

jefferson's rivals: the shifting character of the federalists

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Our first national political association, after the revolutionary patriots, was the Federalist Party, which controlled the Federal government for twelve years, and then dwindled rapidly away. Within its brief career this Federalist Party managed to go through three quite distinct phases, each of which revealed a different composition of members and of principles. While these are visible enough in the detailed histories of the early national period, they have not been clearly marked in our textbooks. An appreciation of the distinctness of each phase should reduce some of the confusion about what the party stood for in the 1790's, where Jeffersonians have succeeded in attaching to it the reactionary social philosophy of Hamilton. Furthermore, an identification of the leading traits of Federalism in each of its three phases will clarify the corresponding traits in the opposition to Federalism.

i. federalism as nationalism, 1785-1789

The dating of this phase is arbitrary, but defensible. Programs for strengthening the Articles of Confederation were a favorite subject of political men before Yorktown. In 1785 a national movement began to form. Several delegates met in that year at Mount Vernon to negotiate commercial and territorial conflicts between Virginia and Maryland. Informally but seriously they also discussed the problem of strengthening the national government. These men joined with nationally minded leaders from other states to bring on the concerted movement for a new Constitution.¹

The interesting questions raised by Charles Beard about the motives of these Federalists have partly obscured their leading concerns, and the scholarship of Merrill Jensen has perhaps clarified the matter less than it should have. These scholars have caused us to be preoccupied with the question of who was going to rule among the economic classes of the United States, and Beard especially framed the issue as being between landed and commercial interests. But as later critics have demonstrated, Beard did not prove that the Constitutional Fathers were as clearly in the

commercial class as his reasoning would indicate. The two great Virginia nationalists, Washington and Madison, represented the interests of planters and western land developers. At that time they supposed their interests to be identical with those of the American mercantile community. Professor Jensen has quite clearly established that the United States was improving rather than declining in the 1780's in the fundamental fields of political order, productivity, commerce and population. Nor should the short but severe depression in the middle of the decade and the local disorders be particularly blamed on the Articles of Confederation. Under the supposedly more perfect government of the Constitution of 1787 we had whiskey rebellions, western conspiracies, financial confusion and secessionist plots quite as alarming as the troubles of the 1780's. Our leading nationalists had determined on a more centralized system of government well before Daniel Shays took up his musket and besieged a court house. Depression and disorders did, of course, prepare the public to support constitutional changes.²

The leading concern of the original Federalists was the complex field of foreign relations. In the 1780's the United States continued to have a colonial economy, so that there was no important economic question that was not at the same time a question of foreign policy. John Adams, with a bankrupt and disarmed government behind him, could not persuade the British to sign a commercial treaty with their former colonies, nor could Thomas Jefferson do much better with our allies, the French. The result of this diplomatic futility was that the trade of the United States was more thoroughly in the hands of British capitalists in the 1780's than it had been in the 1760's. Most infuriating was the exclusion of United States ships from the British West Indies. This rigorous application of the British Navigation Acts meant that now only British ships could carry American grain, timber, salted meat and livestock to these numerous and needy customers.³

Even the signs of increased prosperity alarmed Americans who saw their growing trade managed and directed for the profit of a reviving British Empire. Furthermore, without an army or the money with which to raise one, the Continental Congress could not press our claims to the Northwest Territory, which the British and their Indian allies held firmly, if quite in defiance of the Treaty of Paris of 1783. Nor could Congress challenge the Spanish in their defiance of the boundaries we claimed in the Southwest, their refusal to allow to our western settlers the free navigation of the Mississippi, and their influence over the southwest Indians. Few Americans lived or traded West of the Appalachian chain, and by no stretch of the imagination could the Atlantic settlements be considered crowded. A conservative statesman, John Jay, would willingly compromise the western claims of the United States in the interest of peaceful commerce. But Jay was not typical of the men who dominated American politics. As William Appleman Williams has argued, the effective rulers

of the United States before 1829 were determined mercantilists, by which he means men who believed that the United States should expand to become a full-grown mercantilist empire. It was this ambitious design which united such diverse patriots as John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. They wanted commerce *and* agriculture, expanding territories *and* domestic manufactures. In their moments of exalted vision they saw the American system engrossing all of North America, or even all of the western hemisphere.⁴

