The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party 1828–1861

Yonatan Eyal

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The phrase "Young America" connoted territorial and commercial expansion in the antebellum United States. During the years leading up to the Civil War, it permeated various parts of the Democratic Party, producing new perspectives in the realms of economics, foreign policy, and constitutionalism. Led by figures such as Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois and editor John L. O'Sullivan of New York, Young America Democrats gained power during the late 1840s and early 1850s. They challenged a variety of orthodox Jacksonian assumptions, influencing both the nation's foreign policy and its domestic politics. This is the first book to offer an exclusively political history of Young America's impact on the Democratic Party, complementing existing studies of the literary and cultural dimensions of this group. This close look at the Young America Democracy sheds light on the political realignments of the 1850s and the coming of the Civil War, in addition to showcasing the origins of America's longest existing political party.

Yonatan Eyal received his A.B. in history from Stanford University and his A.M. and Ph.D. in history from Harvard University. Eyal has been the recipient of the Dissertation Writing Fellowship at the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History at Harvard University, the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History Fellowship, the Richard A. Berenson Graduate Fellowship at Harvard University, the Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship in Humanistic Studies, and the Jacob K. Javits Fellowship from the U.S. Department of Education. His articles have been published in *Civil War History*, *American Nineteenth Century History*, and the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*. This is Eyal's first book.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK
Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521875646

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First published in print format 2007

ISBN-13 978-0-511-33234-0 eBook (Adobe Reader)
ISBN-10 0-511-33234-3 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-87564-6 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-87564-1 hardback

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For my parents, Hanna and Chaim Eyal

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Acknowledgments

Although New Democrats may have been reluctant to thank those who helped them and came before them, it gives me great pleasure to do so myself. At the top of the list is Professor and Dean (and now President) Drew Gilpin Faust. Drew directed the doctoral dissertation that became this book, providing expert guidance with a human touch. At a critical moment in my graduate career, she took time from her busy schedule to encourage me, offer incisive feedback, and suggest more effective ways of presenting my research. Her uncanny ability to remain rigorous and critical while providing support and building confidence is the hallmark of an ideal mentor. I will always be grateful for her shrewd insight, warm encouragement, and careful engagement with my work.

I am also indebted to the two other historians who served on my dissertation committee. James T. Kloppenberg was the first Harvard professor with whom I spoke, and during my graduate school years and after he has remained a constant and indispensable presence in my intellectual life. Harry L. Watson painstakingly read my manuscript, expressing interest in my conclusions and refining my conceptualization of the antebellum Democracy. Since I first met him, Harry has offered valuable feedback on several projects, and I appreciate his rigor and attention to the details.

Since my undergraduate days at Stanford, George M. Fredrickson and Jack N. Rakove have served as mentors, friends, and role models. George was the one who first suggested that I explore the Young America phase of Democratic Party development. For the original idea behind this undertaking, and for much else, I remain grateful. David B. Abernethy and Brad S. Gregory both encountered me as a college freshman, and since then have contributed to my growth and self-confidence as a scholar. Michael F. Holt carefully read the entire manuscript and saved me from numerous errors of fact and interpretation.

Parts of Chapter 2 appeared as "Trade and Improvements: Young America and the Transformation of the Democratic Party," *Civil War History* 51 (September 2005): 245–68. I thank the Kent State University Press for granting

permission for its use, and editors William Blair and Anthony Kaye for their constructive feedback.

Various faculty members at Harvard guided me through graduate school, offering help throughout the process of research and writing. They include Professors Sven Beckert, Joyce Chaplin, Lizabeth Cohen, Donald Fleming, Christopher Jones, Michael McCormick, Lisa McGirr, Susan O'Donovan, and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. Lilian Handlin took time away from her own research schedule to discuss the fascinating life of George Bancroft with me. Staff members Pat Denault, Janet Hatch, Mary McConnell, Arthur Patton-Hock, Cory Paulsen, and Gail Rock made all the logistics run smoothly. At the University of Cincinnati, James Murray ensured that my first academic appointment provided a hospitable work environment, while Mark Lause, Tom Lorman, and John K. Alexander engaged in numerous helpful conversations.

For assistance in locating archival sources, I thank Alison Scott and Barbara Burg of the Widener Library at Harvard University. I also appreciate the efforts of the reference staff at the Houghton Library of Harvard University (my favorite place to work), the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the Joseph Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago.

At Cambridge University Press, my editor, Lewis Bateman, expressed early interest in this project and guided it to publication with enthusiasm and skill. Lew's reputation preceded him, and now I can see why. His assistants Ciara McLaughlin and Monica Finley diligently aided in the process, while Shelby Peak and Regina Paleski saw the manuscript through its final stages. Thanks to Sara Black's copyediting, the finished product is more readable and polished. I am also grateful to the two anonymous readers for the Press, both of whom improved my work significantly. I of course take sole responsibility for any deficiencies remaining.

I came to Harvard as a student of Professor William E. Gienapp. Although he passed away during my time there, I like to think that the book I have written bears his mark and would garner his approval. Whether physically present or not, Bill's attention to detail, passion for excellence, vast knowledge of nineteenth-century American politics, and marvelous wit and humor have infused my work throughout this project. I vividly remember the morning that I proposed this topic to him. He sat, in characteristic fashion, behind his large desk, reading glasses perched on the tip of his nose and arms folded across his chest. After I outlined the idea to which George Fredrickson had first alerted me, he paused for a moment and asked, "Well, did George tell you how long this would take to do?" His approach to scholarship has made a lasting impact on my own, which means that his memory will continue to live as long as I am writing and thinking about history.

