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# American Republican Leadership and the Movement for the Annexation of Canada in the Eighteen-Sixties

Joe Patterson Smith

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## AMERICAN REPUBLICAN LEADERSHIP AND THE MOVEMENT FOR THE ANNEXATION OF CANADA IN THE EIGHTEEN-SIXTIES

By JOE PATTERSON SMITH  
Illinois College

During the tragic internal convulsions of the eighteen-sixties in the United States, leaders of the Republican party, which dominated the national government of the Republic throughout the decade, showed sporadically an interest in the absorption of British North America. As a party the Republicans took no formal action in conventions assembled or in party platforms concerning their desires; but the more prominent leaders of the party on many occasions kept the question of Canadian annexation alive. With one exception, the manifestations of a desire for expanding the United States northward came entirely from the radical wing of the party. Certain angles of this problem have been carefully studied by the historians of the Dominion, because they influenced the action of the British provinces in North America during the decade. Within the past few years interest in the ramifications of the annexation talk has been growing south of the border. A full understanding of the problem is impossible for the present because certain of the archival material in the possession of the United States has not yet been opened to students and because papers of some of the radical Republicans have either been destroyed or lost and some other collections, known to exist, are closed to the curious. Because of these limitations, only a tentative statement may be made of the position of the more important leaders of the party, of the direction of their efforts, and of the motives underlying their actions.

When the Republicans assumed control of the government on March 4, 1861, Wm. H. Seward, the most prominent figure in the party, after Lincoln, was rewarded for his efforts in the campaign of 1860, with appointment to the office of Secretary of State. From this key position, within a month, he was recommending to his chief that the disruptive forces within the United States could be stayed by pursuing a programme of expansion in North and Central America<sup>1</sup>—an old political trick which had stopped civil discord in other nations at times. However, Mr. Lincoln was distinctly not interested. Shortly, moreover, Mr. Seward was so involved with more pressing matters attending the civil conflict that his interest in expansion lay dormant. As the war was closing his imperialistic aims revived. In the spring of this year, 1865, he sent Robert J. Walker, special agent of the Department of State, to Montreal. Walker, a master of propaganda, as he had proved in Great Britain during the critical year 1863, launched a drive in the newspapers and through pamphlets calcu-

<sup>1</sup>The plan was presented to Mr. Lincoln in Seward's memorandum "Thoughts for the Reflection of the President, April 1, 1861". John G. Nicolay and John Hay, who print the reflections in full, think that Seward's intentions were serious (*Abraham Lincoln, a history*, vol. III, pp. 445 ff.).

lated to persuade the Canadians, particularly the merchants of Montreal, that annexation to the United States was desirable.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Mr. Seward served notice on the British government that the Reciprocity Treaty of 1854 would terminate within a year. To give point to this notice, the Secretary of State hampered commercial operations between Canada and the United States by enforcing a strict passport system for traders who had previously passed across the Canadian-American border at will. He also prevailed upon his colleague, the Secretary of the Treasury, to enforce the customs regulations with rigour. In July, when the Detroit Commercial Convention assembled, John S. Potter, Consul General of the United States at Montreal, proceeded to the Convention at the direction of the Secretary of State to encourage the delegates there to adopt resolutions commending the United States government for abrogating the Reciprocity Treaty.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Potter urged this action on the ground that it would lead to the speedy annexation of the British North American provinces to the United States. The work of Potter and the talk of lesser persons in the Convention provoked the Canadian delegates and brought forth from Joseph Howe of Halifax what some consider the greatest speech of his career. In this address, Howe seems to have reflected the dominating sentiment of the Maritimes and the Canadas when he pointed out in vigorous language that Her Majesty's colonials were not interested in annexation to the United States.<sup>4</sup> This opinion endured north of the border throughout the entire decade despite the belief in certain circles in the United States that many Canadians longed for annexation to the great Republic.<sup>5</sup> Mr. Seward, like others, was oblivious of provincial feeling. Hence, late in 1865, when a delegation from the provinces arrived in Washington to attempt the negotiation of a new reciprocity agreement, he temporized with them by contending that it interfered with the taxing power of the House of Representatives and for this reason he was powerless in the matter.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Mr. Seward's organ, the *New York Times*, was pointing out that the Secretary of State's policy was calculated to bring about the speedy annexation of the Canadian provinces. In July

<sup>2</sup>The British *charge d'affaires* in Washington felt that Walker's work was sufficiently important to warrant advising his government of Walker's presence in Montreal (Public Archives of Canada, *Series G*, vol. 173, pp. 373 ff.: Burnley to Russell, March 27, 1865).

