Rehearsing for the Great Debate of 1850
The Controversy over Seating Father Theobald Mathew on the Floor of the Senate

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Just after the first session of the 31st Congress convened in December 1849, and before the sectional issues that would preoccupy it for the next nine months as it debated the Compromise of 1850 were even raised, the Senate confronted an apparently unrelated question. Democratic senator Isaac Walker of Wisconsin asked his colleagues to extend to Irish temperance reformer Father Theobald Mathew the honor of being seated on the floor of the Senate. Father Mathew was in the midst of a journey that was taking him across the United States advocating total abstinence. His visit had proved to be a phenomenon of truly impressive dimensions. It coincided with a growing religious and increasingly political movement to limit drink in the United States that was furthered by a surge in nativism. This movement no doubt contributed to his success. By the end of his travels, the charismatic organizer had gained a pledge of teetotalism from over five hundred thousand Americans. As he passed through Washington, several senators believed that his “humanitarian” achievement was worthy of a show of respect. President Zachary Taylor invited Father Mathew to dine with him at the White House, where iced water replaced alcohol as the drink of choice, and he briefly visited the House floor at the request of its members. Now it was the Senate’s turn to offer the popular advocate recognition for his good work.1

The Senate took up the question of Mathew’s seating just as a furious and seemingly endless, paralyzing conflict in the House was taking place over the selection of a Speaker. Perhaps it was because the House was so preoccupied with its own very real internal divisions that it had quickly and without debate agreed to ask Father Mathew to come onto its floor to witness its proceedings, such as they were. But whatever the reason for this uncontested invitation, the hospitality the House showed Mathew did not signify the absence of a deep sectional crisis within its ranks. Holding the balance of power in the House, Free Soil Party representatives refused to give their support to the Whig candidate for the speakership, former Speaker Robert Winthrop of Massachusetts, arguing that his endorsement of the Wilmot Proviso ban on slavery in the territories was too weak. They were even more adamant in their opposition to the slaveholding Democratic candidate
Howell Cobb of Georgia. Without their votes, neither candidate could gain the majority necessary to be elected Speaker. The House was deadlocked, casting sixty-two ballots over a three-week period without a successful result. Bitterness on all sides intensified, and senators looked on with horror at what this impasse foreshadowed for their future efforts to resolve the sectional issues that they would soon confront in the session of Congress that had just gotten underway.2

It was in the charged atmosphere created by this lengthy House dispute that the seemingly innocent gesture of seating Father Mathew on the Senate floor would become so deeply divisive. The House was already experiencing a growing sectional rift as it dealt with its organizational tasks, and now the Senate would discover the depth of its own sectional divisions in its debate over Father Mathew. The controversy in the Senate surrounding this relatively minor matter would reveal the same fundamental schisms that would soon dominate the nine-month congressional battle over the Compromise itself. Many of the underlying assumptions of the confrontation to come first exploded onto the Senate floor in this intense conflict over the seating of Father Mathew. The dispute that ensued offers an opportunity to examine some of the arguments of the larger sectional debate detached from a direct link to the intractable slavery expansion issue that had so preoccupied the country in the aftermath of the Mexican War and would dominate the coming congressional debate over the fruits of that conflict. Here in microcosm were the elemental questions that would divide the nation in the decade to come. They were not new to the national stage, but their appearance here in the Mathew debate foretold the power and influence they would have in the months and years ahead.

Among the most prominent questions was the fundamental one of the centrality of slavery to the politics of the day. Should the slavery issue enter into virtually all aspects of antebellum politics, or was it to be just one of many concerns that should be dealt with in isolation from other national controversies? Was the slavery issue manufactured by those who wished to benefit politically from it, or was it the key moral issue that both those who opposed it and those who supported it claimed it to be? And there were other critical questions raised by the ostensibly simple matter of whether to seat a prominent reform leader on the Senate floor. State equality, the right of citizens of all the states to be treated equally, became an issue in the debate over Father Mathew’s presence in the Senate, as did the nature of the Union and the Constitution. The controversy over Mathew also raised the topic of abolition and the charge that abolitionists cared more for those in distant places

than the ones in need around them. Finally, the justice of slavery itself became involved in the debate over the seating of Father Mathew, as did the southern ambivalence over the institution that so thoroughly defined their society.

All of these issues would become central to the debate over the Compromise of 1850 that followed just a few weeks after the controversy over Father Mathew had engaged the Senate and angered many of its members. That larger dispute would last for months and offer an opportunity for all of these underlying issues, and more, to receive a full and complete airing. But their presence here, in the Mathew controversy, demonstrates how basic they were to the sectional conflict. They could surface and become key to this relatively minor controversy precisely because they were so fundamental. No issue with sectional overtones, however minor, could avoid revealing the broad array of social and political beliefs that animated the country’s divisions and fueled both northern and southern rage.

