

“The Most Profligate and Scurrilous Public Prints”

Frank E. Fee Jr.

... our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost.

Thomas Jefferson, 1786

... were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers & be capable of reading them.

Thomas Jefferson, 1787

... the man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them; inasmuch as he who knows nothing is nearer to truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods & errors.

Thomas Jefferson, 1807

From forty years' experience of the wretched guess-work of the newspapers of what is not done in open daylight, and of their falsehood even as to that, I rarely think them worth reading, and almost never worth notice.

Thomas Jefferson, 1816

Thomas Jefferson's evolving opinion of the press coincided with an evolution of newspapers in America at the turn of the nineteenth century. To be sure, the previous century had seen political newspapers, such as James Franklin's *New-England Courant* and Peter Zenger's *New-York Weekly Journal*, but the momentous decisions facing the newly formed United States superheated the political climate and transformed the press. And the press, in turn, animated and inflamed the political discourse.

Certainly, the vision that engendered the First Amendment guarantee of a free press proved nothing like many newspapers of the Early Republic, and each of the first three

presidents was shocked and saddened at the result. What Jefferson took pains to hide, however, was his own role in the invective.

By the late eighteenth century, politics centered on a virtual life-and-death struggle between the Federalists of John Adams and Alexander Hamilton and the Democratic-Republicans of Jefferson, James Monroe, and James Madison. The Federalists are sometimes seen as the party¹ of the North, chiefly New England, favoring a strong central government under the Constitution, particularly in view of the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation, under which the States – it might be hard to call them United – existed from 1781 to 1789. The Democratic-Republicans, known throughout the period as the Republicans, were the states’ rights party, favoring weak central government and, in most cases, continuation of the Articles of Confederation. It was seen to be the party of the South, principally the Virginians so close to the top tier of the government, although many powerful adherents – Samuel Adams and John Hancock among them – could be found in the North and throughout the republic. Many newspapers in this era, although not all, served a political and print culture not unlike our own times, with a fierce partisan divide and a willingness to abandon truth and civility for political advantage. As historian Worthington Ford puts it:

It cannot be said that the ideals of journalism were high, and the intensity of party struggle made the lowest instruments acceptable. Personalities were freely exchanged, and the character of no man was safe from the assaults of anonymous scribblers, who as

¹ “Party” here and elsewhere during the late eighteenth century might be seen more clearly as factions of like-minded individuals rather than fully formed parties in the modern sense. Organized parties would evolve closer to the 1830s and the age of Jackson. See, for instance, Jeffrey Pasley, *“The Tyranny of Printers”: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001).

easily changed their allegiance as their coat, and who gained a precarious living from personalities, half truths and untruths, expressed in the most outrageous terms.²

Although demurring on the point, contemporaneous printer and historian Isaiah Thomas nevertheless included in his 1810 *History of Printing in America* remarks on the American press by Samuel Miller, who wrote that it had been “pronounced by travellers [sic] the most profligate and scurrilous prints in the civilized world.”³

“The Federalist”

Because of their ability to circulate ideas and opinions cheaply far and wide to all classes of people, newspapers figured prominently in the debates leading to ratification of the Constitution of the United States on June 21, 1788. In the months prior to the convention, May 25 and September 17, 1787, delegates drew up the proposed Constitution and newspapers published drafts of the document and commentary. Before it was done, “the country’s ablest men wrote thousands of vehement letters both defending and attacking the work of the Convention.”⁴ Those letters were published and republished throughout the newly minted states, generally over pseudonyms intended, in part to preserve their authors’ anonymity, as Fairfield and others assert,⁵ but also because at the time it was still considered “ungentlemanly and self-aggrandizing

² Worthington Chauncey Ford, “Jefferson and the Newspaper,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 8 (1905): 78-11, at 81.

³ Samuel Miller, *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: T. and J. Swords, 1803), 251-255, quoted in Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, 2nd ed. (Barre, MA: Imprint Society, 1970), 21.

⁴ Roy P. Fairfield, “Introduction,” in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, 2nd ed., Roy P. Fairfield, ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966), vi.

⁵ *Ibid.*

to engage publicly in political controversy.”⁶ From a rhetorician’s perspective, they also may have been hoping to lend stature, ethos, to their words by attaching them to a Roman or Roman-looking name. Thus, some writers adopted the names of famous Romans, like Agrippa, Cato, Caesar, or Publius, while others, such as John Dickinson had in the 1760s with his “Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer,”⁷ “used homely identifications, such as ‘A Columbian Patriot,’ ‘Centinel,’ and ‘A Federal Farmer.’”⁸ The “often acrimonious arguments for and against ratification [were] replete with biting satire, dire predictions, and creative name-calling.”⁹

In response to an anti-Federalist who had signed himself Agrippa, a Massachusetts writer signing himself as Kempis O’Flannegan warned, “Agrippa is the oracle of sedition, and sedition is the idol of anti-federalism. – Beware, O sons of Massachusetts, how ye swallow the anti-federalist pill; it may appear to be gilded with a medicine savory to the taste, but you will find, if you take it, that it will be bitter to the stomach.”¹⁰

⁶ Arthur Scherr, “John Taylor of Carolina: Pamphlets and the Press in the 1790s,” *American Periodicals* 27, no. 1 (2017): 53-72, at 56.