<sup>3</sup>The speeches of Potter were not recorded save in the daily papers. See files of the *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Tribune*, and *Detroit Tribune* between July 1 and 15, 1865. These papers were hostile to reciprocity and favoured annexation. A footnote in the *Proceedings* of the Convention records that Potter's speech was made before the Reciprocity Committee.

<sup>4</sup>The full text of Howe's speech may be found in the *Howe Papers* in the Public Archives of Canada or in the *Proceedings of the Detroit Commercial Convention*, pp. 187 ff.

<sup>5</sup>When Mr. Young came out to Canada as Governor-General, he toured the provinces and carefully studied the state of public opinion, finding that save for a very few disgruntled office-seekers, few in the Dominion entertained any notion of annexation to the United States. The state of feeling is recorded in detail in a despatch from Young to Granville, Nov. 11, 1869 (Public Archives of Canada, *Series G*, Confidential Despatches, 1867-1873, pp. 154-62).

<sup>6</sup>Secretary McCulloch in his annual report to Congress for 1865 said: "The people of the United States can not consent to be taxed as producers while those outside of our boundaries exempt from our burdens shall be permitted as competitors to have free access to our markets" (*Report of the Secretary of the Treasury*, Dec. 4, 1865, p. 206).

of the following year, when the Fenians raided Canada, Mr. Seward avoided taking any steps against them. Previously he had promised Fenian leaders to pursue such a course. In fact, he barely acquiesced in the half-hearted measures taken by his radical Republican colleague, the Attorney-General.<sup>7</sup> In 1867, when urging the Senate to adopt the Seward Alaska Purchase Treaty and the House to provide the funds therefor, Mr. Seward held that such action would prevent the British from acquiring the area, and that hemmed in on the Pacific, the British provinces would soon seek annexation to the United States.<sup>8</sup> In the autumn of this year he urged upon a prominent American banker the purchase of the Hudson's Bay Company's rights and territories in North America.

The motives which inspired Mr. Seward's action in the whole matter of expansion are to a large extent conjectural. Certain general statements may be made which are perfectly fair to Mr. Seward even in the latter part of his career when he had become, through a process of chastening, the real leader of the conservative Republicans. He was one of that generation of Americans who believed whole-heartedly in expansion and in the political wisdom of "Manifest Destiny". His agents, Walker and Potter, over-estimated the willingness of Canadians to seek annexation to the United States for whatever dubious political advantages it might bring. Seward undoubtedly suffered from the same mistaken notion which was probably based on this poor counsel. On the other hand, it is necessary to point out that in working for the abrogation of the Reciprocity Treaty, he may have been serving the immediate self-interests of up-state New York where his political power lay. He had opposed the adoption of the Reciprocity Treaty and had denounced it many times. Probably believing as many conservatives did that the southerners would be readmitted to the halls of Congress in December, 1865, he wished to get the treaty which had been, according to Tansill, floated through the Senate of the United States on champagne and the votes of the slavocracy, definitely disposed of.

In failing to have anything to do with the prosecution of the Fenians, Mr. Seward was lending what support he could to the candidacy of moderate Republicans who were supporting the domestic reconstruction policies of his chief, for it must be remembered that New York State had a large number of Irish voters and sympathizers. One characteristic of Mr. Seward's activity stands out clearly—his efforts, save his one recommendation to President Lincoln in 1861, were pacific in the extreme, and after 1865, Mr. Seward would not have risked a war with anyone for the chimerical advantages of territorial conquest. Also, the writer is firmly of the opinion that Mr. Seward, by 1868, did not fear the political power

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<sup>7</sup>Seward's attitude seems to have been well summarized in a letter written to John A. Macdonald: "There is a perfect understanding between Mr. Seward and two of the Fenian chiefs, that they [the Fenians] are to be allowed to carry on all the preparations they please, so as to frighten the Canadian government, and compel them to keep up a strong force to guard against apprehended danger—that this course will incur a fearful expenditure, and will force us to increase our Taxes, so as to prevent inducements to smuggling, and in the end lead to a general wish for annexation, to prevent the continuance of excitement and increasing Taxes" (Public Archives of Canada, *Macdonald Papers*, "Fenians", vol. II, pp. 250 ff.: Gowan to Macdonald, March 19, 1866).

