

In a day and a state where slavery was legal and popular, John Randolph, a Virginia congressman and plantation owner, spoke against it and acted against it.

by Steve Byas

John Randolph of Roanoke was a fiery congressman from Virginia — a slave state — who served in both the House of Representatives and the Senate for more than three decades during the early 1800s. A skilled orator, his temper was most often evident on the floor of Congress, but it was not always confined to there.

After Randolph publicly declared that his nemesis Henry Clay stunk like rot-

ten mackerel shining in the moonlight, and referred to him as a “blackleg” — a popular expression of the day for a corrupt politician — Clay had had enough, challenging Randolph to a duel. Though the two men shot at each other from a distance of 10 paces, they emerged unscathed, except for Randolph’s new coat, which took a bullet hole. Randolph suggested that Clay owed him a new coat, and Clay responded that he was glad that that was all he owed Randolph.

Significant to understanding Randolph’s sometimes eccentric behavior was his chronically poor health, which caused many to express amazement that he lived to age 60. During his lifetime, Randolph suffered scarlet fever, yellow fever, an-

gina, rheumatism, and severe bouts with melancholy. He treated himself with laudanum, mercury, morphine, and what he called the “little blue pill” (opium). He would often respond to queries as to how he was doing with, “Dying sir, dying.”

Randolph never married, probably due to a genetic disorder known as Klinefelter Syndrome, in which a male has an extra X chromosome, which leads to infertility, impotency, and beardlessness. Some contend his long affliction with tuberculosis was the cause. His disorder also left the successful political orator with a well-known high-pitched voice. Despite his feminine-sounding voice, his speeches in Congress were known for their power, which struck fear in the hearts of political opponents.

When Randolph entered the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, with spurs jingling and his favorite hounds around him, his hat pulled down to his eyes, and a whip in his hand, the speaker of the House did not dare challenge him. At least not until Randolph’s nemesis, Henry Clay, became speaker in 1811, and ordered the dogs out.

Randolph opposed Clay over Clay’s support of the Bank of the United States, high protective tariffs, and the Kentuckian’s advocacy of war with the British. Clay, for his part, led a group of new congressmen in 1811, elected by a wave of anger in the Western states at Britain’s selling of guns to the Indians on the frontier. It was Randolph who dubbed Clay and his fellows “the War Hawks.” He feared that war would lead to a contraction of domestic liberty. He explained his opposition to what became the War of 1812: “I fear if you go into a foreign war ... you will come out without your Constitution.” Why? “We shall be told that our government is too free” to fight a successful war.

But though he was a staunch defender of liberty, limited government, and constitutional principles, he is perhaps most remarkable for the fact that as a member of one of Virginia’s most illustrious families (in a state that contains a wealth of many such famous families), he was a plantation owner, with hundreds of slaves, who despised slavery.

Conservative philosopher Russell Kirk, author of *The Conservative Mind* and his own book on Randolph, *John Randolph of*

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Roanoke, called the prosperous plantation owner and statesman “The most interesting and unusual man ever to be a power in the Congress.”

Randolph not only expressed regret that he had ever owned a slave, he freed his slaves and provided for their resettlement on land in the “free state” of Ohio. His life story deserves more coverage in our nation’s history, including the strange tale of how his attempt to provide a better life for his former slaves was opposed by powerful forces in both the slave state of Virginia and the free state of Ohio.

Badgering Himself About Beliefs

John Randolph had an impressive pedigree. One of his ancestors was among the barons who forced King John of England to sign the Great Charter of English liberties — the Magna Carta. The famous Indian princess, Pocahontas, and her husband, John Rolfe (the man who pioneered tobacco farming in Virginia), were also among his famous ancestors, and he was a cousin to President Thomas Jefferson. Yet another relative of Randolph, Peyton Randolph, a giant at the First Continental Congress, was his great-uncle.

But Randolph’s own youth was marked by the loss of his father and his mother’s remarriage to St. George Tucker. Tucker was a powerful figure in American history in his own right, who published the five-volume study of William Blackstone’s commentaries and its relationship to American law. The early relationship between Tucker and young Randolph seemed cordial, even affectionate, but the relationship eventually turned sour, with most historians noting as the cause differences over the management of the estate (which Randolph considered mismanagement).