The specifics of the sectional encounter would evolve over the coming decade. Party alignments would shift, personalities would come and go, the basis for the votes taken on the endless round of proposals Congress debated would vary, but the controversy over the slavery issue and its significance would remain, as would divisions over understandings of state equality, the nature of the Union, and the meaning of the Constitution. Southern ambivalence over slavery and northern ambivalence over abolition would also persist. These fundamental concerns would dominate and define the conflict in the years ahead, just as they would form the basis of the Compromise debate in 1850. The words spoken in these debates and the concepts articulated mattered. They both reflected and formed a concrete reality with influence and consequence for all those who heard and read them. Nothing was inevitable, but the issues debated and the themes raised in the Mathew controversy and in the Compromise debate that followed would help establish the direction the contingencies of the future would take and the meaning they would have.

Concerns about slavery were never far from any debate that involved the sections. It is unlikely that Senator Walker’s request would have met with objection if it had not been revealed that in 1841 Mathew had joined with Irish nationalist leader Daniel O’Connell and signed an antislavery appeal to the Irish in America. In addition, he had hosted Frederick Douglass at a rally in Cork, Ireland, in October 1845, at which the former slave told the crowd, “All reforms go together.” Douglass believed temperance and abolition were part of the same movement for a moral regeneration of society, a combination of reforms southerners found repugnant. But Mathew saw nothing objectionable in Douglass’s formulation and, following the rally, honored Douglass with an invitation to his home for breakfast. Douglass was impressed. “No one,” he reported to abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison, seemed “shocked or disturbed at my dark presence. No one seemed
to feel contaminated by contact with me.” Not only was Mathew opposed to the
institution of slavery, but he also showed no sign of prejudice toward those who
had been the object of its oppression.3

Southern senators were outraged and appalled when they learned of the po-
sitions Mathew had adopted and the actions he had taken while in Ireland. In
September 1849, Judge Joseph Lumpkin, president of the Georgia temperance
society, wrote to Mathew, who was then in the midst of his American tour, asking
if it was true that he had signed the 1841 antislavery appeal to the Irish community
in the United States. Mathew was evasive. Avoiding a direct answer, he replied
that as a guest in America he did not want to interfere with any of the country’s
institutions. Lumpkin took this equivocal response as an unwillingness or an in-
ability to deny the charges against him and reacted by disinviting Mathew from
a planned appearance before his Georgia organization. Many senators from the

3. Frederick Douglass, quoted in Quinn, Father Mathew’s Crusade, 160; Frederick Douglass,
quoted in Laurence Fenton, Frederick Douglass in Ireland: “The Black O’Connell” (West Link
South shared Lumpkin’s anger and as a consequence vigorously opposed seating Father Mathew as an honored guest on the Senate floor.4

Senator Jeremiah Clemens, Democrat of Alabama, led the southern opposition to Father Mathew’s seating, charging that Mathew had attacked slavery and had called on American citizens to carry out a war against the South and its institutions. Mathew, argued Clemens, had denounced “one portion of the Confederacy as little better than a band of lawless pirates” and when accused of taking this position had refused to clarify his stand. But it was not only Mathew’s criticism that angered Clemens. Almost more gallling than what Mathew had said was that he was an outsider attacking American institutions while on American soil. “I do not, sir, believe slavery to be a sin,” declared Clemens, “and if it is a sin, it is one with which a foreigner has no business to interfere.” American slavery, right or wrong, was not the affair of one who did not share in the nation’s destiny. For southerners, the country’s future was for Americans to decide and any criticism of their institution by one who was not an American was especially upsetting and of serious consequence.5

Henry Clay of Kentucky, who would dominate the coming session with his compromise proposal, disagreed. To Clay, seating Mathew was a minor matter, a small “compliment” to one who had given so much for a good cause. “The resolution,” he declared, “is an homage to humanity, to philanthropy, to virtue. . . . [I]t is a merited tribute to a man who has achieved a great social revolution.” But what Clay objected to most was not just the attempt to deny the Senate floor to an exemplary individual, it was Clemens’s insistence on “pushing the subject of slavery in its collateral and remote branches upon all possible occasions that may arise during our deliberations in this body.” Clay saw slavery as an issue, an important issue, no doubt, but nevertheless as only one issue among many. He could not understand

4. Quinn, *Father Mathew’s Crusade*, 162–63; Timothy S. Huebner, “Joseph Henry Lumpkin and Evangelical Reform in Georgia: Temperance, Education, and Industrialization, 1830–1860,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 75 (Summer 1991): 262–63. Lumpkin had received a newspaper article reporting on a meeting between Mathew and Garrison. Apparently this originally raised Lumpkin’s suspicions about Mathew. Ultimately, a subsequent letter from Mathew to Lumpkin resolved their differences sufficiently to allow for Mathew’s visit to Georgia in January 1850. Paul DeForest Hicks, *Joseph Henry Lumpkin: Georgia’s First Chief Justice* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2002), 46–48. Senator John Berrien of Georgia supported Lumpkin’s original action, writing to him in January 1850, after the Senate controversy was over, that Mathew was guilty of an “officious intermeddling with the domestic institutions” of the people of the South. Berrien’s letter to Lumpkin is quoted in Hicks, *Joseph Henry Lumpkin*, 48.