<sup>8</sup>Concerning the activity of Mr. Seward in gaining support for his measure, Welles makes some interesting observations (G. Welles, *Diary*, New York, 1911, vol. III, pp. 75, 76).

which the southerners might wield once they were permitted to return to Congress.

Lesser political leaders adopted a more belligerent attitude toward the Canadian provinces and toward Great Britain. Some of these men, impressed with the tremendous military power of the United States, wished, orally at least, to go forth to conquest. These men, it may be noted, were all of the radical faction. During the late autumn of 1864, when the Confederate States were using Canadian soil as the vantage point from which to project terroristic raids into the United States, the lesser politicians and the newspapers began to urge the conquest of Canada. Montgomery Blair, who had just resigned as Post-Master General in Mr. Lincoln's Cabinet, informed the Irish of the United States that as soon as the South had been conquered, Canada would be invaded with the Union hosts.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, he was making a strong bid for the Irish vote in the approaching autumn election. Mr. Arnold of Illinois wished Congress to prepare for the conquest by building a canal to connect the Mississippi and Lake Michigan so that the gunboats on the river might be rushed into the lakes to protect Chicago and other lake ports and to bombard Canadian lake towns.<sup>10</sup> Congressmen from western New York wished to build a ship canal around Niagara Falls on the American side of the river so that the conquering American hosts might have ready passage into Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence.<sup>11</sup> The expenditure of such funds would be worth hundreds of votes whether or not Canada were ever actually invaded. The statements of these protagonists of conquest have a flavour of the "pork barrel".

Zachariah Chandler, Senator from Michigan, and Chairman of the Military Affairs Committee, was undoubtedly the most powerful man who preached conquest. His earliest utterances in this regard came in the autumn of 1864 and his last, a ferocious speech in the spring of 1869.<sup>12</sup> What his motives may have been are not discernible. His utterances read like the mouthings of certain political demagogues of the present day. They were chauvinistic and intemperate in the extreme and may have been for no other purpose than to solidify the support of Michigan veterans.

Henry Winter Davis, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the House until March, 1865, preached the same gospel as Chandler and was definitely interested in Canadian annexation. His motives seemed to have involved a desire to wrest the direction of foreign affairs from the President and Secretary of State.<sup>13</sup>

Of the men not in public office, Joseph Medill, editor of the Chicago

<sup>9</sup>Montgomery Blair to the Secretary of the Irish National Fair, Feb. 9, 1864 (reprinted from *All the Year Round* in *The Fenian Raid on Fort Erie*, C.A. pamphlet no. 2726, p. 14).

<sup>10</sup>*Congressional Globe*, 38th Cong., 2nd Sess., vol. I, pp. 36, 540.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 337.

<sup>12</sup>Chandler wished to recruit an army corps in Michigan especially to defend the frontier (*ibid.*, p. 33).

<sup>13</sup>Davis's attempts to usurp the powers of the President to direct foreign affairs were constant through the 2nd Session of the 38th Congress. That contemporaries felt that Davis was up to mischief is apparent. "Pray put a bridle on the mouth of Winter Davis and other fools, who would get us into a war with England" (Harvard University Library, *Sumner MSS.*, vol. LXXI, pp. 53 ff.: P. W. Chandler to Sumner, Dec. 29, 1864).