Randolph inherited the plantation, which he called, appropriately enough, “bizarre.” He also inherited the slaves who lived and worked on the plantation, along with huge debts, which he largely blamed on his stepfather’s alleged mismanagement. Had Randolph been inclined to free his slaves then, it would have been impossible. Slaves were considered part of the “collateral” for the loans of the plantation. Randolph could not free the slaves without liquidation of the debt.

Still, Randolph was a persistent opponent of the slave trade, and never bought or sold slaves, repeatedly condemning the evil institution. In his youth, Randolph, a prolific reader, was greatly influenced by the anti-slavery essay of British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. “All my feelings and instincts were in opposition to slavery in every shape,” he said.

As the years passed, the frugal Randolph attacked the plantation’s heavy debt, eventually not only paying off the loans, but turning his farm into a highly profitable enterprise. By the time of his death in 1833, the estate of John Randolph was quite significant. While the prosperity of the plantation was built with slave labor, there is no indication that Randolph was ever physically abusive of his slaves. When his 383 slaves were manumitted, none bore any marks of physical abuse. He was also known to dismiss overseers whom he considered to be abusive.

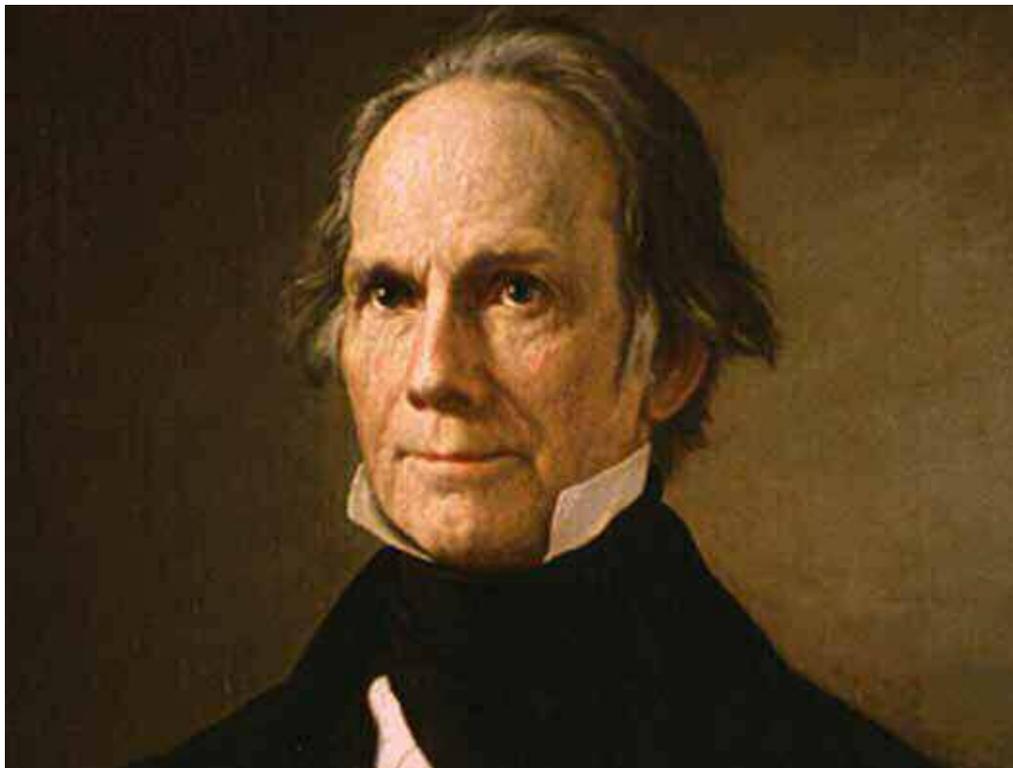
It is not certain when Randolph conceived of his eventual plan to not only free his slaves but financially provide for their future, but it is known that Randolph

considered the morality of holding slaves to be in conflict with his “evangelical Christianity.” Randolph went through a period in his life of religious skepticism, even perhaps atheism, before experiencing a powerful religious conversion experience. He said about slavery, “I tremble for the dreadful retribution which this horrid thirst for African blood ... may bring upon us.”

With no wife and children, Randolph looked upon the slaves on his plantation as, “My best friends,” sometimes even referring to them as his “family.”

