilton gave a similar anti-establishment speech in the Austin federal courthouse in connection with the 1859 election. He again made reference to his yeoman origins, arguing that the regular party’s adoption of a new platform supporting reopening the slave trade was a direct insult to white laborers, whom firebrands had denounced as “degraded to the condition of the negro.” He continued that the move to reopen the slave trade was “an undisguised secession measure…aimed at nothing short of overturning the government.” He also warned that he “would never consent to a system which would reduce white labor to nothing and Africanize the South.” Hamilton went on to announce his candidacy for Congress from Texas’ western district and to endorse the election of Houston as governor. A few weeks later, he conducted a series of debates with his “organ-grinder” opponent, Thomas N. Wahl. In these, Hamilton played upon the same themes and at one venue concluded with a testimonial to Houston that the Intelligence reported had made “old and gray bearded men spring from their seats and bound into the air.”

Hamilton and Houston both won. In his first speech on the floor of Congress, January 26, 1860, Hamilton referred to the uniqueness of Texas’ affection for the Union and warned that a election of a “Black Republican” Speaker of the House would further the cause of disunion. He saw himself and other Southern Jacksonian unionists as the ultimate conservatives, caught between radicals on both sides:

The Union sir is being dissolved now. It may be in the power of the conservative elements of this House to arrest it; but that cannot be done by the election of a Black Republican Speaker. I believe that I represent as conservative a constituency as any gentleman upon this floor; a people who are devoted to the
Union; a people, sir, who have, I think, manifested that devotion by yielding up what no other State in the Union has yielded, a separate nationality…65

As the secession crisis intensified, so did Hamilton’s rhetoric. He shifted away from sentimental Texas nationalism and simple nostalgic Jacksonian unionism. Instead, recalling Paschal’s metaphor of the “temple of liberty,” he borrowed similarly classical - almost biblical- imagery, to decry the catastrophic whirlwind looming ever nearer:

“Mr. Speaker, the noble temple of American liberty stood complete in all its parts...not a pillar missing or joint dismembered. And its votaries were gathered about the altar worshipping, as was their wont, with hopeful hearts. Forebodings were felt, and predictions made of the coming storm and destruction of the temple. And the storm has come and still rages- the temple still stands, but shorn of its fair proportions and marred in its beauty. Pillar after pillar has fallen away. And while its proud dome still points to Heaven, it is reeling in mid air like a drunken man, while its solid foundations are shaken as with an earthquake. Yet there are worshippers there, about the shrine, and I am among them…66

Like Houston and Hamilton, during the run-up to the Secession crisis in the late 1850s, the Southern Intelligencer steadfastly supported Jacksonian unionism. From 1856 to March of 1860, the “proprietors” identified themselves as Baker & Root, while the editor and primary propagandist was George W. Paschal.67 A self-professed constitutional lawyer, he was instrumental in convincing James Bell to run for the Supreme Court and in whipping up popular sentiment against the party machine’s candidate, Buckley.68
Paschal considered himself a loyal and “true” Democrat opposed to sectionlists and secessionists. So he opposed Houston during his flirtation with Know-nothingism in the 1850’s, and regularly blamed threats to the Union upon the equally extreme views of Free-soilers on the one hand and Southern fire-eaters on the other. Thus, in 1856 he excoriated Southern extremists for exaggerating threats of a northern backed slave rebellion, and in 1859, he extolled Judge John Reagan for denouncing the troublemakers, “the re-open-the-African-slave trade free booter-filibustero-secessionists.” Like Reagan, Paschal considered himself a “States-Rights Union loving Democrat…who preaches no doctrine South which he might not preach North.” From 1856 to 1859, Paschal was consistently critical of the southern radicals (whom he dubbed “salamanders”) who favored reopening the slave trade and invading Cuba solely to make it a new part of the southern slave plantation system.69