In coping with the death of Bill Gienapp, I was comforted by the loyalty and generosity of his wife, Erica, and his son, Jonathan. Jonathan has cultivated a precocious historical mind during college, while Erica continues to involve

herself with her late husband's students and activities. I thank them both for allowing me to remain connected to the Gienapp family in the face of such trying circumstances.

For funding to support my research and writing, I gratefully acknowledge the U.S. Department of Education for a Jacob K. Javits Fellowship, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation for an Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship in Humanistic Studies, the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History at Harvard University, the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University, the Harvard Center for American Political Studies, and the Harvard University Department of History. These agencies allowed me the luxury of several unfettered years to pursue my interests.

When I first visited Cambridge, Bill Gienapp said that I should come to Harvard not just for the faculty, but also to enjoy the company of talented peers. His comment was correct, and I have made some of my best friends while working on this project. The "first tetrarchy" of Daniel Wewers, Justin Florence, and Kevin Blake deserves pride of place. Over the past several years, we have gotten to know each other's families, traveled together, studied for general examinations, held countless discussions, and otherwise done what close friends do. They have become an integral and greatly appreciated part of my life. Fellow graduate students in nineteenth-century American history have made our field a community. They include Dara Baker, Mike Bernath, Tom Coens, Christine Dee, Jennifer Goloboy, Dan Hamilton, Alison LaCroix, Lisa Laskin, and Chandra Miller Manning. Silvana Siddali and Eva Sheppard Wolf offered their advice about the job market and the dissertation during the past several years, and Silvana alerted me to a number of research leads regarding Young America. Other graduate student friends who have left indelible (and that means positive) impressions on me are George Blaustein, Linzy Brekke, Lauren Brown, Luis Campos, Jennifer Davis, James Fichter, Rebecca Goetz, Kate Grandjean, Kyle Harper, Hal Jones, Judy Kertesz, Andrew Kinney, Philip Mead, Elizabeth Mellyn, Marion Gross Menzin, Margot Minardi, Daniel Sargent, Sara Schwebel, David Smith, Trygve Throntveit, Ken Weisbrode, and Lauren Willig. Alan Gluck spent many a lunchtime discussing my interpretation of the Democratic Party, among other topics, while Christopher Carlsmith provided a faultless model of the academic at work and play.

My parents, Hanna and Chaim Eyal, have marched alongside me throughout this academic journey. They have supported me emotionally and financially at every point in my education. When I expressed doubts, my father said, "Trust me – when have I ever been wrong?" I am happy to say that his track record remains unblemished. Without them I would not be writing these words today. To them I dedicate this book with thanks for all they have done throughout my life. My sister, Shiri, kept her own scholarly identity at a healthy distance from the history world. But she has also read some of my work and shared the happiness of my successes. My parents-in-law, Debbie and Irwin Thomashow, welcomed me into their lives like a son. Because of them, my memories of

writing this book include the sounds of waves crashing on the Maine seashore among the laughter and warmth of family gatherings.

Last, though so amazingly far from least, I am eager to acknowledge the love, empathy, and companionship of my wife, Karen. Not only has she shared her linguistic cleverness, analytical insight, and editorial skill, she has been my cheering section and ally. Although I use words to describe the world of nineteenth-century Democrats, the English language fails me when I try to express my love for her.

Introduction

The Spirit of Young America

In 1853, New York writer and lecturer George William Curtis tried to put into words the elusive mindset known as Young America. Curtis attempted to define a concept that had many meanings in the antebellum United States, and in his speech he focused on its spirit of freshness and boldness. "Youth, or Young America, smiles at greatness," he observed.

> It confidently expects to exceed and rival in greatness, "the noblest Roman of them all." It says "well done" to Alexander, and pats Hannibal on the back; it smiles patronizingly on Julius Caesar, and will acknowledge Homer to be a good poet, if you insist upon it; and even admits that, at present, two and two make four. But it is secretly convinced that all these works of antiquity are only partial and incomplete affairs, not to be compared with what can be done in our day, and resolves that the time shall come when two and two shall make five.[1]

The Young American "prowls about Cuba," he continued, "seeking how he may devour it, and sends Commodore Perry to Japan, with the very pleasant message that he is the sun, that the moon is his wife, and the earth their heritage." This assessment only barely exaggerated the quest for novelty that lay at the heart of the Young America ethos.[2]

Curtis's contemporaries came to similar conclusions about Young America. The *Democratic Review*, a partisan journal of polite letters, best encapsulated its ethos through poetry:

> Wherever Action leaves the past, and brings the future near –
> Where'er electric progress leaps from customs cloudy sphere –
> Wherever Thought, like nature, yearly fruits progressive bloom,
> And where Free-Will, like Christ, escapes all living from earth's tomb –
> Oh! there is Young America.[3]

[1] *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 14 December 1853, 2.
[2] Ibid., 15 December 1853, 2.
[3] *Democratic Review* 31 (July 1852), 87.