It is apparent that Randolph struggled with the issue for many years. He wrote his brother, “But one subject presses hard upon me, among my worldly concerns. It is the making of suitable provision for my slaves ... at my death.” He worried about the “cruel fate to which our laws would consign them.”

He publicly condemned the Virginia Legislature for its failure to improve slave conditions or take any action for gradual emancipation, as had happened in the North. His own stepfather, St. George



Henry Clay disagreed with John Randolph on a host of political issues, including the creation of the Second Bank of the United States. The two even fought an inconclusive duel in 1826. When Randolph died in 1833, one of his last instructions, which was carried out, was for his face to be turned to the West. He wished to “keep his eye” on Henry Clay.

Randolph not only expressed regret that he had ever owned a slave, he freed his slaves and provided for their resettlement on land in the “free state” of Ohio.

Tucker, had proposed a plan for emancipation as early as 1797. If there was no emancipation, Randolph feared an eventual slave rebellion, which could be a bloodbath.

While Randolph did not support the immediate emancipation of slaves in Southern states, his refusal to jump on the abolition bandwagon wasn't conditioned by a belief that slaves were not deserving of freedom. Quite the opposite was likely true. He responded to comments praising his oratorical skill that the greatest orator he ever heard was a black mother pleading at the auction block not to be separated from her child, and he confided to his friend Josiah Quincy that the “curse of slavery” was “an evil daily magnifying.”

But he was concerned that abolition would lead to much social strife for blacks and whites alike. He recognized a need for some preparation for emancipation (such as education), rather than casting them off the plantations to fend for themselves. In *John Randolph of Roanoke*, David Johnson wrote, “Randolph’s views about slav-

ery were a complex mixture of realism, religion, culture, and custom.”

While Randolph supported manumission (voluntary emancipation), he stopped short of abolition (emancipation by government decree, especially by federal action), opposing federal efforts to limit or diminish the institution, seeing Northern abolitionism as a movement to subjugate the South. He contended that slavery would eventually fall under its own weight. He argued that it had run its course in the Northern states, and believed it was beginning to run its course in Maryland. The institution was going to eventually become so unprofitable, he believed, that the day would come that financially desperate plantation owners would run from their own slaves.

Even as he wrestled with his own conscience, his political positions took center stage. As a dedicated supporter of President Jefferson in the early years of his administration, Randolph used his position as chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee to develop a plan to reduce the national debt of \$112 million.

His plan would only leave \$2 million to fund the operations of government, while \$7.3 million a year would be expended in paying down the debt.

The results of the 1824 presidential election led to a deterioration of the already poor relations with Clay. When neither Andrew Jackson (Randolph’s choice) nor John Quincy Adams garnered a majority of the electoral college vote, the election was “thrown” into the House of Representatives. Clay’s considerable clout was given to Adams, leading to Adams’ election by the House. Shortly thereafter, Clay was picked by Adams to lead the Cabinet as secretary of state. Randolph immediately charged, in his trademark high-pitched voice, “Corrupt bargain!” This phrase was repeated for the next four years until Jackson won the 1828 election over Adams.

Randolph supported General Andrew Jackson of Tennessee in the 1824 and 1828 presidential elections to challenge the creation of a Bank of the United States and the concept of protective tariffs to guard America’s “infant industries” from foreign competition.

Henry Clay supported both the bank and protective tariffs, as well as “internal improvements” — today we call this spending on infrastructure — paid for by the federal government. Clay called it the “American System.”

Randolph did not like it. In fact, he had even broken with Jefferson himself years earlier because he believed Jefferson was abandoning the original constitutionalist philosophy of the Republican Party, forming another group, sometimes called the Tertiary Quids (“third thing,” or as we would call it today, a third party). They were also called the Old Republicans. From this Old Republican movement emerged the coalitions that evolved into the Democratic-Republican Party (and eventually Democratic Party) in support of the political ambitions of Andrew Jackson. Jefferson and Randolph eventually reconciled as they both expressed disgust with the Republicans chartering a Second Bank of the United States in 1816 (the First Bank’s charter had expired in 1811, and the Republicans did not renew it). Many of today’s grassroots Republicans can relate to the common practice of Republican politicians adopting many liberal Democrat ideas as their own, with just more “efficiency.”