When it became clear that Houston would be the only viable candidate to unseat the sectionalist Runnels as governor, Paschal’s rhetoric intensified apace with Hamilton’s and he made peace with Houston, saying: “the name Houston is no longer dangerous as a friend,” and reprinting a letter from Jefferson County claiming that everywhere the writer traveled, he found “Sam Houston to have risen rapidly in the public estimation. If he was dead and buried in 1857, as was claimed by his opponents- he certainly has been resurrected in this year of grace 1859.”70

In 1860, Paschal was instrumental in organizing Union clubs throughout the state. Their purpose was to thwart the election of either the Republican Lincoln or the Dixiecrat Breckenridge by any means. These clubs agreed to endorse the candidacy of four uncommitted Constitutional Union electors from Texas, Paschal and William Steadman
at large; and Ben Epperson and John H. Robson from the eastern and western congressional districts, respectively. While most of the clubs also endorsed the national Constitution Union ticket led by Tennessee’s Whig Senator John C. Bell, they agreed to vote for “the Union ticket” of electors “content to leaving them uninstructed as to how the vote of the State shall be given, except that they should so cast it, if necessary, as will defeat the nominees of the Chicago (Republican) Convention.” Meanwhile, those described by Paschal as “old-line Democrats” formed “Douglass and Johnson Clubs,” yet these also endorsed the same Union electoral slate with instructions to vote for the candidate “shown to be most available against Lincoln.”

When A.B. Norton took over from Paschal as editor just before the 1860 campaign, the Intelligencer’s platform did not change. It republished from the New York Day Book letters purporting to be from East Texas and Ft. Worth, each of which exaggerated the danger of abolitionists urging a slave revolt. “J.W.S.” from Ft Worth claimed that “we will hang every man who does not live above suspicion…Necessity now reverses the rule, for it is better to hang ninety-nine innocent (suspicious) men than to let one guilty one pass…” Alluding to both the French Revolution and the famous English poet, Norton (or perhaps Paschal - it is difficult to be sure), replied that “Byron’s old pirate Lambro-‘as mild a man as ever scuttled a ship or cut a throat,’ was a babe in the woods compared to the Ft. Worth man. J.W.S. should have lived in the time of the bloody butchers, Marat and Robespierre.” In an allusion to more ancient history and literature, the editor continued by criticizing secessionists on the ground their exaggerated scare stories encouraged disloyalty and contempt for law and order, leading people to
believe “their lives, their property, their women, and their children are in imminent danger…” Then, according to the *Intelligencer*,

> When the Constitution and the laws are overthrown, when the powers of the Judiciary are usurped by the mob, then every man carries his life in his hands…It is the reign of Nero with the horrible feature of a multitude of fiddlers, instead of a single tyrant.\(^7^2\)

Another letter published in the same issue, this one from a friendly correspondent signed “Union,” added another aspect to the *Intelligencer’s* attempt to paint itself as the voice of conservatism, wisdom, and reason. “Union” particularly criticized the performance of one N.W. Shannon at a September 18\(^{th}\) secessionist meeting in Washington County. It claimed that Shannon, a young lawyer,

> always has been a disruptionist…He is the flower of the Democracy here…He is the chevalier of the young South. Keen, shrewd and insinuating, he always stands behind the curtains to bring about the doctrine of the “Young South.” He curses the old people as “fogies” and boldly asserts the young men of the South as the regenerators of the country.\(^7^3\)

As the November election loomed, unionist editors accused secessionists of not only disregarding the lessons of history and great literature, but of exhibiting profound disrespect and ingratitude toward their better, wiser elders, a serious sin against the code of southern gentility.