5. Jeremiah Clemens, Dec. 20, 1849, Cong. Globe, 51. At least one senator took Father Mathew’s temperance work at face value. Sam Houston, Democrat of Texas, proclaimed that he was free of drink: “I, sir, am a disciple. I needed the discipline of reformation, and I embraced it. I am proud upon this floor to proclaim it.” Houston favored honoring Mathew (58).
or accept its entry into virtually everything Congress considered, even including this simple courtesy. Is this debate over Mathew “not politic, unwise, and injurious to the stability of the very institution which I have no doubt the honorable gentleman would uphold?” he asked his Alabama colleague. A constant focus on slavery, Clay believed, could only lead to resentment and anger at an institution that would appear to be attempting to control all things.6

Michigan’s Democratic senator Lewis Cass empathically agreed. Cass had run for the presidency on a compromise platform in 1848, and he shared Clay’s perspective on the place of the slavery issue in national affairs. Slavery, Cass told his colleagues, should not be made “a test by which questions foreign to its interest are to be tried and determined. . . . Certainly, if it is to meet us at every step of the session, a spirit will be roused utterly incompatible with calm deliberation or satisfactory adjustment.” “I know nothing of the opinions of Father Mathew on the subject of slavery,” declared Cass, “nor do I seek to know them.” For him, it was enough to recognize that Mathew had come to America to “break the bonds of the captive and to set the prisoner free; to redeem the lost, to confirm the waver- ing, and to aid in saving all from the temptation and dangers of intemperance.” Mathew was a “warrior” engaged in a “noble mission.” What relevance could other issues have to his crusade?7

Stephen Douglas of Illinois, who was devoted to the belief that slavery was a local, personal issue, also could not understand the relevance of Mathew’s views on slavery. “How is it,” he asked, “that in this case it is contended that this compliment to an individual implies an approval of every opinion that he may entertain upon political, religious, or moral questions?” Douglas simply could not see why a vote for the resolution to seat the Irish priest should be seen as an approval of the “opinions of Father Mathew upon the slavery question, any more than” an endorsement of “his sentiments upon religion.” Douglas was an expert in compartmentalization. His political career was built on the separation of moral issues affecting a locality from the practical concerns of the whole. He could not fathom how a hero who was bringing the blessings of temperance to the entire country could be denied an honor just because he had taken a position on an issue that was limited in its impact to one particular region.8

Clay, Cass, and Douglas spoke from the perspective of those who sought to deemphasize the role of the slavery issue in national affairs. A major focus of the advocates of compromise and national reconciliation was the denial of the signifi-

cance of the slavery issue. If the source of sectional controversy could be minimized, or even dismissed as unreal, then the divisions plaging the Union could be easily resolved. Many who adhered to this position did not believe slavery expansion to be an authentic threat. The laws of nature, they insisted, blocked the institution from spreading West. If slavery could not enter into the territories won from Mexico, then why should an issue of such limited importance enter into the question of Father Mathew’s seating on the Senate floor? If barred from the West, surely slavery should also be barred from unrelated topics of Senate debate.  

New York Whig senator William Henry Seward had no such understanding of the slavery issue, and he certainly did not share Clay, Cass, and Douglas’s objective of minimizing it. By his focus on slavery and the question of its expansion during the coming session, Seward would become known as the “legislator for slaves.” As the debate began, he celebrated Father Mathew’s opposition to slavery, to the dismay of many of his southern Senate colleagues. Seward did not avoid praise for Mathew’s temperance efforts. “Where among the living,” he asked, “do we find a man whose works of benevolence have so splendidly and gloriously followed him?” And he was a recognized, deeply committed friend of the Irish Catholic immigrants in his own state. But, like Frederick Douglass, Seward saw Mathew’s teetotalism and his abolitionism as part of the same crusade. The antislavery senator did not favor denying “from virtue the meed which is its due, because it happens to be combined in the person of one who exhibits not more a devotion to virtue than to the rights of man.” Mathew should not be refused the recognition of the Senate just because he supported the “rights of man” as well as the “virtue” of abstinence. “The tribute proposed to be paid” to Mathew, Seward concluded, “should not be withheld from him simply because he sympathized with . . . the cause of human freedom.”


10. William Seward, Sept. 11, 1850, Cong. Globe, appendix, 1648; Seward, Dec. 20, 1849, Cong. Globe, 52, 56. Seward, a vigorous supporter of the resolution, had strong ties to the Irish and to the Catholic Church since his inaugural address as New York governor, on January 1, 1839. See Joseph McCadden, “Governor Seward’s Friendship with Bishop Hughes,” New York History 47 (Apr. 1966): 160–84, among the many secondary works that deal with Seward’s views on Irish immigrants. It is also important to note that Seward’s stance in favor of the “rights of man” was consistent with his political need to distinguish himself and his New York Whig faction from his state’s Democrats and from a rival faction of New York Whigs. See Michael Holt, The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 453–54, 491–93.
Each senator’s view of the propriety of the honor proposed for Mathew reflected his position on slavery and the sectional conflict. Seward was no more willing to let pass an opportunity to applaud the antislavery cause than Clemens was to condemn it—or Clay, Cass, and Douglas were to downplay the significance of the slavery issue altogether. But by unambiguously defending the Mathew invitation in terms of the slavery issue and by using the provocative language of the “rights of man” and the “cause of human freedom,” Seward ensured that the slavery issue would dominate the Mathew debate. Southerners had already raised the question of Mathew’s ties to abolition. Seward made those ties impossible for them to ignore. His praise for Mathew’s stance on slavery was so offensive to southerners that it ensured that the honor proposed for Mathew would become an occasion for a sectional battle before the actual contest over the Compromise of 1850 had even begun.