*Tribune*, urged Canadian conquest with more consistency than any other person in the nation. Always impressed with the great military power built up by the United States in suppressing the rebellion, he advocated its use to conquer Canada and to humble Great Britain.<sup>14</sup> He applauded, in turn, the extreme utterances of every bellicose politician and urged the government to undertake Canadian conquest as a suitable punishment to be meted out to Great Britain for her alleged hostilities to the United States during the Civil War.<sup>15</sup> Intermittently, he urged, by personal letter, many persons of prominence in the administration to seek Canadian annexation. He was frank in pointing out that the admission of British American territory to the American Union as states would give the northern section of the United States a political predominance which the Southern States when readmitted to the Union, would never be able to overcome. His motives, like those of Chandler, Henry Winter Davis, and Arnold, may have been purely political and sectional. How much weight with the American voter the utterances of the belligerent leaders within the Republican party had in the elections of 1864, '66, and '68 is conjectural. However, a war psychosis and a deep-seated belief in the wrongs done the United States by Great Britain undoubtedly attracted many Americans to the support of the Republican party.<sup>16</sup>

All the lesser leaders of the Republican party, however, were appealing neither to the military power of the United States nor relying on war psychosis to further Canadian annexation. N. P. Banks, Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, as successor to Henry Winter Davis, introduced into that body, on July 2, 1866, a Bill which in Yankee parlance might be styled an enabling Act. This Bill, which was the "brain child" of James W. Taylor,<sup>17</sup> a consistent advocate of Canadian annexation, made specific provision for the admission of each British North American province whenever it should seek entrance into the United States. The House heard the Bill through a first and second reading, then sent it to committee, from whence it was never returned.<sup>18</sup>

The time of the introduction of this Bill is significant. One month before the Fenians had raided Ontario and been driven out. This action had attracted much attention to the potentialities of Canadian absorption. President Johnson and the radical Republicans were swinging full stride into the momentous campaign of 1866, each faction seeking every possible means to attract voters to its camp. This campaign was being fought out,

<sup>14</sup>Chicago *Tribune*, Dec. 14, 1864.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, June 29, 1865.

<sup>16</sup>That many persons, Canadians as well as Americans, appreciated this fact is well illustrated by: *Sumner MSS.*, vol. CXXXIX, p. 3, Parkes to Sumner, Jan. 8, 1865; *Howe Papers*, vol. IX, pp. 18 ff., Joseph Howe to Sir John Rose, March 8, 1865; *ibid.*, vol. XII, pp. 479 ff., Joseph Howe to Earl of Clarendon, March 20, 1866; *ibid.*, vol. IX, pp. 82 ff., Joseph Howe to Lord Stanley, Aug. 7, 1866. This despatch mentions specifically the psychological change in George Bancroft, N. P. Banks, Henry Wilson, and Charles Sumner who "are forced to bow to the prevailing sentiment".

<sup>17</sup>Taylor's career is sketched by T. C. Blegen in the *Minnesota Historical Bulletin*, vol. I, pp. 153 ff.

<sup>18</sup>*Congressional Globe*, 39th Cong., 1st Sess., vol. IV, p. 3548. T. C. Blegen in "A Plan for the Union of British North America and the United States, 1866" (*Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. IV, pp. 470 ff.) treats the Taylor-Banks proposal as an outgrowth of reciprocity.

of course, on the policy to be pursued in the reconstruction of the Southern States lately in rebellion. Mr. Banks was one of the "wheel horses" of the radical Republican group. He represented a Massachusetts constituency in which voters of Irish descent, declining shipping interests, and newly rising industrialists were important. Here, then, in this Bill was his earnest to the Fenian sympathizers and to his Massachusetts friends, somewhat disgruntled with the Washington government for its failure to secure them compensation for the commerce carriers destroyed by the *Alabama*. It has not been possible as yet to establish definitely that Mr. Banks hoped with this Bill to mollify the industrialists disgruntled over the repeal of reciprocity. However, much was made of it during the campaign of 1866 and if the testimony of a conservative Republican senator from Connecticut is correct, the Bill won Banks and other radicals many Irish votes.<sup>19</sup> It may be noted, moreover, that the voters of Irish descent probably controlled the election in many northern constituencies. Whether or not Mr. Banks was really an expansionist is a question which cannot be answered. Superficially, such a conclusion might be drawn from the evidence. But, neither before nor after this one gesture, in Congress at least, did this leader evince any interest in the annexation of Canada.