Daring and audacious conduct, a willingness to depart from well-worn customs, a forward-looking desire to embrace the new – these were all attributes of the ideology named Young America.

New York Democratic operative Samuel J. Tilden spoke in a Young America vein when he wrote:

> I believe that the gradual amelioration and culture of our race is in the inevitable order of Providence. I see elements which have been and are preparing our country to act a grander part than any has hitherto done in this great plan. That part is to be wrought out, not by an indolent repose on what our ancestors have ordained for us, but by trials and sacrifices and earnest efforts to solve the great social and civil questions which necessarily arise in the experiences of a nation.[4]

For Tilden, fulfilling America's national destiny involved hard work and application. It remained a hard-headed labor of love, not an idle inheritance. The younger generation needed to shoulder its burden. Territorial expansion, an increase in the volume of trade and manufacturing, government involvement in social matters, and assertiveness in foreign policymaking were all new approaches to public affairs that Young Americans wished to introduce.

The following pages chronicle the life of a Democratic political faction representing this way of thinking. They document the efforts of a group of politicians, editors, and activists to reshape the nature of the antebellum Democratic Party, making it more progressive and adaptive than was the case during its founding days of the 1820s and 1830s. Moving away from the agrarian roots of Andrew Jackson's original coalition, Young America Democrats accepted the market revolution, loosened their interpretations of the Constitution, and adopted various reform causes. This book examines the novel doctrines introduced into the Democratic Party by Young America. It highlights the differences between the old Jacksonian Democracy of Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren, on the one hand, and the New Democracy of leaders such as Stephen Douglas and August Belmont, on the other.

Young America's imprint moved the Democratic organization closer toward the Whig line of thinking, accepting economic growth and American nationalism to a degree that would have seemed alien to many of the party's founders. During the 1840s and 1850s, the Democracy began to leave behind much of its outmoded ideology of agrarian solidity and republican virtue, coming to terms with market growth, technological invention, entrepreneurial opportunity, and other aspects of what contemporaries considered the modern world. As a friend of Senator Stephen Douglas once characterized this forward-looking faction of the party, the "progressive Democracy" was a group "opposed to cherishing one set of doctrines & one set of office holders generation after generation." Injection of new blood and new ideas into the party was their goal.[5]

[4] Samuel J. Tilden to Mrs. Franklin Chase, 29 November 1850, in John Bigelow, ed., *Letters and Literary Memorials of Samuel J. Tilden*, 2 vols. (1908; New York: Books for Libraries, 1971), I, 70.

[5] James O'Donnell to Stephen A. Douglas, 29 November 1852, Stephen A. Douglas Papers, Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

Historians have used the catchphrase "Young America" in several murky contexts, generating confusion about whether the name refers to a faction or a movement, a fad or a rhetorical device, or a general label for the times. The term "Young America" in fact stood for all of these things. It is perhaps most commonly known as the moniker of a group of self-conscious literary nationalists who clustered in New York during the 1830s and 1840s and pledged to create a distinctly American literature. Nationalistic New York intellectuals formed this branch of Young America in the late 1830s. It became an informal literary salon devoted to fostering uniquely American writing and combating rising vulgarity with high culture. Among its leadership stood the publisher Evert Duyckinck and the haughty author Cornelius Mathews, as well as writers William Alfred Jones, Jedediah Auld, and Russell Trevett. Novelists such as Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne flittered around the circle too, ensuring Young America's entrance into the literary canon. Together they probed American themes for a native literature, particularly urban life and the frontier. For several years, they published *The Arcturus*, a literary journal, and ultimately entered the circle surrounding publisher John L. O'Sullivan and his *Democratic Review*. By 1847, they were again producing their own magazine, the *New York Literary World*, with Duyckinck as editor.[6]

Young America thus emerged first and foremost as a slogan denoting a group of writers and editors who wished to distance their country from the pretensions of European fiction and poetry. Circling around its margins were Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Gilmore Simms, lending a national air to what frequently appeared a provincial reading club. This is the Young America best known to literary scholars and many historians. However, as this group's connections with the *Democratic Review* suggest, the expression "Young America" was also adopted by a set of politicians, party operatives, and editors within the Democratic Party. And considerable overlap existed between literary and political Young Americans. For example, John O'Sullivan, longtime proprietor of the *Democratic Review*, published fiction in his magazine and kept in contact with members of both groups. Cultural Young American Evert Duyckinck served as literary editor for the *Review*, while authors such as Hawthorne occupied Democratic political posts. Still, Young America the Democratic political faction featured leaders and programs of its own, eventually overtaking the literary society in activism and prominence. This is a study of political Young America, the group of progressive Democrats who introduced new policies into the party during the late 1840s and early 1850s.

Most scholarship on Young America has examined its literary and intellectual side, providing cultural histories that address politics tangentially or inadequately. For example, the most recent study of Young America erroneously

[6] Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1956), 71–117; Edward L. Widmer, *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999); Robert E. Riegel, *Young America, 1830–1840* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1949).

interprets the political wing as a weak dilution of the original literary society. Its primary focus and affinity is for the writers and artists who attempted to establish an indigenous intellectual culture.[7] Although historians have written about the Young America Democracy, only one unpublished study of the movement addresses politics head-on, and it remains clouded by dated scholarship and narrow vision. Instead of conceptualizing and explaining this party transformation, it narrates events year by year without providing a satisfying analysis. Scholars have also written articles on political Young America, as well as accounts of people and events that touch on the movement marginally.[8] But no one has pursued a systematic analysis of Young America's impact on the Democratic Party.