Mississippi Democratic senator Henry Foote’s condemnation of Seward was swift and unqualified. Foote would become one of the leading proponents of the Compromise, but here, in the rehearsal for the debate over that Compromise, he showed no willingness to be conciliatory. He suggested that Seward supported Walker’s resolution “on the ground that Father Mathew is an avowed abolitionist in opinion, and is on that account worthy to receive special honor at the hands of an American Senate.” The New York senator, continued Foote, “must have become suddenly oblivious of his official oath, which binds him to support the Constitution of the United States, whose sacred provisions guarantee perpetual protection to slavery against all foes, either foreign or domestic.” Foreshadowing a key element of the southern position in the Compromise debate, Foote reminded his fellow senators of just how critical was loyalty to every letter of the Constitution. Without the inclusions of its provisions protecting slavery, he insisted, the “Constitution itself would never have become part of the supreme law of the land, or the Union of these States have been established upon foundations which all true patriots hope may prove perpetual.” Concern over Mathew’s stance on slavery had rapidly escalated into a question of dedication to the Constitution and a worry over the permanence of the Union. If northerners wished to ensure that their vision of a perpetual Union would be realized, they had better avoid the endorsement of anyone who challenged the institution of slavery.11

Mississippi’s other Democratic senator, Jefferson Davis, joined his colleague in condemning Seward’s antislavery position, and, in addition, he vehemently attacked Mathew as a foreign agitator—and not just foreign, but, more threatening still, an incendiary from the British Isles. “British emissaries,” he cried out, were assuming the “false pretext of philanthropy to mask their unholy designs to kindle

the fire of civil war among the United States.” Mathew, Davis insisted, was “known as the ally of Daniel O’Connell in his attempt to incite the Irishmen, naturalized citizens of the United States, to unite as a body with the Abolitionists in their nefarious designs against the peace, the property, and the constitutional rights of the southern States.” Davis asked if we are “not only to permit, but to welcome, the intrusion of the stranger into the most delicate domestic question which has ever threatened the peace and safety of our Confederacy?” For the future president of a future competing confederacy, the answer was a resounding no.12

Virginia Democratic senator James Mason concurred. We are, he complained, being asked to offer a “compliment in favor of a man who, I take it upon myself to say, has committed an act of aggression upon the American people which years of regret can never efface.” “I humbly submit to you,” Mason told his colleagues, “if you pay this compliment which is now asked of the American Senate, what authority have we that he may not feel himself called upon to connect his mission in some manner with the destruction of slavery in the southern States?” An endorsement of Mathew would give license to a partnership between temperance and the unspeakable evil of antislavery. Mason, author of the fugitive slave provision of the Compromise of 1850, was alert to any threat to the institution of slavery.13

The vehemence of this southern opposition to Walker’s request to offer the famed temperance leader the honor of an invitation to the Senate floor was too much for the Wisconsin senator to take. Echoing Clay, Cass, and Douglas, Walker declared it “unfortunate that in every little matter we must see so much jealousy upon the subject of slavery.” He was sure that the slaveholding and nonslaveholding families of the victims of the “horrors of inebriation” could but look at the Senate with “perfect astonishment, when they find that the matter of slavery has so far crept into our deliberations, that we cannot sympathize with men upon the great and glorious subject of temperance, without bringing in this question to mar the deliberations of the body.” To Seward, Foote, Davis, and Mason, the issue was slavery, but to others, the question was not the right or wrong of the South’s peculiar institution but rather the necessity of making slavery a part of seemingly every issue under discussion. The country was struggling with the slavery issue, yet it was dividing not just over the institution itself but, more crucially, over the question of its place in the American political dialogue. In 1850, the country was debating not only the issue of slavery in the territories, the treatment of fugitive slaves, and all the other measures of the Compromise. The debate was more basic.

than that. It was a contest over the centrality of the subject that in the end would occupy it for the decade and more to come.¹⁴

The simple matter of Father Mathew’s invitation to the Senate raised still other perplexing issues in addition to the critical ones associated with the role of the slavery issue in American politics. Southern condemnations of Father Mathew could be expected, but the debate became more complicated with New Hampshire Free Soil Senator John Hale’s denial of Mathew’s anti-slavery credentials. Once in America, Hale claimed, Mathew had fallen silent on the question of slavery, much to the Free Soiler’s regret. Hale admitted that if the vote to invite Mathew to the Senate was to be based on his antislavery commitment, as many southern senators seemed to think it should be, he would have to oppose granting an invitation to the insufficiently antislavery temperance leader. But since the resolution was a judgment of Mathew’s temperance work alone, it would have Hale’s support. Still, Hale was troubled by Mathew’s faltering reform position.¹⁵