The leading Federalists of the Constitution-making era understood that Britain and Spain were weak in North America because they retained only minor outposts of their empires here, but the United States was weak because of defective political arrangements. The challenge tackled by the founding fathers was simply to find some ingenious way of preserving the freedom of the American people, while marshalling their great material resources for common purposes. The opposition to the Federal constitution was based on fear that it could be exploited to reduce the liberties and wealth of the people; it was commonly attacked for failing to guard this or that particular interest. But we should notice that several features of the Constitution were scarcely challenged at all: its provisions for a national revenue, a national military force, a national commercial policy, and, as a consequence of all of these, a potentially vigorous policy toward the British, the Spanish and the Indians.

There remained one group of Americans, powerful in influence though not in numbers, who supported the new Constitution without seeing in it the means for developing an autonomous, western-hemisphere American Empire. These were the gentlemen of the eastern cities trading in British goods and American staples. By the standards of the world in the eighteenth century these men were progressive enough, but the astonishing events of the French Revolution were to leave them celebrated as conservatives in history books. Some of them had been cautious Patriots, others had been Tories. But after 1783 all were in favor of reintegrating the economy of America with that of the British Empire. This was by no means a treasonous notion, for it looked forward to a partnership of equals, rather than the nettling subordination which the ministers of George III had tried so distressingly to maintain in the years preceding independence. The British supplied the best manufactured goods on the most reasonable terms. They were in other ways uplifting and desirable neighbors. They had an established church, but permitted freedom to dissenters; certain classes were privileged, but all classes enjoyed valuable liberties and opportunities for advancement; crime, vice and misery plagued town and country, but organized charities fought them with increasing devotion and technical skill; the British had become the world's foremost slave traders, but were also now becoming the world's outstanding abolitionists.

Madison, Jefferson, and Monroe, all good American Nationalists,

would see Britain as a foe of enlightened progress in the 1790's, and would identify the cause of human liberty with that of France. They supposed that their pro-British countrymen were political reactionaries. In fact, the Anglophiles of America overwhelmingly looked to the liberal trading classes of Britain, and admired their cautious and civilized humanitarianism, their drift toward freer trade, their religious toleration and their support of upright personal and public finance. The England of their ideal was responsibly progressive, and moving away from rural Toryism, the Royal Prerogative, narrow Anglicanism, commercial monopoly and the slave trade.

There were friends of the United States among English radicals—Price and Priestley are examples. But the important pro-American party in England was composed, reasonably enough, of merchants and bankers specializing in the American trade. These men, led by the Barings, advocated that the United States be given the enjoyment as an independent nation of almost all the economic advantages earlier enjoyed in the condition of dependency. Obviously the more a friendly disposition toward Britain developed in America, the more the pro-American group could advance conciliatory measures in the British government. When the United States twisted the lion's tail, the pro-American party was obliged either to keep quiet or be denounced as disloyal.⁵

ii. washingtonian federalism, 1789-1800

George Washington's command of his own administrations has been obscured by the dramatic doings and impressive rhetoric of his principal minister, Alexander Hamilton. The importance of Hamilton has been further exaggerated by the political tactics of the opposition, who sensibly directed their attacks against the vulnerable Secretary of the Treasury rather than the venerated President. Washington's political technique itself removed him partly from the arena of political contention: he suggested policies more often than he proclaimed them, he sought advice from all sides, he avoided personalities, and he left time for deliberation. Of all his secretaries, Hamilton was the most erratic, but also the most talented and, in a way, even most loyal. Hamilton, Madison, and Jefferson all tried to steer Washington in the making of foreign and domestic policies, but none fully succeeded. Hamilton was more successful than the Virginians because he did not instigate public attacks on the administration when it failed to follow his own wishes.⁶