This book seeks to correct the imbalance, providing the first exclusively political examination of changes within the Democracy.[9] In order to understand how

[7] Widmer, *Young America*. Other scholarship on the literary and cultural history of Young America includes Miller, *The Raven and the Whale*; John Stafford, *The Literary Criticism of Young America* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1952); Brady Harrison, "The Young Americans: Emerson, Walker, and the Early Literature of American Empire," *American Studies* 40 (Fall 1999): 75–97; Robert E. Spiller, "Emerson's 'The Young American,'" *Clio* 1 (Oct. 1971): 37–41; and William T. Kerrigan, "'Young America!' Romantic Nationalism in Literature and Politics, 1843–1861" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Univ. of Michigan at Ann Arbor, 1997). Kerrigan's dissertation is an admirable account of Young America's contributions to literature, politics, and reform. By contrast, I pay exclusive attention to party politics and come to conclusions different from his.

[8] Siert F. Riepma, "Young America: A Study in American Nationalism Before the Civil War" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Western Reserve Univ., 1939). Other sources on political Young America include David B. Danbom, "The Young America Movement," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 67 (June 1974): 294–306; Merle Curti, "Young America," *American Historical Review* 32 (Oct. 1926): 34–55; Kerrigan, "Young America"; Robert W. Johannsen, "Young America and the War with Mexico," in Richard Francaviglia and Douglas Richmond, eds., *Dueling Eagles: Reinterpreting the U.S.-Mexican War, 1846–48* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian Univ. Press, 2000), 155–75; Dale R. Prentiss, "Economic Progress and Social Dissent in Michigan and Mississippi, 1837–1860" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford Univ., 1990); Bradley Jay Cartwright, "Young America: Manifest Destiny and the Rhetoric of Race and Gender, 1837–1855" (M.A. thesis, Univ. of Texas at El Paso, 1999); Donald S. Spencer, *Louis Kossuth and Young America: A Study in Sectionalism and Foreign Policy, 1848–1852* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1977); Jere W. Roberson, "The Memphis Commercial Convention of 1853: Southern Dreams and 'Young America,'" *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 33 (Fall 1974): 279–96; George B. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979); Stewart Winger, *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 2003); and Mark A. Lause, *Young America: Land, Labor, and the Republican Community* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2005), which examines a workingmen's reform movement that also adopted this label.

[9] On the antebellum Democratic Party, see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1945); Wallace Hettle, *The Peculiar Democracy: Southern Democrats in Peace and Civil War* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2001); Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (1983; New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1998); Roy F. Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1948) and *The Democratic Machine, 1850–1854* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1923); Michael F. Holt, "The Democratic Party, 1828–1860," in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed., *History of U.S. Political Parties*, I (New York: Chelsea House, 1973); Joel Silbey, *A Respectable*

the spirit of Young America challenged Jackson's coalition, a political narrative centered on issues and campaigns is necessary. Literary Young America remains an important field of investigation, one inevitably entwined with political Young America. Indeed, it would seem impossible to comprehend the latter without giving heed to the former. However, the interpretation presented here is based on the assumption that much other scholarship has explored the literary and cultural dimension of this idea, and that a political history of the antebellum Democracy is needed to redress an historiographical omission. Ultimately, of course, both the cultural and political aspects of Young America are required in order to understand the movement fully.

Ralph Waldo Emerson provided the first mention of Young America. In comments delivered to a "Boston Mercantile Association" in February 1844, Emerson hailed the "Young American" as a pioneering figure in national life. He prodded the "Young American" to anticipate the future with openness and ingenuity. He spoke, somewhat uncharacteristically, of the benefits of railroads and steam engines, of foreign immigration and the promise of American technology. The most nationalistic piece of writing in Emerson's repertoire thus inaugurated the career of a political group that moved far from the sage's intentions. Later that year Democratic radical George Henry Evans started a newspaper called *Young America* in order to advance his campaign for the federal distribution of western lands to settlers. In June 1845, New York writer Cornelius Mathews spoke of "Young America" at a New York University address. And, in December 1845, essayist Edwin De Leon employed the words for a commencement address at South Carolina College.[10]

These orators had no doubt heard of Emerson's speech, although they were also attracted to the concept of Young America because of developments overseas. During the 1830s, European radicals launched a series of revolts, usually unsuccessful, that culminated in the great revolutions of 1848. Expressing the yearnings of a new generation, the dissidents called themselves "Young Europe." In 1831, Italian revolutionaries led by Giuseppe Mazzini founded the "Young Italy" movement. Their goals included the unification of the peninsula and the substitution of American-style democracy for monarchy. "Young England," "Young Ireland," "Young Germany," and other variants sprouted up throughout the 1830s and 1840s. Americans such as Emerson, and later Senator Stephen Douglas and editor George Sanders, appropriated this revolutionary language in order to express sympathy for European rebels who hungered for

Minority: The Democratic Party in the Civil War Era, 1860–68 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977); James C. N. Paul, *Rift in the Democracy* (1951; New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1961); William N. Chambers, *The Democrats, 1789–1864: A Short History of a Popular Party* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1964); and Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824–1854* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004).