Mathew had indeed signed the antislavery call of 1841, and he had also welcomed Frederick Douglass to his home, but when he came to America he focused on the temperance cause alone and had no intention of involving himself in domestic controversies over slavery. As southerners had discovered, to their chagrin, he had written exactly that to Judge Lumpkin and when asked by abolitionist William

Lloyd Garrison to participate in an antislavery meeting at Worcester, Massa- 
chusetts, he responded in substantially the same way. Garrison visited with Mathew in 
Boston and invited him to address the Worcester meeting, which was intended as 
a celebration of the anniversary of abolition in the West Indies. Mathew declined, 
saying he already had enough to do saving men from the “slavery of intemperance” 
and could not be involved in the abolitionist movement as well.  

Garrison was outraged. He angrily declared that by declining to join with the 
abolitionists, Mathew had “added to the anguish, horror and despair of the mis-
erable slaves, made their yokes heavier, and fastened their chains more securely.” 
When Frederick Douglass learned of Mathew’s decision to distance himself from 
abolitionist activities, he worried that his old acquaintance might have changed 
“his morality by changing his location.” And on discovering that Mathew had ar-
gued that there was nothing in the Bible against slavery, Douglass sadly wondered, 
“What could the slaveholders ask or desire more than this?” 

Judge Lumpkin in the South and Garrison and Douglass in the North were all 
angered by Mathew’s evasiveness. But in addition to being smart politics for one 
who wished to gain support for his temperance cause in both sections of the country, 
Mathew’s effort at balancing opposing interests in the slavery dispute was a reflection 
of a style of organizing that was characteristic of the Irish temperance leader, one 
he had used with great success at home. He was effective in Ireland at gaining both 
Catholic and Protestant, nationalist and pro-British adherents by not taking sides 
in the many bitter disputes that had overwhelmed Ireland. In America, Mathew was 
simply applying the very same tactics that succeeded so impressively in his Irish 
campaign. Soon Mathew’s refusal to become part of either the abolitionist crusade 
or the pro-slavery argument was drawing national attention in the press and across 
the country. 

In Congress, no one was more satisfied with Mathew’s position than Henry Clay. 
Hale’s disappointment in Mathew’s lack of commitment to antislavery brought a sup-
portive shout from Clay. “Hear him,” Clay interjected as Hale spoke. The Kentucky 
senator sought to dampen southern hostility to Father Mathew by pointing out that 
an actual Free Soiler had disowned him. But rather than bringing the debate to an 
end, the discussion only become more far-reaching and, as it did, additional themes 
that would dominate the larger debate over the Compromise came to the fore.

16. Quinn, Father Mathew’s Crusade, 161.  
17. William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, quoted in Fenton, Frederick Douglass 
in Ireland, 114; Frederick Douglass, quoted in Colm Kerrigan, “Irish Temperance and US Anti-
18. Quinn, Father Mathew’s Crusade, 9, 162. 
Jefferson Davis also shouted out in the middle of Hale's speech. But rather than responding to Hale by attempting to quiet the controversy, Davis proclaimed that he would exclude “every abolitionist, foreign and domestic” from the Senate. Hale, who was always ready to employ humor in the congressional proceedings, countered by declaring that for his part he would never bar pro-slavery men completely from the Senate, though he would, recalling the constitutional three-fifths compromise, restrict them to “a wholesome minority” of two-fifths of the membership, leaving three-fifths to those who agreed with him and opposed slavery.  

Jeremiah Clemens was not amused. He did not accept Hale's denial of Mathew's antislavery commitment, and he angrily claimed that by asking for an “abolition agitator” to be honored, Seward and Hale were approving of one who was “intermeddling with the property rights of others.” Focusing on another theme that would pervade the Compromise debates, Clemens suggested that the two northern senators should “look a little at home.” The ills of northern society offered enough suffering to occupy all the North's attention. Clemens reminded his antislavery colleagues, “There are at your own doors objects of charity enough, without hunting for slaves upon whom to bestow it. There are at this very moment, in all your great cities, thousands of homeless wretches, destitute of food or raiment, and without a thought or an instinct that is not colored by crime.” “And yet,” Clemens continued to rage, “with a miserable hypocrisy, you must travel away to the South, and waste your sympathies upon a population who are better clothed, better fed, who work less and live more happily, than four fifths of yourselves.” Picking a favorite southern example of northern duplicity that also demonstrated the weakness of northern manhood, Clemens asserted, “You compel a poor factory girl to perform an amount of labor which is not exacted from healthy and robust men by the planters of the South—separate her from her friends and relations—allow no one to visit her without a written pass from an overseer, and all the while thank God that you are free from the curse of African slavery.” Northern telescopic philanthropy ignored a system of labor at home that exploited its workers while it attacked the South's institution of slavery, which treated its workers with restraint and concern. The debate over the country's competing systems of labor had begun in Congress even before it engaged in the battle over the fate of slavery in California and the Mexican territories.