But Washington was in charge of his administrations, and his Federalism was distinctly neither that of Hamilton nor that of Madison, but a superior combination of both. Hamilton represented the point of view of the Anglophiles, a group increasingly disliked and distrusted by Madison and Jefferson, and yet, as Washington saw, an indispensable part of the community. This group supported the financial program of funding, of assuming the states' revolutionary debts, and of creating a central

bank. The Anglophiles naturally viewed the French alliance as at best a sometime convenience, and certainly not as a permanent and paramount factor in American diplomacy. Hamilton was himself one of the most ardent members of his own party, actually favoring a full commercial *and military* alliance with the British. Madison and Jefferson, on the other hand, believed that the United States could achieve full commercial and territorial satisfaction from the British Empire by a combination of closer relations with France and coercive acts of trade and navigation directed against the British.⁷

The foreign policy of Washingtonian Federalism may best be summed up in the word neutrality, which represented a middle course between Hamilton's desired English alliance and the Republicans' (as they came to call themselves) desire to wage commercial warfare. Hamilton was determined to avoid war with the British, and wrote, in defense of his policies, some of the longest political tracts celebrating the advantages of peace over war. Yet Hamilton was willing enough, in defense of his principles, to fight western Pennsylvanians, Frenchmen, Spaniards or even the Jacobins of Virginia. Jefferson and Madison, on the other hand, were so convinced of the utter reliance of Britain on American markets and raw materials that they denied their proposed measures of commercial coercion would produce war. Later experience proved them wrong, but to themselves and their followers they appeared a peace-loving group.

In the twentieth century the word neutrality has acquired connotations of passiveness, uninvolvedness and even irresponsibility, and Washington's Farewell Address has been quoted in defense of isolationism. But isolationism was impossible to a nation whose territory and trade were still vulnerable to the ambitions of three imperial powers. And Washington's neutrality was a policy of strength, even compared to Hamilton's or Madison's, for the great powers had only contempt for neutrals who would not fight for their independence. Whether the offending power was Britain, France, Spain, or a tribe of American Indians, Washington would with equal patience initiate negotiations of the friendliest sort possible, while at the same time seeking a military force adequate to the emergency if negotiations failed. Preserving and strengthening the American union was the highest political goal that could be realized in Washington's lifetime.

Washington agreed with Hamilton on the value of funding, banking, a large and growing trade, and a permanent military force, but in long-range objectives he agreed with Jefferson and Madison. This was especially true with respect to his dedication to the development of the American West, and the binding of it to the Atlantic states by roads, canals, and equal rights in government. Like so many of Washington's political goals, this one of building up the trans-Allegheny west had originated in private ambition. He had been one of the first Americans to cross the

mountains and fight the French for possession of the heart of the American continent, and continued to develop his lands on the Ohio to the end of his life. Ever patient, Washington did not press as demanding a diplomacy against either Britain or Spain as did the later Virginia presidents, but he was demanding enough. He insisted on nothing less than full United States sovereignty in the Old Northwest and Southwest, and the free use of the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico, and these diplomatic goals were obtained during his second administration.⁸

Washington also shared with the Republican leaders a long-range goal of American economic self-sufficiency. There is widespread misunderstanding on this question of who advocated the rapid development of American manufactures, because of the inconsistency of the two most familiar figures of the early republic, Jefferson and Hamilton. Professor Williams, for one, has solved the riddle.⁹ Jefferson, after all, declared many times that it was better for Americans to be farmers, and import what manufactured goods they needed from European workshops. But that was not his language all the time, and it was certainly not his behavior. Jefferson, like Washington, took a deep and lifelong interest in mechanical improvements and American industries. Jefferson hated poverty, filth and crowding, those noisome products of the early industrial revolution; but he loved machinery and science. As a tourist he always sought new inventions to admire, and so, of course did Washington. Washington approved of Hamilton's Report on Manufactures; the Republicans did not attack him for it.