10 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Young American," *The Dial* (April 1844): 484–507; Edwin De Leon, *The Position and Duties of Young America* (Columbia, SC: A. S. Johnston, 1845); Widmer, *Young America*, 51, 60–1; Kerrigan, "Young America," 1–28.

republics of their own. The coinage of Young America thus began with transatlantic contact, and the movement subsequently strengthened this connection by attempting to aid European republicans during and after the revolts of 1848.[11]

The Young America label permeated disparate branches of the Democracy at different times and with varying effects. Young America Democrats were those party members who adopted a progressive course on a range of issues during the 1840s and 1850s, who felt comfortable moving away from the orthodoxies of Andrew Jackson's Democracy and toward the construction of a newer, more flexible organization. In this study, I refer to these forward-looking Democrats as New Democrats, and I use the term "New Democrats" or "New Democracy" interchangeably and synonymously with the phrase "Young America" or "Young America Democrats." Both concepts refer to the rising generation of party leaders and constituents who stood for change within the organization. New Democrats used the ideology of Young America to reorient the image their party had heretofore represented. They relied on the Young America values of foreign expansion, prodemocracy intervention in other countries, research and innovation, and economic growth to guide their party toward a new synthesis.

How cohesive or self-conscious a group were the politicians who comprised Young America? Generational consciousness and unity played a key role in their mobilization, as most of them occupied the same age range and had experienced similar career trajectories during the early national and Jacksonian periods. Senator Stephen Douglas, editor John O'Sullivan, and banker August Belmont were all born in 1813. Chicago notable John Wentworth was born in 1815. Editor and publicist George Sanders and Senator Jesse Bright, in 1812. Florida legislator David Yulee, in 1810. Young party operative Samuel J. Tilden, in 1814. This common age range reinforced the way they thought of themselves as a distinct generation, a cohort unique in having matured after the War of 1812, when a heady spirit of American nationalism displaced the precarious anxiety of the early republic. Thus, it seemed no accident that the Young Americans placed more confidence in assertive policymaking than their elders. Their childhood was one of relative peace and prosperity, when the nation could focus on consolidating its gains rather than hanging on to its existence.[12]

New Democrats also tended to follow similar life trajectories. They often grew up in established eastern areas or in Europe. Their youth was dominated by trailblazing moves to the American West and subsequent efforts to establish themselves as lawyers, local notables, and then politicians. They reached their peak of political influence during the 1840s and 1850s but more often than not suffered defeat when politics turned overtly sectional in the mid 1850s. They felt displaced and irrelevant during the Civil War and saw their hour of glory as the Young America heyday before the coming of secession. This generation

[11] For more on Young Europe's connections with Young America, see Chapter 4.

[12] On the common age range of New Democrats, also see Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), 54.

of mid-nineteenth-century Democrats was born around the time of the War of 1812, cut their political teeth on Jacksonian politics, rose to what they called the "full flush of manhood" in the 1840s and 1850s, sometimes enjoyed brief political revivals in the 1860s and 1870s (e.g., Governors William Allen in Ohio and Samuel J. Tilden in New York), and then flickered and died in the 1880s and 1890s. Their actions as New Democrats must be understood in the context of their generational consciousness, particularly the common experiences through which they lived. The War of 1812 and the rise of Jacksonian Democracy served as constant reference points guiding their political lives, as did the Civil War and Reconstruction toward the twilights of their careers.

Of course not all members of this generation became New Democrats. Many gravitated toward the Whigs, feeling less anxiety than the Democrats about the exercise of state power and the expansion of the economy. Others maintained the orthodox Jacksonian position on key issues. Those figures who did embrace the spirit of Young America were often captivated by the political ferment in Europe during the 1840s, by the rise of novel technologies and the acquisition of conquered territory, and by the explosion in scale and volume that characterized the Jacksonian economy. Both economics and foreign policy lit up their imaginations, in other words, and prompted them to act more boldly than their fellow Democrats and their Whig opponents. This book will examine these motivations, among them concern for revolution in Europe and the importance of bottom-up demands on politicians from their constituents. To put it plainly, the two most important factors causing certain members of this generation to become New Democrats were, first, the perceived necessity of enhancing federal power for the purpose of foreign prodemocracy intervention, and, second, the calls of constituents upon their leaders to increase the government's role in promoting economic activity for their own self-interest.

Democratic revisionism in the 1840s and 1850s was thus grounded in larger ideological and cultural changes taking place during the late Jacksonian period. The market revolution spread westward quickly, European republicans took up arms to realize their vision of free society, Americans' penchant for invention and ingenuity generated technological growth, and optimistic schemes for introducing free trade and international communication appeared foolproof. The particular way in which certain Jacksonian Democrats reacted to these broader changes forms the story narrated here. Had there been no Young Americans, the Union and the Democracy would no doubt have developed economically and politically without them. Yet the special form that this maturation took, the unique ways in which New Democrats presented their priorities, makes their history significant.