There was a noticeable lull in the discussion of Canadian annexation in Congress and in the public press throughout 1867 and 1868. Indubitably, the inglorious spectacle of the impeachment and trial of the President held the public gaze. Despite the lull, however, the question was kept alive by the debates in the House of Representatives incidental to the purchase of Alaska and by the joint action of the provinces and Great Britain in the erection of the Dominion of Canada. Allusion has already been made to the fact that Seward and others urged that the purchase of Alaska would lead ultimately to Canadian absorption. Prominent Republicans did not participate in the discussion concerning the erection of the Canadian Dominion.<sup>20</sup> The lesser leaders and the newspapers confined themselves to admitting that Confederation would make annexation easier because now it could be consummated in one stroke, rather than piece-meal.

In the spring of 1868, B. F. Butler led a Congressional Committee to the Maritimes, ostensibly to investigate the means by which trade with them might be revived and fishing disputes reconciled. The report which Mr. Butler finally sent to Congress in the spring of 1869 shows that the Committee devoted its time while in the Maritimes to preaching annexation<sup>21</sup>—setting the stage therewith for the final move of the most prominent radical Republican interested in annexation, Charles Sumner of Massachusetts.

Charles Sumner's speech of April, 1869, in which he denounced the Johnson Clarendon Convention which attempted a settlement of the *Alabama* claims, placed him far in front of all the Canadian annexationists of the eighteen-sixties. Many times historians have commented

<sup>19</sup>H. K. Beale, *The Critical Year* (New York, 1930), pp. 200 ff.

<sup>20</sup>*Congressional Globe*, 40th Cong., 1st Sess., pp. 37 ff.

<sup>21</sup>"Your Lordship will easily perceive the desire which is betrayed by the tenor of this Report not only to enter into isolated and destructive commercial relations with that Island [Prince Edward Island], but even to detach it and Nova Scotia from the rest of the Dominion of Canada" (Public Archives of Canada, *Series G*, from H.M. Minister at Washington, 1869-1871, enclosure after p. 848: Thornton to Clarendon, March 29, 1869).

upon the preposterous claims for damages which Mr. Sumner set forth in this speech. And a time or two comment has been made concerning the annexation features thereof. The speech was delivered in an executive session of the Senate, as was the speech of Zachariah Chandler, previously mentioned. The Senate promptly lifted the ban of publication on both these speeches and the comment in the United States, in Canada, and in Great Britain was widespread. The Honourable Joseph Howe of Nova Scotia was amazed that a man of Sumner's intellect and supposed knowledge could entertain for a moment the thought that the British colonials in North America wished annexation to the United States.<sup>22</sup> Mr. Howe failed to understand the forces which had been working on Sumner. Prior to his entrance into the United States Senate in the eighteen-forties, Mr. Sumner had lived for a time in Great Britain. There, he had become closely acquainted with John Bright, the Duke of Argyll, and many others, all of whom corresponded with him for many years after his return home.<sup>23</sup> These English friends were all of the "Little England" party and believed fully that the time was not far distant when the colonies, particularly those in North America, would withdraw from the Empire. Mr. Sumner undoubtedly believed that this party represented the mature judgment of the English people. In addition to his English friends, Sumner had a few correspondents in Canada and these furnished him with reports that the Canadians, particularly after the repeal of reciprocity, would be forced because of economic necessity to seek admission into the United States.<sup>24</sup> Friends of the Massachusetts senator in the diplomatic and consular service from time to time advised him that reciprocity repeal and a firm attitude towards Great Britain with regard to the *Alabama* claims would further absorption. Joseph Medill and other prominent American journalists wrote to Sumner frequently on the same theme.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, from his vantage point as Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs the Massachusetts senator watched over all the proceedings with regard to Canada and sought to divert all congressional action taken after 1864, to his Committee. All these forces led him to the conclusion that the time had come to strike. The motives underlying Mr. Sumner's action are obscure. Samuel Ward, the principal agent of Baring Brothers in the United States, who had lived in Boston for many years and knew many prominent politicians in New England and the Middle States rather intimately, believed that Sumner's speech was the platform from which he would seek to succeed Grant as the Republican candidate for the presidency in 1872.<sup>26</sup> Other prominent persons concurred with Mr. Ward's opinion. During the summer of 1869, when Sumner was campaigning in Massa-

<sup>22</sup>*Howe Papers*, vol. IX, pp. 82 ff.: Joseph Howe to Lord Stanley, Aug. 7, 1866.