For Hamilton the Report on Manufactures represented a flirtation. Neither before nor after its preparation was he an ardent advocate for, or student of, industrialization. To protect American manufacturers would be to some degree to exclude British, and to diminish the import-export merchants who were the rich, well-born, and wise in Hamilton's political universe. After Washington retired Hamilton dedicated himself to political and military ambitions, not to technological advancement. During the presidency of Adams Hamilton labored for the full-blown military and commercial alliance with Britain which Washington had sensibly avoided, while Adams was opposing French aggressions with Washingtonian firmness and patience. Under Washington, the merchants had supported the policy of neutrality; Adams was firm enough against the pretensions of the French so that they might have supported him too. But Hamilton split the party by supporting the extreme Anglophile-Franco-phobes and denouncing John Adams. Divided, the Federalists lost control of the nation, never to regain it.¹⁰

Before considering the last phase of Federalism, let us summarize the Federalism of George Washington, as continued by John Adams. In foreign policy Washington aimed at the expansion of our territory and trade and the preservation of peace and independence by fair and patient negotiations, supported by an army and a navy. Domestically he favored the

balanced economic growth of all sections of the country, but especially an increasing interdependence among them, and relatively less dependence on foreigners. He favored the conservative trading classes, but then taxed trade and applied much of the income to securing the West. The significant opponents to Washingtonian Federalism shared his long-term objectives, but disagreed so strenuously over means as finally to suspect the comence or the good intentions of Washington himself.

By the end of the Federal Decade Alexander Hamilton had become less the leader of his party than an uncontrollable destructive force within it. He challenged President Adams in his constitutional role as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, he disputed the President's authority in foreign affairs, and in 1800 issued a printed assault on the President's character which was probably indictable under the Sedition Act of 1798. There is no excusing Hamilton in this crisis. His President had firmly prepared the nation to defend itself if necessary, and, fully in the spirit of his predecessor, had patiently sought a peaceful diplomatic remedy for our troubles with France. There was a perfectly real and serious threat to the United States during the Adams administration, for the increasingly powerful French nation was both attacking our commerce and improving its plans to reoccupy Louisiana. It was foolish of Republican leaders to write these facts off as the libels of a subversive Anglo-monarchical party, but so far as they were foolish those leaders were also ineffectual. Adams had the majority of the nation behind him in the French crisis. Hamilton, Pickering, and the rest of the Anglophile Federalists had come to their own delusion, which was that the Republicans were not merely misinformed about French intentions, but were conspiratorially involved with revolutionary France in a plot to subvert American liberty. Rather pathetically, these Federalists, after helping prepare the nation to defend its rights, cast themselves in the role of strident and inept censors. It was not merely that they dosed the American nation with taxes, navies, standing armies and the Alien and Sedition Acts. All of those, including the limitations on the freedom of the press, had been borne during the Revolution, and would be borne again during later national emergencies. What hurt in Hamiltonian-Pickeringian Federalism was the manifest desire to make of these emergency measures a permanent system, for it was embarrassingly clear that these men deplored the passing of the war emergency.

iii. reactionary federalism, 1800-1815

"We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists," declared Thomas Jefferson in his First Inaugural, thereby inviting the followers of Washington and Adams to join in harmonious support of his own administration. Jefferson helped create the first two-party system in the United States, but he did not believe in it. He intended to cast the worst of the Anglomen into political obscurity and bring the rest of the nation into tranquil cooperation. The successes of his predecessors and the European

peace made it possible for Jefferson to remove internal taxes, reduce the military and honor the public debt. Friendly relations with England improved our trade, and this under the terms of the once-hated Jay Treaty.

During the years of Jefferson's greatest successes, the name Federalism became corrupted by the fanaticism of several of its most visible leaders. It was in this third phase, for instance, that Federalism became synonymous with a kind of defensive political elitism. With the nation enjoying unprecedented prosperity and security in 1804, Hamilton was despondent about "our real disease, which is democracy."¹¹ Worse, Hamilton was experimenting in his last years with a project for mixing public piety and conservative politics in a proposed Christian Constitutional Society, in which both sound religion and sound politics might be made to serve the interests of each other. The political essays of Fisher Ames, widely reprinted in Federalist papers, brought a pessimistic and insulting view of the character and morals of the American people to their attention.¹²

To this sour attitude a few of the leading Federalists added the notion of disunion. The perennial advocate of this was Timothy Pickering, who had been the outstanding sponsor of the Sedition Act of 1798. Men of tolerant views may say of Pickering as they have said of Jefferson Davis, *et al.*, that there is nothing so absolute in politics as to make the idea of dissolving the United States immoral. Nevertheless, the idea of a separation of the states was horrible to the greatest Federalist, Washington, and was quite unpopular even among Pickering's friends. But Pickering was not read out of the party because of his eccentricity, and, given a more receptive audience for his ideas because of the unpopularity of the War of 1812, he finally pushed them, if not to the lunacy of secession, at least to the futilities of the Hartford Convention.