Though not all young statesmen became Young Americans, allusions to youth, purity, and freshness nevertheless filled the correspondence and public discourse of many Democrats. Taken together, this generational rhetoric underscores the age-sensitive awareness that cemented a network of politicians into a young Democracy, a New Democracy, a Young America Democracy. Democrats (and others) writing to New York attorney and assemblyman Samuel

J. Tilden spoke of a "Young Democracy" in the 1840s, for instance.[13] When Ohioans convened to frame a new constitution in 1851, they explicitly called for a "Young Men's Convention," reasoning that the new generation would have to live with their handiwork. The "Young Democracy" was a rallying cry first sounded during James K. Polk's presidential campaign of 1844, and during the next ten years a variety of sometimes-conflicting Democratic groups used it to draw attention to their causes.[14]

When William Allen became chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1845, his constituents observed that he occupied "an enviable position Regarded universally as the Leader of the young Democracy of the Nation. The older portion of the Party are compelled to acknowledge your fitness for that post, and even for any so high as the people can hereafter confer." Allen remained the youngest senator in both sessions of Congress in which he served and was applauded for obtaining the "greatest [honor] conferred on one so young." Supporters calling themselves "young Democrats" continued to write to him throughout his time in Washington.[15]

Allen's constituents were not the only ones highlighting youth. Complaining of old Democratic Party regulars, publisher John O'Sullivan editorialized:

> Such a class are very liable to become not less hostile to all progressive improvement, to all further development, and practical application of democratic reform, than the most conservative bigots of the opposite school of politics [the Whigs]. . . . They become the most bitter in the persecution of those from whose unseasonable agitation of such topics they apprehend a disturbance of that calm and consolidated party ascendancy of which they are reaping, or hoping to reap, all the fruits of personal aggrandizement. They gradually crust themselves over the party, with an influence upon it paralyzing to all the generous simplicity, fervor, and truth, natural to democratic principles, until at last they ruin by corrupting it, and eventually, after the lapse of a greater or less term of years, the healthy vitality of the main body itself is roused from its long lethargy – its gallant and unsophisticated youth come forward on the stage, and take up and carry on the great mission of the party, which is that of unresting democratic reform – the old skin sloughs gradually off, and it comes forth in all the young vigor of its rejuvenescence – and lo, if you presently look abroad, you will find the greater portion of these old "party leaders," once so loud, so zealous, and so radical in their day, arrayed on the side of the old permanent aristocratic opposition to all democratic movement.[16]

[13] William Allen Butler to Samuel J. Tilden, 7 January 1845, Samuel J. Tilden Papers, New York Public Library; J. Boorman to Samuel J. Tilden, et al., 28 March 1846, ibid.; James J. Roosevelt to Samuel J. Tilden, 1 April 1846, ibid.

[14] *Cleveland Daily Plain Dealer*, 6 January 1851, 2, 3.

[15] Henry A. Whitman to William Allen, 28 April 1845, 14 December 1845, William Allen Papers; J. R. Meredith to William Allen, 24 February 1846, ibid. Ironically enough, during Allen's later political career as governor of Ohio and Democratic presidential contender in the 1870s, questions emerged about his age and competence for office. The ineluctable fate of a Young American was one day to become its antithesis, an Old Fogy. See the clipping attached to a letter from C. H. Sargent to William Allen, 21 May 1875, ibid., and Reginald C. McGrane, *William Allen: A Study in Western Democracy* (Columbus: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1925), 198–9.

[16] *Democratic Review* 6 (Nov. 1839), 439–40.

Written in 1839, O'Sullivan's article threw down the gauntlet on behalf of his generation of Democratic upstarts.

So sharp did Democrats' generational cleavage become by the election of 1852 that Whigs publicly sympathized with the older group of politicians. "If we can thus confer a favor on the veterans of the opposition," waxed a Whig journal, "and manifest the tender and respectful sympathy which we feel for them, we shall consider ourselves truly fortunate in finding so easy a method of benevolence." Even though they despised the principles of Democracy, they still respected the "prominent members of that party." As Richard Hofstadter noted, the idea of legitimate opposition in American politics reached maturity by the 1840s. Whigs saw their perennial contests with Democrats as part of an established pattern with accepted customs and procedures. And they expressed dismay when these routines collapsed at the hands of an erratic youth movement that could eventually derail American politics beyond the Democracy alone.[17]

Generational self-consciousness thus remained the crucial unifier of Young America Democrats. A keen sense of their generation's responsibility to reform the Democracy and the Union prompted their heterodoxy on standard Democratic policy. Few other ties bound New Democrats together as closely as age, since coalitional affiliation was transitory and many New Democrats endorsed one part of Young America's program but not another. New Democrats' group consciousness, to be sure, was not as strong as some competing affiliations. At critical moments, one's home state, factional loyalty, and commitment to a particular pet policy could trump concerted Young American action. This is one of the reasons why historians have shied away from full-scale analysis of political Young America: its self-consciousness and cohesion were not so tight as to define a formal movement or even a faction, though they became strong enough to suggest a presence, a temper, a subtle inkling of change in sensibility. More than a faction but less than a movement, as George Fredrickson has described it, Young America functioned as an idea with diverse adherents at any given time. It operated fluidly, not rigidly, and this illusoriness accounts for the dearth of historical writing on New Democracy.[18] A lax generational consciousness that swept up certain members of the antebellum Democracy,

[17] *American Whig Review* 15 (April 1852), 311, 316; Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1760–1840* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969).