Slavery was the critical issue in 1850 and in the sectional conflict. Mathew's threat to the institution, or what some southerners believed was the threat he posed to it, formed the basis of their opposition to his invitation to sit in the Senate. But Henry Foote of Mississippi raised another issue that grew out of the concern over slavery.

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and was, for southerners, the key to its defense. That issue, the issue of state equality, would also preoccupy the 31st Congress and hold sway over its deliberations for the remainder of its first session. Foote presented it here as part of the threat Mathew, and those who defended him, presented to the South’s defining institution.

Southerners believed that the equality of the states within the Union gave the citizens of each state, with their property, the equal right to the territories won from Mexico in the recent war. The federal government did not own the territories, declared influential Whig senator John Berrien of Georgia, but was simply the “administrative agent of the people” in every one of the states. Thus, it was the “duty of the Government,” to pass laws that “will enable emigrants from all the States” to go to the public domain “enjoying the same rights which they possess within the States in which they dwell.”

Holding to this basic southern position, Foote contended that the time was coming “when the absolute equality of the sovereign States of this Confederacy shall be universally acknowledged; when the domestic institutions of all the States shall be made effectually secure against the malign assaults of all foes.” The Mississippi senator had proclaimed in ringing tones the fundamental political creed of the South. State equality was the guarantor of slavery in the South and in the territories. What, precisely, state equality should mean, how the threat to it was perceived in the South, what northerners thought of it, and, finally, what implications it would have for the future of the Union would be debated fiercely in the coming months, but here it was being raised first in a controversy over a simple Senate invitation to an international temperance crusader.

A still more challenging issue that would also occupy the Congress during the course of the Compromise debates entered into the dispute over Father Mathew, however, it was actually raised by a southerner in response to the position many of his fellow southerners had taken on the request to bring Mathew to the Senate floor. Louisiana Democratic senator Solomon Downs did not see a problem with the Mathew invitation. He could not understand why a challenge to slavery by a reformer from the British Isles should be of concern to anyone. After all, he reminded his southern colleagues, “We of the South believe ourselves to be right in our opinions on the subject of slavery.” There should be no anxiety over Mathew’s presence in the Senate. “Our course will bear the test of scrutiny and examination,” declared Downs. If people from abroad with “erroneous opinions”

22. John Berrien, Aug. 12, 1850, Cong. Globe, appendix, 1524. Berrien was engaged in a bitter factional dispute within the Georgia Whig party with Congressmen Robert Toombs and Alexander Stephens over the authenticity of their loyalty to the South. See Holt, Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party, 450–51.
visit us, their views will change. “I have too much confidence in the justice of our cause and the strength of our institutions to suppose he could do us any harm.” Downs did not have a problem with Mathew’s visit to the Senate because he had absolute certainty in the worthiness the South’s institution of slavery.24

Willie Mangum, Whig senator from North Carolina, agreed. Mangum did not care what Mathew’s views were of southern slavery. In his opinion, the institution was so strong, there could be no fear for its “stability or justification.” It could surely withstand any criticism Mathew might bring to it. Thus no harm could come from granting Mathew the honor proposed for him. “This institution,” he assured his fellow senators, “whether for weal or for wo, may defy such weak assaults, it is based upon a foundation that may defy danger from such a cause.” Mangum did not consider antislavery criticism of it “to weigh a feather.”25

Downs and Mangum were confident in the integrity of their peculiar institution. But why did they need to make this point to their southern colleagues? Were their colleagues not as confident? Did they have doubts that made them fear being challenged by the Irish reformer who had once objected to their institution? Did they not, with Downs, have the confidence that they could win Mathew over to their view? Southern ambivalence toward the institution they fought so vigorously to defend would surface in the debates over the Compromise as southern legislators often justified diffusion, spreading their slave population westward into the new territories, as a means of relieving the Old South of a morally burdensome institution that some of them referred to as an “evil.” Here, in the rehearsal for that debate, two southern senators who supported the Mathew invitation, one a Democrat and one a Whig, questioned the confidence of their southern colleagues in the slave institution that they all depended upon and claimed to support unreservedly.26

Before southern congressmen were forced to confront their ambivalence any further, Florida Democrat David Levy Yulee came up with a simple way to justify voting “no” on Walker’s resolution that would avoid the complex question of the right and wrong of slavery. He asked that the invitation to Father Mathew be tabled. Giving the temperance leader the honor of a seat on the Senate floor,