After 1800 Federalists distinguished themselves by voting against the Louisiana Purchase, and thereby increased their reputation for being enemies of the western settlements of the United States. They were sectional, not national in their outlook, just as they were elitist, not majoritarian. All that was constructive, progressive, and optimistic in the Federalism of the first and second phases had now been adopted by the Jeffersonian Republicans, at least in the sense that the majority party found positions of respect and influence within itself for a diversity of interests and programs. Thus Tench Coxe and Mathew Carey, our leading advocates of industrialization, were both good Republicans in the 1800's. Albert Gallatin, the eminently Republican Secretary of the Treasury, became a partisan of the Bank of the United States. Jefferson himself proposed the application of surplus revenues, at a time when he could anticipate them, to the construction of roads and canals to bind the West to the East, and he revived Washington's plea for a national center for learning. While Republicans were promoting such civilized projects, leading Federalists, the former authors of neutrality laws in the early years of the French Rev-

olution, were supplying equipment to the Spanish-American revolutionist, Francisco de Miranda.¹³

It is surely unkind to characterize post-1800 Federalism by the extreme doctrines of Timothy Pickering and Fisher Ames, but the party invited such characterization by allowing them such eminence in their councils. The third-phase Federalists, to do them justice, did manage to function as a responsible opposition on some issues, and where Jeffersonian statecraft was weakest their criticism was most sensible. From the first concerted assault on American shipping in 1805, the Federalists maintained that there was but one way to defend one's commerce, and that was to arm. Had this reasoning been followed, the United States might have been prepared for the War of 1812, and being so prepared might not have felt compelled to declare it. Confronted with several trained regiments of American troops near the Canadian border, the British government might well have removed some of the causes of war in time to avert it, especially if American arming had been attended with a patient and conciliatory diplomacy. The Federalists' willingness to arm was partly a political tactic, aimed not at beating back the pretensions of Britain, but at voting down embargoes. Nevertheless, however devious their motives, their advice was sound. Under Washington and Adams embargoes were scarcely used. Therefore international trade continued in spite of its liabilities, producing the vital import revenues with which the government could finance its program of military preparations. This, in turn, supported a firm diplomacy which, perhaps as much as was possible, reduced the European restrictions on American trade.

The embargoes of Jefferson and Madison, by contrast, failed to produce the swift and decisive capitulation of the British or the French that had been intended, and produced great distress and disaffection at home. That this distress was ultimately blamed on the British in most sections of the country made the policy of commercial restriction not a civilized substitute for war but, as the Federalists had correctly predicted, a goad toward it. And restriction sapped our ability to prepare for war.

Once war was engaged, too many Federalists refused to support the very military preparations they had pretended to advocate in earlier years. The younger Republicans, on the other hand, adopted the Federalist contempt for commercial restriction and adopted the un-Jeffersonian view that armies and even navies might be instilled with Republican virtue. So by the end of the War of 1812 the Federalists had as a party thrown away their last sensible position, the notion embodied in the first and second phases of Federalism that to pursue a successful foreign policy a nation must be armed, and that to be armed it must have a reliable revenue and a manageable currency. By the time these principles had become completely absorbed into Republicanism, Republicanism had become completely the Federalism of Philadelphia in 1787 and of Washington's presidency, modified only in degree by the rapid democratization of man-

ners characteristic of the times, and by the eager expansiveness of the younger generation. Federalism as a name lingered in the declining seaports of New England, a relic of an eighteenth-century age when the wealthiest and most influential citizens were those engaged in the British trade.¹⁴

The fading of the name did not mean the disappearance of all the men who had marched under it during its varied career. John Marshall's greatest years came after 1815. Rufus King, William Plumer and Harrison Gray Otis were moderate enough to see that the Republican Party, after all, served the national interest. John Quincy Adams had supported the Louisiana Purchase and even the Embargo; his Federalist credentials destroyed, he was henceforth to be classified with Republicans and—he lived so long—Whigs. Even Timothy Pickering survived the party he had helped destroy, and lived to lend the doubtful charm of his endorsement in 1828 to the Hero of the West, Andrew Jackson.¹⁵

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footnotes

1. There was nothing conspiratorial about this. The effective decisions to consult with other states were taken in the Maryland and Virginia legislatures. See D. S. Freeman, *George Washington*, VI (New York, 1954), 66.