⁷ John Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies* (New York: Outlook Co., 1903). Accessed at Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/47111/47111-h/47111-h.htm>.

⁸ Fairfield, *Federalist Papers*, vi.

⁹ Michael J. Faber, “Democratic Ant-Federalism: Rights, Democracy, and the Minority in the Pennsylvania Ratifying Convention,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 138, no. 2 (April 2014): 135-162, at 135.

¹⁰ Kempis O’Flannegan, “To the Citizens of Massachusetts,” *Massachusetts Gazette*, Boston, January 1, 1788. Except for recasting the medial S’s, which look like F’s but were, in fact, S’s, in proper English usage for hundreds of years before the 1800s, all spelling, punctuation, and syntax are in the original. Since headlines were seldom used in colonial newspapers, stories are identified by their first few words for citation purposes.

In Pennsylvania, an extract of a letter from an unnamed constitutional convention delegate quoted him as saying that “My decided opinion of the matter is, that there is no alternative between the adoption of it and anarchy.”¹¹

In an assessment that sounds eerily prescient of the twenty-first century, the delegate further lamented:

All the opposition to it that I have seen is, I must confess, addressed more to the passions than to the reason; and clear I am, if another federal convention is attempted, that the sentiments of the members will be more discordant or less accommodating than the last. ... General government is now suspended by a thread, I might go further, and say it is really at an end, and what will be the consequence of a fruitless attempt to amend the one which is offered before it is tried, or of the delay from the attempt, does not in my judgment need the gift of prophecy to predict.¹²

Locus of power

The Articles of Confederation probably owed their nature too well to having been drafted (1777) and ratified (1781) during the Revolution. As Americans were throwing off the yoke of a tyrannical government, they had little inclination to recreate central authority in their new framework. Political scientist John Altman says that:

Because colonial rule left the founders with a disdain for centralized government, they designed a system in which the individual states retained their sovereignty and that gave minimal power to the national government. The national government would hold the states together in a "league of friendship, operating mainly to provide for national defense and to conduct foreign policy. The Articles of Confederation created a system of government that had no chief executive, no court system, and left the national government with no real power to enforce taxation or regulate the economy.¹³

¹¹ “Extract of a Letter,” *Pennsylvania Mercury, and Universal Advertiser*, Philadelphia, January 3, 1788.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ John A. Altman, “The Articles and the Constitution: Similar in Nature, Different in Design,” *Pennsylvania Legacies* 3, no. 1 (May 2003): 20-21.

In nutshell, he says that “In trying to correct the problems suffered under colonial rule, the American founders created a weak and impotent national government that was incapable of managing economic and social conditions in postrevolutionary America.”¹⁴

The solution, the founders saw, was a stronger federal government. And yet the very weaknesses that reformers saw in the Articles appealed to men who wanted power kept closer to home with the states, and some who argued that creating a supra-government would trample natural rights. The objections of George Mason, a Virginia delegate to the Constitutional Convention, found their way around the states through the press. In part, Mason said he objected because under the proposal, “The Judiciary of the United States is so constructed and extended, as to absorb and destroy the Judiciaries of the several States; thereby rendering law as tedious, intricate and expensive, and justice as unattainable by a great part of the community, as in England; and enabling the rich to oppress and ruin the poor.”¹⁵

Among other concerns, Mason also found that in the draft,

The President of the United States has no Constitutional Council (a thing unknown in any safe and regular government) he will be therefore unsupported by proper information and advice, and will generally be directed by minions and favourites – or he will become a tool to the Senate – or a Council of State will grow out of the principal officers of the great departments; the worst and most dangerous of ingredients for such a Council in a free country; for they may be induced to join in any dangerous or oppressive measures to shelter themselves, and prevent an inquiry into their own misconduct in office.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ George Mason, “Objections, of the Hon. George Mason,” *Columbian Herald or the Patriotic Courier of North-America*, Charleston, SC, Dec. 27, 1787.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Moreover, out of the debates “has sprung that unnecessary and dangerous officer, the Vice-President, who for want of other employment, is made President of the Senate; thereby dangerously blending the Executive and Legislative powers; besides always giving to some one of the States an unnecessary and unjust pre-eminence over the others.”¹⁷

Among yet other defects, Mason wrote, “There is no declaration of any kind to preserve the liberty of the press, the trial by jury in civil causes, nor against the dangers of standing armies in time of peace.”¹⁸

Interestingly, Mason also objected to the fact that “the general legislature is restrained from prohibiting the further importation of slaves for twenty odd years, though such importations render the United States weaker, more vulnerable, and less capable of defense.”¹⁹ He did not elaborate.