> Once the outcome of the presidential election was known, the fervor on both sides only increased. Governor Houston’s delaying stratagems could not halt the groundswell against Lincoln and the Union. His request that the legislature defer to the popular will on
a grave question like Secession was answered by calling the aforementioned convention, which agreed that its ordinances would be submitted to a plebiscite. Soon, Houston would have to cave in to the secessionists or fight them openly. In January 1861, Houston quickly penned an address to the people of Texas that was published and circulated *en masse*. In it, he found no use for ancient history but merely counseled loyalty and caution, much as Bell had done.\(^7\) Once the vote on Secession had mooted Houston’s unionist sympathies, he sent an address to the Texas Legislature on March 18, 1861. It is in this address that he protested the famous “test oath” to the Confederacy that he was called upon to aver. The previous day, he had refused to appear as directed to take the oath. This speech is uncharacteristically legalistic of Houston, and it is without significant historical analogy. The circumstances of his address, i.e., the necessity to justify his refusal to take the oath, must not have lent themselves to such a mode of argumentation. Besides, like the secessionists after their convention and plebiscite, he knew that the political issue had already been decided, and that *post hoc* technical justification of his own conduct was the only rhetorical ground left to him.\(^7\)

The legislature declared the governor’s office officially vacant as a result of Houston’s intransigence. Still he refused to change his views. He was too attached to Texas to accept Abraham Lincoln’s offer of military aid to keep her in the Union, but he would not cow-tow to the mob that now ruled her. With the issue no longer in doubt and his own political career ruined, Houston gave one final public speech on the subject of secession on Sunday, March 31, in Brenham, Texas. Unlike his earlier political efforts to muddy the waters, and his legalistic defenses of his now lost position, it was brutally candid. His arrival in the town caused quite a stir among secessionists. They called him
out into the street from the courthouse where friends and admirers had asked him to deliver a brief address. Hugh McIntyre, a local secessionist but also an old friend of Houston’s, emerged and quieted the crowd by climbing up on a nearby table and drawing his pistol. They soon heeded his warning to pay attention to Houston: “You ruffians keep quiet, or I will kill you.”

Houston then came out behind McIntyre and delivered a speech. It cannot be known whether it was the speech he intended to deliver inside the courthouse, or whether it was an extemporaneous plea to the crowd, or some combination of the two. In it, Houston’s familiarity with Greco-Roman history and his appeal to the wisdom of calmer, greyer heads could not be repressed:

I declare that Civil War is inevitable and is near at hand … when it comes the descendents of the heroes of Lexington and Bunker Hill will be found equal in patriotism, courage, and heroic endurance with the descendents of the heroes of Cowpens and Yorktown. For this reason I predict that the Civil War which is now near at hand will be stubborn and of long duration.

When the tug of war comes, it will indeed be the Greek meeting Greek. Then, oh my fellow countrymen, the fearful conflict will fill our fair land with untold suffering, misfortune, and disaster. The soil of our beloved south will be drink deep the precious blood of our sons and brethren. I cannot, nor will I close my eyes against the light and voice of reason. The die has been cast by your secession leaders, whom you have
permitted to sow and broadcast the seeds of secession, and you must ere long reap the fearful harvest of conspiracy and revolution.\textsuperscript{77}

It is fitting that one of the portraits of Sam Houston that adorns the governor’s office at the Texas State Capitol is Washington Bogart Cooper’s “Sam Houston as Marius Among the Ruins of Carthage.” In it, Houston is depicting wearing a Roman toga and standing among the broken column capitals of that ancient enemy of Rome. History tends to run together in the popular imagination, and so it mattered little to Cooper that Marius was a Roman general in the 1\textsuperscript{st} Century B.C., decades after the destruction of Carthage. Likewise, few of his listeners probably realized that when Houston had admonished the Brenham crowd that “the die is cast” he was referring to the reported comment of Julius Caesar when he crossed the Rubicon.\textsuperscript{78}

Unlike Caesar, Houston would not cross. When President Lincoln offered him federal troops to keep Texas in the Union, Houston asked a few close friends for advice. All but Epperson counseled against assuming the role of \textit{imperator} in a domestic civil war. A tired Houston, ten years older than Caesar was at his crucial decision point, concluded, “Gentlemen, I have asked your advice and will take it, but if I were ten years younger, I would not.”\textsuperscript{79}