2. See, for instance, Madison to Monroe, 7 August 1785; Madison, *Letters and Other Writings*, Congressional Edition (Philadelphia, 1865) I, 169-173.

3. S. F. Bemis, *Jay's Treaty* (Revised Edition, New Haven, 1962) Ch. 2. Gilbert Chinard, *Thomas Jefferson, the Apostle of Americanism* (Revised Edition, Ann Arbor, 1957) Book 3, Ch. 2.

4. Bemis, *Jay's Treaty*, Ch. 1; A. P. Whitaker, *The Spanish American Frontier: 1783-1795* (Boston, 1927), Chs. 1-7; William Appleman Williams, "The Age of Mercantilism: An Interpretation of the American Political Economy, 1763-1828," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, XV (October, 1958), 419-437. Professor Williams greatly elaborates his thesis in Part I of *The Contours of American History* (Cleveland, 1961).

5. The most detailed and sympathetic accounts of the Anglophile Americans and the related friends of America in Britain are by Bradford Perkins: *The First Rapprochement, England and the United States, 1805-1812* (Philadelphia, 1955), and *Prologue to War, England and the United States, 1805-1812* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963).

6. The earliest influential history of the 1790's that made Washington the dupe of Hamilton is "The Anas" by Thomas Jefferson, first published shortly after his death, and followed by Randall in his influential biography. "The Anas" is reprinted in Paul L. Ford, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* I (New York, 1892).

7. A stimulating and detailed comparison of the aims of foreign policy is Paul A. Varg's *Foreign Policies of the Founding Fathers* (East Lansing, 1963). This is the only profound study of American foreign policy from the end of the American Revolution to the end of the War of 1812; only the previously mentioned works by W. A. Williams challenge it in depth and originality.

8. Bemis, *Jay's Treaty*, and *Pinckney's Treaty* (Revised Edition, New Haven, 1960).

9. Williams, *Contours*, 163-170.

10. John C. Miller, *Alexander Hamilton, Portrait in Paradox* (New York, 1959), Chs. 32, 33, the first of which is appropriately titled, "The Effort to Avert Peace." Also see the recent admirable study by Alexander De Conde, *The Quasi-War* (New York, 1966), especially Ch. 8, and Stephen G. Kurtz, *The Presidency of John Adams* (Philadelphia, 1957).

11. John C. Hamilton, ed., *The Works of Alexander Hamilton* (New York, 1850-1), VI, 568.

12. Miller, *Hamilton*, 552-3; Seth Ames, ed., *Works of Fisher Ames* (Boston, 1854).

13. See sketches by Broadus Mitchell in the *DAB*: "Mathew Carey," III, 489-91; "Tench Coxe," IV, 488-9; Williams, *Contours*, 189-90. Federalist support for the misguided adventures of Miranda is stressed in Henry Adams, *History of the United States* (New York, 1921) III, 189-196. William Spence Robertson demonstrates that Jefferson and Madison knew enough to prevent American aid to Miranda in 1806 had they wished to do so. See "Francisco de Miranda and the Revolutionizing of Spanish America," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1907* I, 189-540, Ch. 9. Hamilton and Pickering had declined to support Miranda in

1798 (Robertson, "Miranda," Ch. 7), in this instance agreeing fully with John Adams. Rufus King supported Miranda for the better part of two decades.

14. A recent book by David Hackett Fischer makes the valuable point that the younger Federalists of the post-1800 era adapted themselves quite expertly to popular political techniques, so that while they were unable to capture the ideals of the rising democracy they helped to develop its political methods. Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism* (New York, 1965). See Shaw Livermore, *The Twilight of Federalism* (Princeton, 1962), for the surprisingly varied careers of surviving Federalists after 1815.

15. Livermore, *Twilight*, 203.