In New York, Governor George Clinton, a Republican who favored a loose national government, likewise took issue with centralizing power in the federal government as proposed in Constitution. Writing under the name “Cato,” he published several letters arguing his point in the New York newspapers. One of the fathers of federalism, Alexander Hamilton, in return published rejoinders as “Caesar,” but conceived of a larger plan to cement adoption of the Constitution.

The result was 85 letters addressed to “The People of the State of New York,” that were published between October 1787 and May 1788, written by Hamilton, John Jay, and James

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Madison, all under the pseudonym, “Publius.” The tri-authorship came to mutual conclusion supporting ratification, but, as scholar Todd Estes finds:

Hamilton’s voice was that of a committed partisan of ratification. He told readers in the first number that he would not pretend to neutrality or impartiality. . . . Hamilton’s essays, then, betray no ambivalence; they *insist* that readers support ratification. But his essays are also tinged with pessimism about human nature, a fatalism that merged with and undercut the assertiveness of his voice . . . By contrast, John Jay’s few essays reveal a breathtaking, panoramic vision of national greatness. Jay’s words give voice to an optimistic outlook and a belief that national glory would be achieved through ratification. . . . Madison’s essays reveal a reflective thinker gradually coming to terms with a document about which he had, initially, serious reservations.²⁰

An unsigned analysis in the *Harvard Law Review* sums up the challenge Hamilton, Madison, and Jay – indeed, Congress – faced:

In the Federalist Papers, Publius defends a Constitution focused on creating power – power the national government lacked during the period of the Articles of Confederation, the lack of which had brought the country to “almost the last stage of national humiliation,” where there was “scarcely anything that [could] wound the pride or degrade the character of an independent nation which [the country did] not experience.” But while creating power was essential, the Founders understood that power always brings tyranny in its wake. They were thus committed to the endeavor of creating a government that was capable of governing both the country and itself. To this end, they created a system flush with “auxiliary precautions” against tyrannical usurpations.²¹

Hamilton, writing as Publius, introduced the project on October 30, 1787, in the *New-York Daily Advertiser*:

After an unequivocal experience of the inefficiency of the subsisting Federal Government [under the Articles of Confederation], you are called upon to deliberate on a new Constitution for the United States of America. The subject speaks its own importance; comprehending in its consequences, nothing less than the existence of the

²⁰ Todd Estes, “The Voices of Publius and the Strategies of Persuasion in *The Federalist*,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 28, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 523-558, at 526-527. Italics in original.

²¹ “Defending Federalism: Realizing Publius’s Vision” *Harvard Law Review* 122, no. 2 (2008): 745-66. Accessed October 4, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/stable/40042750>.

UNION, the safety and welfare of the parts of which it is composed, the fate of an empire, in many respects, the most interesting in the world.²²

Examination of the contemporaneous newspapers preserved digitally indicates that the authors of the Federalist Papers had no doubt prepared at least multiples in the series before publishing the first, and that they shared across several editors with first publication privileges. Federalist No. I was carried that first day by other New York newspapers besides the *Advertiser*. The *New-York Packet* sourced its copy to the *Independent Journal* rather than the *Daily Advertiser*,²³ while in publishing Federalist No II on October 31, the next day, the *Independent*, described it as “For the Independent,” indicating that the authors had given a copy directly to the printer.²⁴ Federalist No. II was not published in the *Advertiser* until November 2,²⁵ while Federalist No. III showed up in the *Independent Journal* on November 3.²⁶ All in all, the essays first appeared in the semiweekly *Independent Journal or General Advertiser*, nos. 1-85, October 27, 1787-April 2, 1888, June 14-Aug. 16, 1788; semiweekly *New-York Packet*, nos. 1-85, October 30, 1787-April 4, 1788; *Daily Advertiser*, nos. 1-50, October 30, 1787-February 11, 1788; and *New-York Journal and Daily Patriotic Register*, nos. 23-38, December 18, 1787-January 13, 1788.²⁷

²² Publius [Alexander Hamilton], “The FEDERALIST No. I,” *New-York Daily Advertiser*, October 30, 1787. See also, for instance, “The Federalist Papers; No 1,” The Avalon Project, Lilliam Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School. Accessed at https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed01.asp.

²³ “The FEDERALIST No. 1,” *New-York Packet*, October 30, 1787

²⁴ “Federalist No. II,” *Independent Journal*, New York, October 31, 1787.

²⁵ “Federalist No. II,” *New-York Daily Advertiser*, Nov. 1, 1787.

²⁶ “Federalist No. III, *Independent Journal*, New York, November 3, 1787.

²⁷ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, 2nd ed., Roy P. Fairfield, ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966), 307-308.