Having inherited a plantation with scores of slaves, Randolph became increasingly bothered by the wrongness of the institution. He remarked that he regretted having ever owned a slave.

The animosity between Clay and Randolph never completely subsided, and when he was buried in 1833, Randolph's wishes were honored. His head would be turned to face the West, so he could "keep his eye on Henry Clay."

Despite their intense political rivalry, Clay and Randolph agreed that slavery was antithetical to American values of human liberty, and the two slave owners were among the founders of the American Colonization Society, which proposed that those slaves that were freed could be returned to Africa, principally to what became the nation of Liberia. The reasoning was that these ex-slaves would face very difficult problems in American society, even upon emancipation.

While many historians have charged that Randolph's and others' devotion to "states' rights" was simply a cover for the defense of the institution of slavery, in the case of Randolph, the charge isn't credible. David Johnson, writing in *John Randolph of Roanoke*, said that Randolph's strict constructionist philosophy "was not crafted as a defense of slavery," but was a sincere effort to oppose political centralization. "Randolph saw nothing in the abolitionist movement except concealed attempts by northern mercantile interests to subjugate the South into an agricultural colony."

Randolph feared the fanaticism of Northern abolitionists, but still stated in 1826 that slavery must be addressed because "it is a cancer."

While Randolph could not cure this cancer in his state of Virginia, or in the nation at large, he could address the future of his own slaves.

Freedom Given and Opposed

By the time of his death, Randolph had the financial wherewithal to provide for his slaves' emancipation and also to purchase land for them in Ohio. But emancipation wasn't to prove to be a simple thing. Unfortunately for Randolph's slaves, Randolph had written at least three wills and four codicils, one of which was used by Randolph's heirs to fight the release of the slaves and led to years of litigation. Though a will from 1821 clearly indicated that it was Randolph's desire to emancipate his slaves and provide them land outside of the slave state of Virginia, a controversial

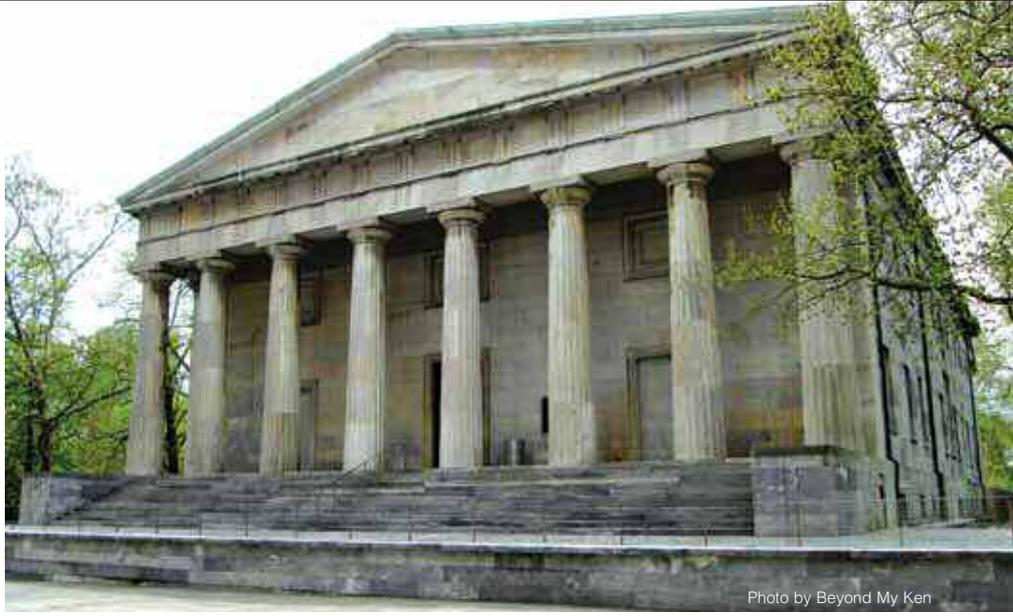


Photo by Beyond My Ken

John Randolph's strong opposition to the federal government chartering a national bank, such as the Second Bank of the United States shown here, brought him increased antagonism from his nemesis Henry Clay, but contributed to the healing of the rift he had with his famous cousin, former President Thomas Jefferson. Both Randolph and Jefferson contended there was simply no constitutional authority for the federal government to charter such a bank.