Analyzing the speeches and proclamations of the Texas secession crisis does much more than merely create a deeper appreciation of this one complex and important man. It reveals the thought-worlds of his compatriots, and it helps explain why the unionists’ words, no matter how eloquent, could not stem or contain the wildfire of popular sentiment for secession. The xenophobic anti-Northern feeling ran so deep and was so ingrained in southern Democratic Party ideology that Houston’s and Hamilton’s
opponents, no matter how eloquent or well educated, needed to do little more than to touch upon it and to feed it. There is another conclusion, beyond this one, that presents itself in light of the fact that secessionist orators like Wigfall and Roberts well knew ancient history but did not use it. The nature and quality of the popular opinion they inflamed was not amenable to long views of the distant past and centuries of western constitutional tradition. It was visceral, emotional, and immediate, produced by recent events. The attempt by Houston and others to calm this rebellious temperament by appeals to reason, logic, and the broader, quieter lessons of history fell upon deaf ears.

Most were not surprised. Judge James Bell wrote his supporters:

“I spoke…with full knowledge of the fact that the expression of my opinions would subject me to be denounced as a freesoiler and an abolitionist by those who think that the greatest political offense of which a man can be guilty is to differ from them in opinion. I am perfectly willing to take my full share of abuse from those who wish to plunge hastily into revolution…if by this means, I can be instrumental in persuading the people to act with calmness and moderation in this great crisis of our affairs.”

This contest between reflection and order on the one hand, and prejudice and resentment on the other, would be oft repeated in the ensuing century with similarly discouraging results.

The rubric of ideological history moots the question of whether rhetoric, in this instance, was causative or merely incidental. The important lesson it teaches is that because politicians use arguments that win approval and gain followers and discard those that flop, studying the recurring themes in those arguments tells us what both the
speakers and listeners thought they were doing at the time, and what they thought was at stake. It gives us the crux of the political battle as it was waged in the minds and hearts of men and women. If one assumes some continuity in this aspect of human nature, this kind of ideological history also tells us what polemics tend to work, given a particular cultural milieu or ethos. The appeal to tradition and moderation against the temptations of faction and prejudice requires a calm reflective audience to sink in. Thus, inevitably, in times of crisis it seldom does. Long views do not sell well in the heat of the moment.

As an analytical tool, the philosophical notions of perichoresis and alterite shed useful light on the world of the mind. Ideology and alterite are both concepts familiar to contemporary historians. Perichoresis adds another level of refinement to our understanding of these concepts by giving the historian a way of describing the complexity of competing ideologies that are comprised of the same major elements, but in different proportions with different relative valences. Hence, it is not enough to ask whether a Houston or a Jefferson was ethnocentric. One must go deeper to explore the valence of this one component of a more complex thought-world. And language, when intended for public consumption reveals as much about that public as about its speaker. Thus, to historians, leaders are neither unimportant nor to be studied or psychoanalyzed for their own sake. Studied in context and over time and space, their language evidences the ideas that resonate in the mind of both the speaker and his audience. One subsidiary idea or rhetorical technique, like the use of historical or literary analogies, can act as an analytical wedge or scalpel, slicing a cross-section through competing texts.

Unionists were more likely to invoke the lessons of the more distant past because this dovetailed nicely with their political strategy of privileging caution over fear and
retribution. Their only bogey-men were the young and reckless of their own country, groups easily identified as patriots instead “others” in the popular mind. The secessionists could trot out a much stranger bete noir. Given public antipathy toward “the black North” secessionists had no need for abstract arguments or calm logic. Moreover, appealing to cultural texts and traditions beyond their own would have undercut the xenophobic power of their polemics.