The Federalist Papers, appearing first in the newspapers, were compiled into a pamphlet that was widely circulated, just as other serializations such as John Dickinson’s “Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer” had been. The preponderance of historians generally sees this pattern as emanating from the wide and relatively inexpensive reach of the newspapers – circulating to homes but also to taverns, where they could be read and discussed. Arthur Scherr, however, argues that early political leaders preferred pamphlets as “cheaper for consumers to purchase than a yearlong subscription to a newspaper.” He adds that “authors may have concluded that pamphlets, concentrating on a single topic of interest to readers, would more effectively convey their message than would burying it in the columns of a large-folio newspaper, where it would compete for readers’ attention with numerous other items and advertisements.”²⁸ It should be noted that not all newspapers were sold solely through annual subscriptions, though it appears most were.

As an aside, it is worth noting that during this period Congress was wrestling with numerous issues of national self-identity and governance not covered or even brought out by the Articles of Confederation. An illustration was the myriad coinage and currencies representing denominations of the colonies, England, Spain, France, Holland, and other countries circulating in the United States. A committee report to Congress shows the problem and the recommended solution: Basing the money on the Spanish dollar and using the decimal system:

Everyone knows the facility of decimal arithmetic. Every one remembers that when learning money arithmetic, he used to be puzzled with adding the farthings, taking out the fours and carrying them on; adding the pence, taking out the twelves and carrying them on; adding the shillings, taking out the twenties and carrying them on; but when he

²⁸ Scherr, “John Taylor,” 54. Scherr presents a similarly argued position in, “To ‘Alarm the Publick Mind’: A Reexamination of Pamphlets and Newspapers in Philadelphia and the Early Republic,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, 83, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 297-33.

came to the pounds, where he had only tens to carry forward, it was easy and free from error. The bulk of mankind are school-boys through life. These little perplexities are always great to them, and even mathematical heads feel the relief of an easier substituted for a more difficult process.²⁹

A sense of the passionate debate surrounding the adoption of the Constitution may be gained from a Rhode Islander's appraisal of delays in his state's legislature:

“A viler and more abandoned set of beings never disgraced any legislative, judicial or executive authorities since the fall of Adam. Every *conscientious* and *honest* man in our devoted republic is employed in contemplating with admiration, and devoutly wishing for the *speedy* adoption of the New Constitution; – though their fears are occasionally on the alarms from the ill founded suggestions of a G-r-y, and the more *sly* insinuations of *your* SIXTEEN seceding members; performances too well adopted to blow up the flame of dissention, and to embitter minds of the public against all *good* and *virtuous government*. God grant that there may be wisdom and goodness enough still found among the *majority* to adopt, without hesitation, what a WASHINGTON, a FRANKLIN, a MADISON, &c. so warmly recommended. – Without this adoption, a civil war I am afraid will take place – this *must* arise from the present confusion of our different state governments.”³⁰

Civil war over the Constitution, particularly if it failed, seems to have been on the minds of a number of correspondents in this period. The unnamed delegate quoted in the *Pennsylvania Mercury* had alluded to it, as well, in his weary commentary.³¹

In the end, of course, the Constitution was adopted, though on the promise that some of the defects that had been identified – Freedom of the Press, for one – would be addressed by the Bill of Rights, adopted September 25, 1791, and ratified on December 15, 1791. But ratification of the Constitution December 7, 1787 (it took effect June 21, 1788) did not lower the

²⁹ “Notes on the Establishment of a Money-Mint, and of a Coinage, for the United States,” *Essex Journal AND The Massachusetts and New-Hampshire General Advertiser*, Newburyport, MA, August 13, 1784.

³⁰ “Extract of a Letter from Rhode-Island,” *Columbian Herald or The Independent Courier of North America*, Charleston, SC, December 6, 1787.

³¹ “Extract of a Letter,” *Pennsylvania Mercury, and Universal Advertiser*, Philadelphia, January 3, 1788.

temperature of the public passions. Sharp words that had made their way into print in the debate over the form of government continued, the shrill voices had become ingrained as the focus turned from how the nation would be governed to who would be in charge.

Politics and the press

Although many newspapers in the young nation represented – even encouraged – the political division, the editors and newspapers most closely associated with the factions were the Republicans Philip Freneau, editor of the *National Gazette*, and Benjamin Franklin Bache of the *Philadelphia Aurora*, both located in Philadelphia. On the Federalist side, John Fenno, who launched the *Gazette of the United States and Daily Evening Advertiser* on April 15, 1789, is most famous, although there were many other sheets associated with the cause. Besides underwriting Fenno, Alexander Hamilton, for instance, had launched the *New-York Evening Post* November 16, 1801 in New York as a Federalist voice. “The purpose of the *Post*,” media historian David Paul Nord writes, “was to boost the Federalist cause and to destroy Jefferson. If that purpose required the editor to vilify his party’s opponents as liars and traitors, to attach the president as a moral degenerate with a slave harem, or to shoot a Republican dead in the street in a duel, so be it. That was what newspaper work was all about in 1801.”³²