1832 will clouded the issue, delaying the slaves' exodus for several years.

As Randolph lay dying in a Pennsylvania hotel in May of 1833, he expressed concern to his servant John White and his doctor that he needed to make some revisions to his 1832 will. The 1832 will was inconsistent with all of his other wills, and in it he expressed a desire for his slaves to be sold at auction. Some have speculated that Randolph had written the 1832 will in a period of deep depression, perhaps augmented by pain-killing drugs. (Others have questioned some of the handwriting in the will itself, arguing it is inconsistent with Randolph's other known handwriting samples). Randolph was concerned that his stepbrothers would prevent the slaves' manumission because they would want to claim the slaves as their own.

In the 1821 will, which he confirmed before his death as the correct will, Randolph wrote, "I give and bequeath to all my slaves their freedom, heartily regretting that I have ever been the owner of one."

Regardless, Randolph told his doctor that he was in great distress about his slaves. "Our laws are extremely particular on the subject of slaves — a will may manumit them, but provision for their support requires that a declaration should continue with the party, and never lose sight of him until he is gone or dead."

Hugh Garland, writing in *The Life of John Randolph of Roanoke*, recounts the scene. Randolph wrote, "I confirm all the directions in my will, respecting my slaves, and direct them to be enforced, particularly in regard to provisions for their support." Putting his hand on the shoulder of his faithful servant, John White, Randolph added, "Especially for this man."

To provide his former slaves with a place to live, he wrote, "I give to my executor a sum not exceeding eight thousand dollars, or so much as there may be necessary to transport and settle such slaves in some other state or territory of the U.S., giving to all above the age of forty not less than ten acres of each." Apparently having second thoughts about his earlier scheme to export ex-slaves to Africa, he added a codicil in 1826 that it was cruel to send slaves to Liberia.

Randolph had evidently given considerable thought as to what would be the fate of his slaves after his demise. He desired their resettlement in the free state of Ohio because that area already held some prosperous black settlements. He appointed his close friend and lawyer Judge William Leigh as the executor of the estate, but his fears concerning the greed of his stepbrothers were warranted. They contested the will in Virginia for 13 years. They

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argued in court that Randolph must have been insane when he drew up the will that released the slaves upon his death.

William Leigh expressed disgust at the efforts of the Tucker stepbrothers to scuttle the emancipation of the Randolph slaves. “The more I see of his brothers, the more I am dissatisfied with them,” he wrote in a letter to Peach Gilmore. Leigh expressed concern that the Tuckers hoped to derive an “advantage” from allegations that Randolph changed his will while insane. But Randolph had written some letters, apparently revealing some negative information about the Tuckers, in anticipation of their opposition to his desire to emancipate the slaves. Leigh threatened to use some letters Randolph had left behind if the brothers persisted in their legal efforts to frustrate Randolph’s true desires. Leigh told Gilmore, “But they will do the Negroes justice or they will find themselves involved in a controversy not the most pleasant.”

Finally, in February of 1845, the Virginia Chancery Court handed down a decision in favor of manumission. During the

years of indecision, Leigh had leased out many of the slaves for services, keeping some to maintain the plantation until the issue was adjudicated.

On June 10, 1846, Randolph’s 383 former slaves left Virginia, but their troubles were still not at an end.

After the issue of the slaves’ emancipation was finally settled, William Leigh made a deal for some land in Mercer County, Ohio. He used over \$100,000 from the Randolph estate to provide for transportation expenses to Ohio. He hired a man named Thomas Cardwell to conduct the move. All the families were provided tents, and there were 16 covered wagons.

Unfortunately, squatters were already living on the land, which was one complication among many. When the former slaves reached New Breman, Ohio, they were met by fierce opposition from men in military uniforms, yelling profanities. These men carried muskets, pitchforks, and various other weapons. The “Randolph slaves,” as they came to be referred to even though they were now

free men and women, retreated back to the boat secured for their use by lawyer Leigh; however, in the melee, centenarian Granny Hannah was killed by a blow to the head. The crowd insisted that they leave Mercer County by 10:00 a.m. the next morning.