[18] George M. Fredrickson, personal communication with the author. George Forgie argues that the cohort that came of age between the 1820s and 1860s revolted against their Revolutionary-era fathers in attempting to establish their own place in national history. Oppressively filiopietistic, midcentury American culture seemed ill-suited to the forward-going spirit of Young America, and a new generation felt the need to light their own path. New Democrats, however, revolted from the Jacksonian generation, not the Revolutionary Founding Fathers. Forgie, in effect, misses a generation. He argues that Young America dissented from Washington, Madison, and Hamilton. In fact, they revered this generation, and took exception to Jackson, Cass, Marcy, and Taney. It was this middle group that constituted the fathers needing displacement. See Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided*, 89–158. Also see Widmer, *Young America*, 21, 57, on this question.

Young America offered a new departure for party members who outgrew their fears of a maturing republic.[19]

Loosely united by a generational affiliation, New Democrats referred to themselves as "young Democrats," "progressive Democrats," or simply as "Young America." Periodicals and personal correspondence fostered their connectedness, bringing together Democrats from various parts of the party and the country to support the forward-looking ideology of Young America. The *Democratic Review* served as a clearinghouse for New Democratic writers and ideas, as editors John O'Sullivan and George Sanders attracted most of the younger party leaders who believed the organization needed to change. In addition, party newspapers cited throughout this study featured Young American proposals, not to mention the speeches and political rallies where most nineteenth-century Americans received their public information. The central facilitator of New Democratic mobilization, however, remained private correspondence. The importance of letter writing was twofold: it knit together a national Democratic leadership based on the values of Young America, and it also connected constituents with their representatives. This bottom-up pressure, as noted elsewhere, proved instrumental in the rise of a New Democracy.

Despite a recurring generational consciousness, the "fuzzy boundaries" of Young America present a tricky and elusive issue. Certainly not all members of the War of 1812 cohort became Democrats, and even fewer presented a fresh political outlook during the 1840s. On crucial issues discussed later, some older members of the party, such as Lewis Cass and Thomas Hart Benton, joined the New Democratic call for change. And on several questions, the younger members of the party did not fall into lockstep. For this reason, readers should not interpret the idea of a New Democracy as a formal movement, a congressional voting bloc, or even as one intellectual circle. The understandable tendency is to try to pigeonhole the Young Americans into a label such as "movement" or "faction." To the contrary, the mobilization discussed in this book was far more ephemeral, inconsistent, and fleeting. The New Democracy represented not so much a coherent group as a chorus of voices from various quarters collectively calling for policy change and partisan reorientation. The phrase "Young America" penetrated a factionally and regionally diverse coterie of Democrats who often acted in contradictory ways. The fact that contemporaries referred to themselves in this generational language, however, confirms the presence of a Young American identity in the antebellum United States. Although this identity remains more unclear or inchoate than we as scholars would like, this group of loosely knit individuals together produced an important effect on the Democratic and Republican parties of the Civil War era.

Most New Democrats joined the party during the Jacksonian ascendancy of the 1830s. Attracted to its strict construction constitutionalism and its agrarian

[19] Sean Wilentz writes that "Young America won support from a diverse collection of northern Radicals, Hunkers, and Calhounites." See Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 564.

economic approach, they fought the explicit hierarchicalism of the Whigs. By the late 1840s and early 1850s, as their communities developed and as the United States entered a new era of international involvement, they began to jettison some of the ideological baggage they had acquired upon joining the coalition years earlier. They loosened their constricted views of the federal government's constitutional authority and embraced a more welcoming attitude toward commerce, reform, and internationalism. Though they moved closer to the Whig line of thinking in this respect, they nevertheless remained within the Democracy (at least until the mid 1850s) because they agreed with its policies on related issues. Banker August Belmont, for example, would never join the Whigs no matter how economically progressive he became. He remained devoted to helping European revolutionaries and immigrants, and these priorities stayed close to the collective Democratic heart. In short, most New Democrats were longtime members of their party, their introduction of new Young America issues represented an internal evolution of ideas within the organization, and they stayed within the party because they agreed strongly with one policy or another that Democrats retained. A group of New Democrats highly conscious of their youth determined to change the party from within, making it more modern and adaptable while maintaining its basic constituency and electoral achievement.

The spirit of Young America infused Democrats north and south, producing a bisectional alliance that knit the party together during times of sectional turmoil. Although most New Democrats hailed from the North, southerners who spoke for the movement became an immensely significant lot. Indeed, editor George Sanders, President James K. Polk, diplomat Pierre Soulé, soldier-statesman John Quitman, and Senator Robert J. Walker stood at the heart of the young Democracy, deeply committed to its programs and visions. Young America's priorities could often turn sectional, as in the case of the bid to acquire Cuba as slave territory. Yet during most of the period of New Democratic dominance, their proposals assumed a broad nationalistic air that brought the party together rather than tearing it apart.

Nevertheless, in the final analysis, New Democrats did not succeed at a complete takeover of the party, and they remained a minority within the organization. The best that might be said is that they introduced a fresh agenda into a plodding organization, confusing two-party politics and diversifying the range of options within the Democracy. They did enjoy notable triumphs between 1844 and 1854, the decade of their greatest power and reputation. Responsible for the mindset of Manifest Destiny, they completed an unprecedented expansion of American territorial boundaries. Eager to realize the benefits of the market revolution, they pushed state and federal governments to appropriate funds for local improvement projects. At the same time, they failed in their trademark crusade to "liberate" Cuba and much of Europe, and in their dreamy hope that American nationalism could eviscerate sectional tensions. Proposals that aimed to unify the country too often divided it by region. Their major success, however, lay in making the antebellum Democracy a more progressive

organization, and in paving the way for the early Republican Party. They provided a new set of alternatives for those who desired growth, prosperity, and a place in the sun for the United States.