Other leading editors in the ideological and political warfare included Federalist William Cobbett, who launched *Porcupine’s Gazette* in March 1797, declaring, “Ye Democrats now beware, and hasten to gird on your armour and shield, that you may render yourselves

³² David Paul Nord, “Newspapers and American Nationhood, 1776-1826,” in *Three Hundred Years of the American Newspaper*, (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1991), 392.

invulnerable to the piercing quills of that groveling animal, the Porcupine.”³³ In shutting down his paper in 1800, Cobbett told readers, “I congratulate myself on having the entire approbation of every man of sense, candour and integrity, the disapprobation of every fool, the hatred of every *malignant* whig, and the curse of every villain.”³⁴ Employing a nautical metaphor, Cobbett reminded his followers that:

I began my editorial career with the *presidency of Mr. Adams*, and my principal object was to render his administration all the assistance in my power. I looked upon him as a stately well-armed vessel, sailing on an expedition to combat and destroy the fatal influence of Frenchy intrigue and French principles, and I flattered myself with the hope of accompanying him through the voyage, and of partaking, in a trifling degree, of the glory of the enterprize; [sic] but [with Jefferson winning the election of 1800] he suddenly tacked about and I could follow him no longer.³⁵

According to media historian Carol Sue Humphrey, Cobbett’s journal “wasted no words in his attacks on the Republicans and their support of the French in the war in Europe. More than any other editor, he helped establish the reputation of the 1790s as the era of vituperative journalism.”³⁶

³³ Quoted in Walt Brown, “The Federal Era III: Scissors, Paste, and Ink,” in *The American Journalism History Reader: Critical and Primary Texts*, Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2011): 120-130, at 126.

³⁴ William Cobbett, “To the Subscribers to This Gazette,” *Porcupine’s Gazette*, New York, January 13, 1800. He had moved from Philadelphia to New York, he said, because “my old democratic Judge, MACK KEAN” had been elected governor of Pennsylvania and he could no longer live in “that degraded and degrading state.”

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Carole Sue Humphrey, *The Press of the Young Republic, 1783-1833* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 46.

She adds that Cobbett “particularly enjoyed attacking the *Aurora* and its editor, Benjamin Franklin Bache. Cobbett described the *Aurora* as a ‘vehicle of lies and sedition’ and characterized Bache as ‘an impudent scoundrel’ and ‘an evil-looking devil.’”³⁷

In Vermont, Matthew Lyon, editor of the *Scourge of Aristocracy and Repository of Important Political Truth*, would go on to become one of the most famous victims of the Sedition Act of 1798.

Underwriting the press

Like Jefferson, Hamilton put money into a number of political newspapers. Besides the *New-York Evening Post*, he and several other backers founded the *American Minerva*, New York City’s first daily, which appeared December 9, 1793, edited by Noah Webster, when Fenno’s *Gazette of the United States* moved to be near the federal government that departed New York in 1790 for Philadelphia,³⁸ where “journalistic activity became most intense at the epicenter of national politics.”³⁹

Another editor, James Thompson Callender, according to Brown, “was a Scotchman of whom nothing good is known.”⁴⁰ He received financial assistance from Jefferson, and as historian Donald Stewart wrote, “That Jefferson sent him money in ignorance of his scurrility defies belief.”⁴¹ It was especially ironic because after having savaged first Hamilton and then

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ See, for instance, Humphrey, *Press of the Young Republic*, 45-46.

³⁹ Pasley, *Tyranny of Printers*, 111.

⁴⁰ Brown, “The Federal Era,” 126.

⁴¹ Donald Stewart, quoted in Brown, “The Federal Era,” 126; Charles A. Jellison, “That Scoundrel Callender,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 67, no. 3 (July 1959): 295-306.

Adams, Callender turned on Jefferson, exposing his relationship with his slave Sally Hemmings after Jefferson tried to buy him off for \$50 but denied Callender the postmastership he desired.⁴²

In assessing the press of this period, Nord presents a dark view:

Throughout the fifty years after 1776, newspapers were usually outrageously partisan, and factional in other ways as well. Newspapers represented and exacerbated all the lines of cleavage in the early republic. In every case of alleged sedition or treason, the newspapers were there: the treason of loyalism, the treason of Republican Jacobinism, the treason of Federalist monarchism, of the Jay Treaty, of the Sedition Law of 1798, of the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, of the New England secessionist conspiracies of 1804 and 1814, and of the Missouri crisis of 1819. And so on and on. . . . In other words, when Americans in the early republic saw treason, sedition, fragmentation, disintegration, degeneration, disunion, anarchy, and chaos, they usually saw it first in the newspaper.⁴³

Through much of the nineteenth century, an observer could gauge the political vitality of a community by counting the number of newspapers published there. A single paper suggested homogeneous political sentiments – or a community yet to reach critical mass to support more factions and more newspapers. Two or more sheets, however, invariably meant multiplicity of political thought. For instance, in Rochester, NY, in the late 1840s, four dailies, two Whig and two Democratic served a community of 36,403 persons, the twenty-first largest city in the 1850 census.⁴⁴ In 1810, Thomas estimated the number of newspapers in the nation at near three hundred and sixty.⁴⁵ Of these, Thomas writes, “A large proportion . . . were established and supported, by the two great contending political parties, into which the people of these states are

⁴² See, for instance, Humphrey, *Press of the Young Republic*, 75.