Were one, waxing nostalgic, to focus on “great men” in a Texas history that is itself larger than life, Sam Houston’s thoughtful resistance to visceral convention would still stand out – from his actions upon capturing Santa Anna, to his vote on the Kansas-Nebraska Act, to his opposition to Secession. And it is therefore unsurprising that Houston surpassed even his fellow unionists in appreciation for, and use of, the classics. The love of ancient Greece and Rome that permeates his speeches, and that drove him to the Cherokee wilderness so that he could memorize the Iliad undisturbed, he passed on to his descendants. Three years before his death in 1863, while he was still in the heat of the fray, he wrote his young son Sam, Jr.:

“At your first leisure, I wish you to read the History of Caius Marius. I think that you will find it in Rollins's, or Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. If not in one of them, you will find it in Plutarch’s Lives.”82
1 William Carey Crane, *The Life and Select Literary Remains of Sam Houston of Texas* (Philadelphia, Dallas: W.G. Scarf, 1884); (reprint Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Co., 1885) 264-266. (All page citations are to the reprint edition). Crane’s book includes an appendix containing not only some of Houston’s writings, but also a copy of the Texas Declaration of Independence and other primary source material.


Thomas E. Shuford, Three Texas Unionist Editors face the Secession Crisis: A Case Study on Freedom of the Press, (Ph.D. diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 1979); Ibid at 176 (quote)

President William Carey Crane of Baylor University made the same point about Houston long before Wiltshire: “It is said that he could repeat Pope’s Homer’s Iliad almost verbatim. His anxiety to study the languages of Greece and Rome became intense…and last his family learned that he was sojourning, more according to his existing taste, with the Cherokee Indians…Questioned by relatives as to his motives for such a wild choice, he replied, that…if he could not study Latin in the Academy, he could, at least, read a translation from the Greek in the woods, and read it in peace. William Carey Crane, The Life and Select Literary Remains of Sam Houston of Texas (Philadelphia, Dallas: W.G. Scarf, 1884); (reprint Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Co., 1885) 18-19. (Carey quote) (All page citations are to the reprint edition); Susan F. Wiltshire, “Sam Houston and the Iliad.” Tennessee Historical Quarterly 32, no. 3 (1973): 249-254; Marquis James, The Raven; Charles Edward Lester, The Life of Sam Houston (New York: J.C. Derby, 1855); George Creel, Sam Houston: Colossus in Buckskin (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1928). Wiltshire also cites M.K. Wisehart, Sam Houston: American Giant (Washington: R.B. Luce, 1962). Lester’s book is a later re-editing of his original Sam Houston and His Republic (New York: Burgess, Stringer, 1846). This book is reportedly based heavily on the author’s actual conversations with Houston, who was then the 53 year-old first President of the Republic of Texas. See Wiltshire, “Sam Houston and
the Iliad,” 250; Marshall De Bruhl, Sword of San Jacinto: A Life of Sam Houston, 364. On this subject, DeBruhl quotes David G. Burnet, an inveterate Houston detractor, as having told Houston’s associate Thomas J. Rusk that “I entertain no doubt that Houston is himself, the real author of that volume of lies.” Wiltshire says merely that Lester “worked closely with Houston for three months” and she concludes, correctly in my view, that Lester wrote the 1846 book and later embellished it as part of Houston’s possible “Know-Nothing” U.S. presidential campaign of 1856, producing The Life of General Sam Houston in 1855. “Campaign biographies” were, at that time a common literary genre.