26. William Barney, The Road to Secession: A New Perspective on the Old South (New York: Praeger, 1972), 49–84, gives the best, extended treatment of the diffusion theme, which he concludes was an “oddly skewed humanism,” designed to develop the tropics, guarantee the happiness of the slaves, “assure southerners of their good intentions,” and lead to the “natural termination of slavery.” See also William Freehling, Road to Disunion: vol. 1 of 2, Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854 (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 418–25, for a valuable and convincing discussion of the implications of the diffusionist plan for southern attitudes toward slavery, esp. 421–24.
he argued, would be taking a stand on a question of “abstract morals.” By voting for the invitation, the Senate would be passing “judgment upon the manners of the citizens of the country—some of whom, in the rightful exercise of a rightful personal liberty, may choose to approve and practice in more or less degree the use of stimulating beverages.” The Senate, Yulee was suggesting, should not be in the business of choosing moral positions that might be seen as somehow interfering with the freedom of citizens to make personal decisions governing their own lives. Yulee was the son of a Sephardic Jewish family that had immigrated to the Jacksonville area to establish a settlement for oppressed European Jews. Perhaps he understood better than any of his colleagues the dangers of the intolerance involved in claiming that one chosen form of personal behavior was morally superior to another. Stephen Douglas had also noted that the Mathew resolution raised the question of personal moral preferences, but he, unlike Yulee, had no trouble separating a recognition of Mathew’s temperance work from an endorsement of the Irishman’s other positions. Yulee, living in a slave society under siege, could not afford the luxury of that belief.27

So far in the debate, the obvious fact that Mathew was an Irish Catholic priest had not been mentioned. Given the political environment of the time, this, at first glance, seems a stunning omission. One year after the Compromise debates took place, the state of Maine, highlighting the growing political resonance of the temperance issue, would pass a law outlawing the sale of liquor. The bourgeoning political importance of the issue tracked the increasing use of alcohol. By 1850, alcohol consumption in the country was at unprecedented levels and the social and moral costs were plain to see. In response, temperance, with all of its associations with religious and nativist reform, was building in strength and entering the political arena, as the “Maine Law” would show, yet, nevertheless, these concerns were almost never raised in the Senate debate. Any discussion of immigration or Catholicism and their perceived ties to the increase in the incidents of excessive drink was simply absent.

The explanation for this silence may lie in the lack of political unity that surrounded the temperance issue. Parties were internally divided over the question of temperance reform, and so their members in Congress may have been unwilling to take a strong position for or against restrictive legislation and equally uninterested in attacking a religious or ethnic constituency whose support some in their party might wish to attract. But praise for Father Mathew was a different matter. It was a safe alternative. He was organizing voluntary abstinence, not demanding state

action to accomplish his goal. Senators were careful to direct their accolades to his "humanitarianism." There was nothing controversial or politically risky in that. Democrats had no difficulty in hailing an Irish Catholic priest, and Whigs were entirely comfortable offering recognition to an opponent of drink who favored voluntary action.28

Father Mathew was the perfect vehicle for this kind of soft, safe temperance reform designed to offend few and gain a broad, general endorsement. In addition to his focus on voluntary measures, Mathew had a hard-earned reputation for evenhandedness in all things religious. It was in the political interest of all parties, especially in the North, where the Irish population was greatest, to openly celebrate the good Father. One congressman's wife even went so far as to claim that support for Mathew was based on the desire to attract the Irish vote.29

Still, anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic prejudice was a powerful force in midcentury America, and its taint could not completely escape the debate over Mathew. Even two years after the congressional dispute over seating the Irish priest, Henry Clay, failing in his private effort to gain the by then ill and destitute Father financial support, lamented the "influence of . . . religious prejudice" in limiting the success of his effort. Clay understood well that nativist attitudes were abroad in the land and ever-present.30

During the debate, William Dawson exhibited this very prejudice. The Georgia Whig echoed Yulee's argument against making moral choices but gave this position a religious and nativist cast. He declared that he was troubled by the Senate's failure to offer the honor of a seat in the Senate to an American temperance reformer. "Have we no man within the limits of the United States, who is entitled to receive this privilege on the part of the Senate of the United States?" he asked. What especially bothered Dawson was the religious distinctions the Senate would

30. Henry Clay to Henry Grinnell, Nov. 11, 1851, Thomas D. Clark Collection, Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort.
be making by honoring Mathew. “When we come to confer a distinction of this sort, I beg you to consider,” he implored his colleagues, “that there are various denominations of Christians in the country. There are Catholics and there are Protestants; and it is not, in my opinion, the province of this body to make a precedent in honor of one class in preference to another.” Dawson simply could not ignore the sectarian aspects of the decision that the Senate was being asked to make. Honoring Mathew would reward a Catholic and Dawson could not tolerate doing that without granting similar recognition to a Protestant. Still, despite his claim of impartiality, it is fair to wonder if Dawson would have noticed and demanded balance if this honor was proposed for an American Protestant alone.  

Like Yulee, Dawson opposed taking a position on a matter that involved a personal moral judgment. For Yulee, the issue was choosing between those who favored temperance and those who accepted drink. For Dawson, the issue was a religious one. He objected to what appeared to him an act favoring one particular Christian denomination over another. Both senators questioned the propriety of selecting one path of personal conduct for an honor while denying an alternate way of life similar recognition.