⁴³ Nord, “Newspapers and American Nationhood,” 392-393.

⁴⁴ Frank E. Fee Jr., “Intelligent Union of Black With White”: Frederick Douglass and the Rochester, NY, Press, 1847-48, *Journalism History* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 34-45, at 36; “Table 8. Population of 100 Largest Urban Places: 1850,” U.S. Bureau of the Census. Accessed at <https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab08.txt>.

⁴⁵ Thomas, *History of Printing*, 17.

usually divided; and whose numbers produce an equipollence; consequently, a great argumentation of vehicles for carrying on the political warfare have been found necessary.”⁴⁶

Washington unhorsed

In the tumultuous times, nobody was sacrosanct. Even George Washington, who historian Patricia Brady says “subscribed to stacks of newspapers” that both he and his wife, Martha, read,⁴⁷ “was fair game for vicious attacks. Innuendo, accusation, even the publication of forged letters from the days of the Revolution” found their way into the leading opposition newspaper, the *Aurora*, edited in Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin Bache, grandson of the great Benjamin Franklin.⁴⁸

An item from the *Aurora*, reprinted in Massachusetts as Adams was about to succeed Washington as president, questioned his motives in not seeking a third term. In leaning in to demean Washington as he was leaving office, Bache oddly favored Adams, who would shortly become his chief target. But for the moment, Bache was happy to declare that Washington’s “disinterestedness ... is rather questionable; for his unwillingness to be a candidate seems to have arisen rather from a consciousness that he would not be re-elected, than a want of ambition or lust for power.”⁴⁹

Bache went on:

It may be singular, that John Adams, who is a professed aristocrat, should be preferred by republicans to George Washington; but an examination into the case will make the preference appear very plain and desirable. There can be no doubt that Adams

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Patricia Brady, *Martha Washington: An American Life* (New York: Viking, 2005), 202.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 206.

⁴⁹ “Philadelphia; Aurora; President,” *Minerva*, Dedham, MA, January 3, 1797.

would not be a puppet – that having an opinion and judgment of his own, he would act from his own impulses rather than the impulses of others – that possessing great integrity he would not sacrifice his country’s interests at the shrine of party – and that being an enemy to the corruptions which have taken place by means of the funding and banking systems, he would not lend his aid to the further prostitution of the American character. In addition to these considerations, it is well known that Adams is an aristocrat only in theory, but that Washington is one in practice – that Adams has the simplicity of a republican, but that Washington has the ostentation of an Eastern Bashaw [pasha]. Considerations so imperious could leave no hesitation on the minds of Republicans to which of the two to give preference.⁵⁰

Bache could not hold back trying to destroy Washington’s reputation through the public prints. In 1797, Bache published a pamphlet comprising correspondence he received from Thomas Paine, author of *Common Sense*. In it, he sought to shred Washington’s public esteem.⁵¹

Excerpts from Paine’s pamphletized missile, described in its republishing as “the most extraordinary composition of abuse, petulance, falsehood, and boyish vanity, that ever came from Grubb-street,⁵²[sic] a prison, or a garret,” were published in the *Federal Gazette* of

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Besides pamphlets, Bache, like many printers, published almanacs, in his case, leaning to the subversive, including one in French as his anti-British politics would dictate. The Library of Congress says that “because daily newspapers were strictly controlled by provincial laws, almanacs served as a more suitable way to express political ideas. In fact, almanacs reached an audience four times that of newspapers—they were an essential part of French and American life at the end of the 18th century. For many people, the almanac was one of the few publications they owned—only the Bible surpassed it in popularity. Almanacs included not only practical information such as a calendar, religious observances and prayers, postal information, commercial and personal directories, and state documents, but also served as a rare source of entertainment. ... Genial and humble fictional characters like “Poor Richard” and “Poor Job” in the United States, and “Père Gérard” in France, were created as a way to instruct the public. By the end of the 18th century, shrewd printers on both sides of the Atlantic had recognized the power of this widely distributed publication, and its potential to provide more just than entertainment and practical information.” Keara Mickelson, “Benjamin Franklin Bache and the Radical Early-American Almanac,” Library of Congress (February 24, 2020). Accessed at <https://blogs.loc.gov/international-collections/2020/02/benjamin-franklin-bache-and-the-radical-early-american-almanac/>.

⁵² Grub Street was home to a number of publishing houses in an impoverished London neighborhood that also, as a consequence, became home to many hacks – writers for hire.