16 Creel, Sam Houston: Colossus in Buckskin, 7-8 quoted in Wiltshire, Sam Houston and the Iliad, 251 (emphasis added).
19 Runnels also engaged in a four-page tirade against corporate and railroad interests. In this latter section, he used characteristic agrarian populist rhetoric to urge the legislature to prevent railroad companies from defaulting on loans from the state secured by two million dollars of corporate railroad bonds. The scheme was for the interest due the state on the bonds to be used for public education. Apparently, the notion of providing government assistance to unpopular industries (e.g. gambling) and justifying it in the name of generating revenue for education is not a new development.
20 Journal of the Texas House of Representatives, 8th Legislature State of Texas, 25-43.
21 Ibid., 43.
22 Ibid., 37.
23 Ibid., 43-51 and 43 (first quote); 48 (second quote); 50 (third quote).
24 Ibid., 50-51.
25 Ibid., 51.
26 Ibid., 45.
27 Ibid., 48.
28 Ibid., 48 (first quote), 49(second and third quotes).
29 Ibid., 261.
30 Ibid.
32 Ibid., pp. 30-36.
33 Ibid., p. 46 quoting James D. Lynch, The Bench & Bar of Texas (St. Louis: Nixton-Jones Printing Co., 1885), p. 280 (about deciding a case to pieces); Tobias, ibid., p. 46 (quote concerning constitutional law).
See generally, Tobias, 43-46.
34 Tobias, Ibid, p. 42 cites as an example “In Defense of the University at San Augustine: Criticism Upon the Pedantry and Presumption of M.A. Montrose’ Articles Published in the Redlander Under Signature of ‘AVE’ and Strictures Upon Refusal of Canfield to Publish Articles Answering Montrose” (1843).
37 Ibid., 47-49.
38 Tobias, “The States Rights Speaking of Oran Milo Roberts,” 100.
39 Galveston News, 24 July 1855.
40 “Speech in Opposition to Know Nothingism,” Oran Milo Roberts Papers, Center of American History, The University of Texas at Austin.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid. Roberts does make an odd military analogy that may have ancient or medieval overtones but is too oblique to be specifically identified: “The abolitionist as he retreats defiantly sends back arrows into our camp giving notice of open war.” Ibid.
43 See Tobias, “The States rights Speaking of Oran Milo Roberts,” 139-141.
O.M. Roberts, “The Impending Crisis,” original manuscript of speech of Judge O.M. Roberts of the Supreme Court of Texas at the capital, 1 December 1860, *O.M. Roberts Collection*, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin (speech quotes); Tobias, pp. 159-209 (circumstances and content of the speeches of Roberts and Bell). The original handwritten draft of Roberts’ speech is written in ink on lined sheets of very thick light blue paper from a legal pad manufactured by John C. Clark & Son, 230 Dock Street, Philadelphia. The speech fills an entire legal pad and is written in a close antique hand. Fortunately, Roberts’ speech was self-published shortly after it was given, as was that of Judge Bell. All of these speeches are located in Box 2F473 of The *O.M. Roberts Collection*, The Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin. Roberts bound most of them together in a scrapbook (bearing the label “MSS #8211”) with the essay on Mormonism and some other essays, as well as the original handwritten draft of the “1860-The First Call Upon the People of Texas to Assemble in Convention.”

James H. Bell, “Speech at the Capitol-December 1, 1860,” *O.M. Roberts Collection*, The Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. See also William Shakespeare, *Henry VI*, Part 2. Clearly, “First let’s kill all the lawyers” was not first used as a political slogan in the late twentieth century. It is equally clear that while some, in agreement with the hackneyed contemporary lawyer joke, regard this as a “good start,” there have always been others to remind us of the context in which Shakespeare penned this line: it is the battle cry of rabble-rousers, brigands, and tyrants. Those societies in which it has actually been practiced include Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, Maoist China, Castro’s Cuba, and virtually every other regime of extreme repression in modern history. Judge Bell apparently knew his Shakespeare and his history well enough to know this. Unlike modern politicians, Judge Bell understood that Jack Cade and Wat Tyler, not lawyers, were the bad guys, and that this is the point Shakespeare sought to make.

O.M. Roberts, “The Impending Crisis” (quotes from Roberts’ speech) Tobias, “The State’s Rights Speaking of Oran Milo Roberts,” p. 183 (Tobias’ conclusion); ibid., p. 186 (regarding the Declaration of Independence).

O.M. Roberts, “1860-The First Call Upon the People of Texas to Assemble in Convention,” *O.M. Roberts Collection*, The Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. This document, handwritten by Roberts, is attached to his personal description of the events surrounding it, from which the
quotes in this paragraph are taken. It was a slightly amended version written by George Flournoy that was printed and published in December, 1860, according to Roberts’ notes.