<sup>23</sup>*Sumner MSS.*, vol. CXXXIX, p. 44, Duchess of Argyll to Charles Sumner, March 2, 1864. (The correspondence of the Duke and Duchess of Argyll with Sumner is published in the *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*.) Cf.: *Sumner MSS.*, vol. CXL, p. 41, Parkes to Sumner, March 12, 1865; *ibid.*, vol. CXXXIX, p. 7, John Bright to Sumner, Jan. 11, 1865; *ibid.*, p. 21, Duchess of Argyll to Sumner, Feb. 1, 1865; and *ibid.*, p. 88, Lord Cranworth to Sumner, March 13, 1865.

<sup>24</sup>Typical of these was Lessaulles to Sumner, Feb. 1, 1866 (*Sumner MSS.*, vol. CXLI, p. 107).

<sup>25</sup>*Sumner MSS.*, vol. LXXXVIII, p. 70: Medill to Sumner, Dec. 2, 1868.

<sup>26</sup>Public Archives of Canada, *Baring Papers*: S. G. and G. C. Ward to Messrs. Baring Brothers and Co., Aug. 6, 1869.



chusetts (the Massachusetts legislature to which Sumner owed his election to the United States Senate was chosen in the odd years), he said that his speech actually meant the annexation of Canada as compensation for the *Alabama* depredations.<sup>27</sup> That it is probable that Mr. Sumner wished the presidency and was commencing a drive for support in the field wherein he felt himself the master of all Americans, seems a reasonable conclusion. However, another interpretation of his action is plausible. Ulysses S. Grant, the Republican candidate, had been elected to the presidential office in 1868 with a majority of 350,000 votes. The Southern States had participated in this election, where federal bayonets supporting the negro vote had piled up a majority of 700,000 for General Grant. The nation was tiring of the reconstruction policy of the radical Republicans and it was apparent that within the near future federal troops would have to be withdrawn from the South and that the white voters thereupon reassuming control would return congressmen opposed to the policies of the radical Republicans. These congressmen, in conjunction with those from the West, would not only upset the political dominance of the Republicans, but might reverse the economic and social policies which they had pursued with a free hand since 1861. Sumner understood this. Such being the case, if the British provinces in North America could be brought into the American Union as states, the predominance of Sumner's party and its ideas might be assured for many years to come.

Admittedly, the many utterances of Republican leaders indicate that from the autumn of 1864 until the spring of 1869, there was much interest in the annexation of Canada to the United States. Such being the case, the question may fairly be asked why the movement failed to come to a head or to bring any tangible results. As I have tried to show throughout this paper, in every case without exception, politicians used talk of Canadian absorption to serve some ulterior purpose: in 1865-6 to reconcile the West and certain parts of New England to the abrogation of the Reciprocity Treaty; in 1864 and 1866 to secure to the radical or the conservative wing of the Republican party votes of Irish constituencies. Once the immediate objective of the politician had been gained his interest lagged. I have tried to show, also, that in the intense rivalry between factions within the Republican party, each used Canadian annexation for what immediate advantage it might bring; while in yet another connection, the intense struggle between Congress and Executive, the former to gain control of the direction of foreign policy and the latter to retain it, involved the Canadian annexation movement only incidentally. Finally, Sumner and the persons who followed his political fortunes wanted annexation as the means by which the rapidly industrialized North could continue its political dominance in the nation. These efforts were in no sense coordinated. Nor was there any strong man who consistently advocated Canadian annexation. The United States, moreover, had turned westward and the conquest of the great American plains focused attention inward rather than outward.

Why Sumner's programme was dropped needs further investigation. The accepted view at the present is that a personal feud between Grant and Sumner led the Republican party to remove Sumner from his impor-

<sup>27</sup>Speech at the Republican State Convention in Worcester, Mass., Sept. 22, 1869 (Charles Sumner, *Works*, vol. XIII, pp. 98 ff.).

tant post in the Senate, destroying his leadership. Minor evidence which has thus far come to light indicates that there may be a relationship between the abandonment of Sumner's annexation programme and the funding of the public debt of the United States. But until such time as this problem is fully investigated, generalizations as to the reasons why the movement collapsed are hazardous.