Baltimore, which noted that Paine, now living in Paris, had been censured by Congress for breach of trust while a government employee.⁵³

Paine's charges, written as though to Washington personally, included that "Monopolies of every kind marked your administration, almost in the moment of its commencement. The lands obtained by the revolution were lavished upon partizans [sic] – the interest of the disbanded soldier, was sold to the speculator – injustice was acted under the pretence [sic] of faith – and the *chief of the army became the patron of fraud.*" In a defense of Washington that reads somewhat like a fact-check in today's media, the *Gazette* declared, "Not one syllable of these charges is well founded."⁵⁴

Elsewhere in Bache's pamphlet, Paine claims, "Had it not been for the aid of France, in men, money and ships, your *cold unmilitary conduct* would, in all probability have lost America: at least she would not have been the independent nation she now is."⁵⁵ And, "Speaking of John Adams and John Jay, Paine says, 'these are the disguised traitors who call themselves federalists. John Adams is one of those men who never contemplated the origin of government, or comprehended any thing of first principles.'⁵⁶

⁵³ "Paine Has Written a Letter," *Federal Gazette*, Baltimore, January 4, 1797.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Modern scholarship suggests a kernel of truth in Paine's assertion. The post-war era *did* see considerable land speculation and unrest surrounding the military land grants. See, for instance, Alan Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Main Frontier, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

⁵⁵ "Paine Has Written a Letter," *Federal Gazette*, Baltimore, January 4, 1797.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

In an overall response, the *Gazette* observed: “Such a mixture of meanness, ignorance, and vanity, is a rare thing even in the history of ‘republican ingratitude.’”⁵⁷

Never supposed to be

Like Jefferson, Washington never anticipated the lengths to which the free press in America would go – or descend – in the service of ideology, and each of the first three presidents expressed support at varying times for what essentially would be the repeal of the First Amendment guarantee of press freedom, the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798.⁵⁸ But unlike Jefferson, Washington, though stung by the invective, seems not to have railed against the editors publicly or, as his successor, John Adams, did, try to jail those who attacked him with laws representing “the fiercest convulsion of the most ferocious political battle between the American Revolution and the Jacksonian age.”⁵⁹

Writing in the mid-twentieth century, historian Marshall Smelser says:

Not many presidents have suffered as much from the press as George Washington did. When partisan editors set up rival newspapers during his first term, they did not directly involve him, but their brawling so alarmed him that he doubted whether the government could survive it. He also feared their unfounded charges would give the impression to foreigners that the Union was about to dissolve.⁶⁰

Although some historians claim Washington remained restrained in the face of press criticism,⁶¹ in fact he approved of the Sedition Act and as the special target of Bache and the

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ See, for instance, David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 506.

⁵⁹ Marshall Smelser, “George Washington and the Alien and Sedition Acts,” *American Historical Review* 59, no. 2 (January 1954): pp. 322-334, at 322.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 326.

⁶¹ See, for instance, Patricia Brady, *Martha Washington: An American Life* (New York: Viking, 2005), 206.

Aurora, historian Richard N. Rosenfeld says, Washington was frequently furious at what he read. One editorial, “according to Thomas Jefferson, made Washington slam the paper on the floor with a ‘damn.’”⁶²

At another time, Jefferson wrote of Washington’s passionate response to criticism in Philip Freneau’s *New-York Daily Advertiser*:

The President was much inflamed, got into one of those passions when he cannot command himself, ran on much on the personal abuse which had been bestowed upon him, defied any man on earth to produce one single act of his since he had been in the government which was not done on the purest motives, that he had never repented but once the having slipped the moment of resigning his office, and that was every moment since, that by God he had rather be in his grave than in his present situation. That he had rather be on his farm than to be made emperor of the world, and yet that they were charging him with wanting to be a king. That that rascal Freneau sent him three of his papers every day, as if he thought he would become the distributor of his papers, that he could see in this nothing but an impudent design to insult him. He ended in this high tone.⁶³

Indeed, Nord says, “President Washington hated the democratic-republican clubs and denounced them as ‘the most diabolical attempts to destroy the best fabric of human government and happiness, that has ever been presented for the acceptance of mankind.’ ... The same charges were leveled against Republican newspapers, by Washington and others. Jefferson defended them.”⁶⁴

⁶² Richard N. Rosenfeld, *American Aurora* (New York: St Martin’s Griffin, 1997), 28.

⁶³ Thomas Jefferson, quoted in Ford, “Jefferson and the Newspaper,” 87

⁶⁴ Nord, “Newspapers and American Nationhood,” 400.

Adams in the crosshairs

If Washington felt wounded by the political invective hurled by the Democratic-Republicans, the second president, Federalist John Adams, had it worse. Worthington Ford writes:

His own party, his very Cabinet were against him, and the opposition press fed fat on the public policy and measures of his administration. Their criticism under Washington was mild to what it became under Adams, and the dominating respect for the general soon gave place to a virulence that in personalities and generally low tone of opposition has rarely been equaled.⁶⁵

In Boston in January 1792, the *Boston Gazette, and Weekly Republican Journal*, whose name signaled its politics, reprinted a question-and-answer piece from “Republican” in a Maryland paper promoting Jefferson and denigrating Adams:

Who drew the Declaration of Independence?