52 Ibid., 61-65.

53 Ibid., 58-59.


59 *The Campaign Intelligencer*, 23 July 1859.

60 Ibid.

61 *Southern Intelligencer*, 4 August 1858.

62 Ibid., p.2.
No other official listing of an editor is found in the issues extant on microfilm from 1856 to 1860. It appears from the issues read and cited here that Paschal had certainly ceased regularly editing the paper once he stood for the Electoral College in 1860 and began touring the state to give speeches in favor of the “uncommitted” Union ticket. This corresponds with the appearance of H.H. Raven as “publisher” in the late summer/early fall of 1860. See Southern Intelligencer, 5 September 1860. Raven apparently returned to Austin in May 1859 from an absence elsewhere, since he was described then by Paschal as his “printer friend, H.H. Raven.” Southern Intelligencer, 11 May 1859. By October 1860, A.B. Norton had taken over as publisher. Southern Intelligencer, 10 October 1860. It appears that at this point Paschal was campaigning and providing pieces to the paper, but someone else was actually editing it for the printer and owner, A.B. Norton. Shuford cites Norton’s essay in A History of the Texas Press Association, E. B. Baillio, ed., (Dallas: Southwestern Printing Co., 1916) and the March 28, 1860 issue of the Dallas Herald for the proposition that Norton had become editor by earlier that month, March 1860. See Shuford, p. 31 (and accompanying note 37).

See James Paulsen, Challenges to Confederate Conscription in the Texas Supreme Court (unpublished draft of 25 February 2005).

The November 19, 1956 Southern Intelligencer attests Paschal’s dislike of both exaggerated reports of slave uprisings and abolitionist agitators. He wrote that “The contemplated negro insurrection which was developed at Lavaca a few days ago has been traced to an “Ohio Yankee”…who confessed his participation, and received a hundred lashes of the ‘discipline’ over which he may shed lugubrious tears at the first abolition meeting which he shall attend—No Mexicans have been implicated at this time.” In the same
issue he excoriated Houston and his “three thousand vice-gerents (sic) and their deluded (Know-nothing) followers,” who threatened to “destroy the South” and the Union. He also wrote vehemently in favor of religious freedom and equal treatment of (presumably white) immigrants, considering the Democratic Party the true champion of the little (white) man. His racism toward blacks is evident in the *Southern Intelligencer*, 21 October 1857, which argued for the right if states to let blacks vote, but only because of principles of states rights. In response to the charge that he was an egalitarian, Paschal responded that “no one has a greater horror of this political black equality allowed in some States, than the writer. But it is a privilege which concerns the States alone where it exists.” *Southern Intelligencer*, 21 October 1857.

70 *Southern Intelligencer*, 25 May 1859, p. 1


72 *Southern Intelligencer* 10 October 1860, p. 2.

73 *Southern Intelligencer* 10 October 1860, p. 1.


75 See Governor’s Message of Sam Houston to the Texas Legislature of March 18, 1861 printed in the *Southern Intelligencer* 27 March 1861, p. 2.

76 Marshal DeBruhl, *Sword of San Jacinto*, 394-396.

77 Ibid., 396-397.

78 “Genealogical notes and anecdotes: Sam Houston as Caius Marius,” found at website [http://www.crosswinds.net/~marlerjc/houston.html](http://www.crosswinds.net/~marlerjc/houston.html) [accessed 9/21/03].

79 Marquis James, *The Raven* 410-411.

80 James H. Bell, “Letter to M.C. Hamilton, et.al.,” cover letter transmitting printed copy of Speech at the Capitol-December 1, 1860,” O.M. Roberts Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. Indeed, it was for this reason that Walter Buenger titled his dissertation “Stilling the Voice of Reason.”
Examples are legion. The League of Nations was a flop. The “voice of reason” attributed by Buenger to Houston was equally ineffective when employed by others against the Bolsheviks in 1917, the American Red Scare in the 1920’s, the rise of Mussolini, Tojo, and Hitler in the 1930’s, and the McCarthyism of the 1950’s.