The Randolph slaves escaped the mob by using a canal to travel to a farm about two miles outside Piqua, Ohio, where a farmer graciously allowed them to set up camp. The farmer, Colonel John Johnston, was then able to persuade the city of Piqua to allow them to set up a camp near the town to rest for two to three weeks.

William Leigh soon arrived and began legal efforts to obtain the purchased land for the Randolph slaves, but considering the hostile reaction of the whites in the area, it is not surprising that the efforts of Randolph’s lawyer William Leigh to win justice for the former slaves proved unsuccessful.

In August 1846, citizens of Mercer County held a meeting and made their intentions clear via several resolutions, one of which proclaimed, “Resolved, That the Negroes and Mulattos residing in Mercer county, came into the county in opposition to a well-known law of the state, and contrary to the wishes of the white population, and still remain here contrary to law, and to our wishes, and therefore have no claim upon our sympathies.”

Another of the resolutions proclaimed that the locals were not going to live among Negroes, and intended to “resist the settlement of Blacks and Mulattos in this county to the full extent of any means, the bayonet not excepted.”

The Randolph slaves were “requested” to move out of Mercer County by March 1847, and if the ex-slaves did *not* comply, they would be removed “forcibly.”

Another of the resolutions called for laws to “absolutely prevent for all time to come, the emigration into this state of any Black or Mulatto person whatsoever.” To make sure that this was done, they pledged not to vote for any man for office who is not in favor of the enactment of such laws “as will effectually prohibit the emigration of this class of people into our state.”

Supposed abolitionist Ohio Congressman William Sawyer was a signer of the resolution. Many Northern abolitionists openly preferred that freed blacks



The African Jackson Cemetery is all that remains of the original settlement of Randolph’s ex-slaves. The town of Rossville is now part of Piqua, Ohio.

be taken to Liberia, or at least stay in a Southern state.

John White (the faithful servant Randolph had wanted to protect) later expressed his disgust at the people of Ohio, saying he would rather be a slave back in Virginia, than live in the supposed free state of Ohio.

Twenty-two hundred acres of land purchased by Leigh were never occupied by John Randolph's ex-slaves, and the land was neatly stolen. Locals claimed that Leigh gave power of attorney in regard to the land to a resident of Mercer County in October of 1846, but no record of such a transfer of authority exists in the court minutes of that date. And Leigh was not even in Ohio on the date that he supposedly signed the papers. Leigh had already returned to Virginia in disgust, and never went back to Ohio.

While the Randolph slaves eventually did settle in other locations in Ohio, the original land purchased by William Leigh was never occupied by them. Historian William Johnson wrote, "Ensuing litigation — which lasted until 1917 — result-

ed in no recovery. Randolph's slaves and their heirs received nothing of the estate willed to them by their master."

In fairness, there were some white residents of Ohio who *did* come to the assistance of the unfortunate ex-slaves. As one newspaper of the time wrote, "Christian people, moved with pity, took them under their patronage, and procured for them [the Randolph slaves], temporary homes among the citizens of this and two or three adjacent counties." Some of the former slaves settled in Rumley, in Shelby County, Ohio, and others of them founded the city of Rossville, which is now part of Piqua, Ohio. Today, only the community cemetery remains of the original settlement.

Back in his grave in Virginia, if Randolph really could look to the West, to "keep his eye" on Henry Clay, he would no doubt have been distressed to see the cruel fate that befell his slaves. But he had done his best for them. At least they were free from bondage.

He would also be distressed at the extent to which the federal government holds

sway over states and the people in them. Shortly before his death in 1833, Randolph expressed great concern about the future of freedom in the country: "I could not have believed that the people would so soon have shown themselves unfit for free government."

When the great Roman statesman and senator Marcus Cicero was told how Julius Caesar was working to destroy the Roman republic, he said, "Don't blame Caesar. Blame the people." The people were allowing Caesar to get away with it. Cicero and Randolph most likely would have agreed on this point. It is up to the people themselves to preserve their own liberty, and not leave such protection to ambitious politicians.

Of Randolph himself, it is appropriate to apply to him the praise of another famous Virginian, General Robert E. Lee. When he spoke to some soldiers of what was left of his once-mighty Army of Northern Virginia (half-starved soldiers who pleaded against giving up the cause at Appomattox), Lee said, "You have done all your duty. Leave the results to God." ■