South Carolina’s John Calhoun did not engage in the religious side of the argument, but he did immediately accept Yulee’s motion to table Walker’s resolution, recognizing that propositions that become “questions of merit” are “difficult . . . to decide.” Soon other southern senators fell in line behind their acknowledged leader and spoke in favor of tabling Walker’s resolution. Many also now accepted Yulee’s position against taking a stand on a question of personal morality. Jefferson Davis, who in a few months, upon Calhoun’s death, would be assuming the mantle of southern Senate leadership, declared that the “virtue or exaltation of private character, the merits of the philanthropist, the Savant, or the artist, come not within the sphere of our official duties. We have no charter to grant diplomas for private virtues.” Southern opponents of Walker’s resolution had found a way to oppose it without appearing to involve the slavery issue in their decision. They could avoid the debate over Mathew’s position on abolition and still reject the effort to honor him.

Perhaps these southerners believed this approach could broaden their appeal. But whatever their expectations, their decision was based on concerns over the future fate of the slavery issue. Calhoun was deeply apprehensive about the worrisome precedent that granting an honor for one particular moral achievement would set. Apparently the honor proposed for Mathew had previously only been

granted to the Marquis de Lafayette. Now the fear was that other such honors would follow. Calhoun warned his colleagues, “If you vote affirmatively upon it, it will draw after it a train that it will be impossible to resist.” Calhoun understood that if honors were granted to a temperance champion, demands that recognition be given to the heroes of abolitionism would soon be made. Honor for one moral stand could well lead to the celebration of another.33

Whatever their arguments and their particular motives, Calhoun, Davis, Yulee, Foote, Dawson, Mason, Clemens, and most of the other southern senators, both Democrats and Whigs, lost their battle. The Senate rejected the motion to table and chose to give Theobald Mathew his honor. Few southerners joined with the majority. The only senators from the South to vote for the Mathew invitation were the strongly pro-Compromise Kentucky Whig senators, Clay and Joseph Underwood, the unalterably unionist and reformed imbiber Democrat Sam Houston of Texas, the future Constitutional Union presidential candidate Whig John Bell of Tennessee, North Carolina moderate Whig Willie Magnum, and, representing Louisiana and its significant Catholic population, Democrats Solomon Downs and Pierre Soule. But these senators were a minority in their section and were motivated by either a unique concern for a special constituency or by an unusual devotion to political moderation.34

In the end, among the majority in the Senate, genuine concern over intemperance joined with political interest to support a harmless expression of support for an Irish Catholic, who was both nonsectarian and non-sectional in his approach. Any effort to uplift the Irish, particularly one made by a Catholic who at times was so distant from his religious affiliation that it concerned the American Catholic hierarchy, drew sympathy and support. But for most southern senators, voting in the minority, section trumped traditional political considerations and stiffened their opposition to the Irish Father whose attitude toward slavery was open to question.35

Ultimately, the debate would have no practical impact. Mathew had to leave town to continue his mission before he could take advantage of the Senate’s invitation. Still, the dispute had sent a powerful message to Congress and to the country as a whole. Daniel Sturgeon, Democratic senator from Pennsylvania, saw immediately the danger revealed by the Mathew debate. The slavery issue, he warned future president James Buchanan, will attach to “every question that will be brought to the notice

33. Calhoun, Dec. 20, 1849, Cong. Globe, 58. See also Foote, Dec. 20, 1849, Cong. Globe, 59. See Downs, Dec. 20, 1849, Cong. Globe, 55, for the claim that only Lafayette had received the honor of an invitation to the Senate floor.
34. See Dec. 20, 1849, Cong. Globe, 59, for the Senate votes on tabling Walker’s motion to seat Father Mathew and on the motion itself.
35. Quinn, Father Mathew’s Crusade, 158.
of the House during a long and burdensome session.” This had been Henry Clay’s fear from the start of the controversy. Isaac Walker, who had offered the resolution proposing to honor the temperance reformer, agreed with Clay and Sturgeon. Sadly, he concluded, “It does seem to me that the introduction of this subject [of slavery] on every occasion, in this way, will do good neither to the Senate of the United States, good to the country, nor good to either division of the country.”

The debate over the seating of Father Mathew had sounded a warning. Northern and southern senators had taken positions and expressed views that would be repeated again and again throughout the congressional session of 1850 as Congress turned to issues critical to the sectional conflict. Many of the various perspectives on the sectional crisis were already in place as the session began, but this debate over the seating of Father Mathew demonstrated the depth of those contrasting positions as well as the extent to which they would direct the controversies to come. Struggles over the morality of slavery, both within the South and among its avowed enemies in the North, would permeate the debate over the Compromise, as would questions of state equality, the meaning of the Union and the Constitution, and the relative merits of northern and southern society. Most significantly, in the larger debate there would be another attempt to deny the centrality of the slavery issue. Yet just as in the controversy over the invitation to Father Mathew, those who wished to downplay the importance of the slavery question and diminish its impact would find their goal impossible to achieve. Denial was the only potentially viable path to compromise. With its rejection by a significant portion of the Congress, no meaningful compromise would be forged in 1850 and no sectional peace realized. Violence would soon erupt over fugitive slaves in the North and, eventually, over the unresolved issue of slavery in the territories.

Father Mathew had left town without being seated on the Senate floor. The array of issues surrounding the institution of slavery would not so easily go away. They would dominate Congress and the country for the next nine months and beyond.