Rising Democrats first deployed the slogan "young Democracy" during the presidential canvass of 1844. James K. Polk was in many ways one of them, though he stymied their plans for internal improvements. By 1854, when Stephen Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act marked the transition from nationalistic to sectional politics, the Young America moment had passed. During those ten years, however, New Democrats made their case for a more active government, assertive overseas involvement, investment in local infrastructure, and reform of basic American practices (including slavery). If the period 1828 to 1844 represented the dominance of the Jacksonian founders and elders, the decade 1844 to 1854 witnessed the rise of a New Democracy, and the years 1854 to 1861 saw the decline of Young America and the eruption of sectional crisis.

This study portrays antebellum Democrats as progressive and forward-looking. Contrary to the recurrent stereotype of the Democrats as racists and imperialists – as Mexican conquerors, Indian removers, and slaveholders – alternative traditions did exist within the Democratic Party of the 1840s and 1850s. Young America highlights this neglected side of the Democracy. On the whole Democrats remained imperialistic and militaristic, although a study of Young America complicates the meaning of these labels and suggests intraparty dialogue over these policies. I argue that New Democrats came to accept the market revolution and its need for internal improvements. This led them to loosen the strict constitutional interpretation that previously occluded federal involvement in such initiatives. They also lusted for international prominence, again projecting a vision of a more active federal state. They undertook a variety of social reform campaigns, nurtured an antislavery tradition within their own organization, and fostered technological investigation and the spirit of free enterprise. All of these ventures required increased federal oversight and activity. One of the greatest contributions of New Democrats, and a key theme of this study, therefore, is the expansion of what Democrats considered legitimate federal authority during the era of young Democracy between 1844 and 1854.

In addition, this book will show that New Democrats anticipated some of the policies of the Civil War period, the Gilded Age, and the Progressive era. Rather than merely harking back to Jeffersonian republicanism and the Western classical tradition, antebellum Democrats also looked ahead to the postbellum years, when a stronger federal government unwittingly implemented many of the visions they had promoted several decades earlier. These ideas included direct taxation, federal distribution of western lands, government-funded scientific investigation and exploration, and – more controversially – naval imperialism. When liberal reformers of the Gilded Age and Progressive bureaucrats of the early twentieth century proposed various reform measures, they unknowingly and unconsciously borrowed much from the spirit of Young

American Democracy. However, such ideas were contemporary to the 1840s and 1850s regardless of what came after, so this argument should not be seen as teleological.

In addition to embracing proposals that played prominent roles later on in American history, New Democrats also smoothed the way for the rise of the Republican Party in the 1850s. Their support for a more activist federal state both domestically and internationally, along with their vision of economic growth and their social reform agenda, operated as stepping-stones between the antebellum Democracy and the Republican Party. The Young America Democracy served as a "half-way" house between older agrarian Democratic ideas and the new nationalist spirit of the Republicans. New Democrats thus affected the agenda of the early Republican Party as well as the orientation of their own organization. The fact that several prominent Young Americans became Republicans during the 1850s makes this link tangible.

Throughout the following chapters readers will encounter a set of mostly recurring characters: politicians, editors, and party organizers, as well as the constituents and ordinary voters they represented. Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois served as the figurehead of New Democracy, embodying in his twitchy personality the restive boldness of Young America. His lieutenants George Sanders, a Democratic editor and organizer from Kentucky, and August Belmont, a German-born banker and party chairman, joined his call for an updated Democracy. Yet even before Douglas rose to fame in the early 1850s, New Democrats in Washington were beginning to reorient their party. President James K. Polk pursued the Young America projects of expansion and free trade with monomaniacal zeal, while his Navy secretary-turned-diplomat George Bancroft advanced Young America's mission abroad.

Several years later, President Franklin Pierce exhibited a similar attraction to Young America, selecting a large portion of his diplomatic corps from the ranks of New Democracy. Samuel J. Tilden, a young Democratic operative from New York, labored tirelessly to convince his colleagues of the need for new policies in a new era. Robert F. Stockton, a Navy commodore elected to Congress, spoke for New Democratic values in the Senate, where a panoply of allies including Pierre Soulé of Louisiana, Robert J. Walker of Mississippi, William Allen of Ohio, David Yulee of Florida, James Shields and Sidney Breese of Illinois, and Edward Hannegan and Jesse Bright of Indiana all united with him. In the House served Young Americans William A. Richardson of Illinois, a close advisor to Douglas; John Wentworth, future Republican organizer and mayor of Chicago; and William Corry of Ohio, a socialist writer. Among the editors stood James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald*, John O'Sullivan of the *Democratic Review*, and the changing group of publicists who worked for such journals as the *Illinois State Register*, the *Ohio Statesman*, and the *Washington Union*.

In addition to this central cast of characters, other important Democrats or sympathizers make passing appearances, depending on the issue and the timeline. Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller, western explorer and columnist Jane