Ans. Thomas Jefferson.

Who was the first prime minister under the federal government?

Ans. Thomas Jefferson.

Who appointed Thomas Jefferson to that office?

Ans. The patriot Washington.

&c.

Will not the same miscreants who now abuse Thomas Jefferson for his resignation of the office of secretary, by and by abuse the President for quitting the government?

Ans. Yes, when it answers their purpose.

Who planned the form of government submitted to the Convention by Alex. Hamilton, proposing a King, Lords and Commons?

Ans. John Adams.⁶⁶

That same day, Fenno’s *Gazette of the United States* assessed the 1796 presidential election and exclaimed that east of the Delaware River, “Notwithstanding all the calumny vented against Mr. Adams, not *one vote* could be withdrawn from the old patriot – not *one vote* could be

⁶⁵ Ford, “Jefferson and the Newspaper,” 88.

⁶⁶ “From a Maryland Paper,” *Boston Gazette, and Weekly Republican Journal*, January 2, 1797.

obtained for Mr. Jefferson. ... The truth has ever been, that in proportion to the progress of knowledge, the people of America have rallied round their government.”⁶⁷

Sedition and foreigners

Washington and Hamilton before him and Jefferson who would follow all harbored thoughts of suppressing criticism of their governance – as has almost every president to this day.⁶⁸ It remained for the prickly Adams to do something about it. Seen from a twenty-first century perspective, the Federalist zeal to carry out the provisions of the Sedition Act is little more than a witch hunt. It lasted only a couple of years, but it had victims and took its toll.

The Alien and Sedition Acts were four laws Federalists in Congress passed in 1798 during the Adams administration, ostensibly to prevent disloyalty among Americans as the prospect of war with France loomed. In fact, however, the acts were directly aimed at Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans’ criticism of the Federalists. A particular target was Bache and the *Aurora* in Philadelphia. While the Alien acts imposed greater restrictions on the arrival of non-citizens and, in wartime, gave the president power to arrest, imprison, and deport aliens,⁶⁹ the Sedition Acts reimagined the seditious libel of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, making it a crime if American citizens:

[W]rite, print, utter or publish, or shall cause or procure to be written, printed, uttered or published, or shall knowingly and willingly assist or aid in writing, printing, uttering or publishing any false, scandalous and malicious writing or writings against the government of the United States, or either house of the Congress of the United States, or

⁶⁷ “New-York, December 29,” *Gazette of the United States*, Philadelphia, January 2, 1797.

⁶⁸ For a recent study, see Harold Holzer, *The Presidents vs. the Press: The Endless Battle Between the White House and the Media – From the Founding Fathers to Fake News* (New York: Dutton, 2020).

⁶⁹ The requirement at the time was that immigrants had to live two years in the United States in order to gain citizenship. This might have affected some of the warring journalists, several of whom had come over from Great Britain relatively recently and might be deportable under the Alien acts.

the President of the United States, with intent to defame the said government, or either house of the said Congress, or the said President, or to bring them, or either of them, into contempt or disrepute; or to excite against them, or either or any of them, the hatred of the good people of the United States, or to stir up sedition within the United States, or to excite any unlawful combinations therein, for opposing or resisting any law of the United States, or any act of the President of the United States, done in pursuance of any such law, or of the powers in him vested by the constitution of the United States, or to resist, oppose, or defeat any such law or act, or to aid, encourage or abet any hostile designs of any foreign nation against United States, their people or government.⁷⁰

Upon conviction, the defendant could face up to two years in jail and a fine of up to \$2,000.⁷¹ It is interesting to note that while Adams, the Federalist president, and the Federalist houses of Congress were exempted under the act, the vice president, Democratic-Republican Jefferson, received no such protection.

Power of the press

As the newspapers of the Early Republic grew more and more virulent, the power of the press came to be more and more feared. “The newspapers are an overmatch for any government,” wrote one contemporary. “They will first overawe [sic] and then usurp it.”⁷²

Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, these days seen as a free press champion by many writers,⁷³ likewise held an ambivalent, opportunistic, and at best pragmatic view of

⁷⁰ “Transcript of the Alien and Sedition Acts,” The Alien Act, July 6, 1798; Fifth Congress; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives. Accessed at <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=16>.

⁷¹ The fine surely was not equivalent to \$2,000 today, but demonstrating the difficulty in assessing the present value of money in previous generations, in 2020 dollars the fine can be estimated in several ways, ranging from \$43,610.40 today using the [Consumer Price Index](#) and \$40,536.68 today using the [GDP Deflator](#). Or, \$2,000 in 1798 has a relative wage of \$689,713.04 paid to an [Unskilled Worker](#) today; \$2,277,714.29 paid to a [Production Worker](#) today; and in [Per Capita GDP](#), \$1,429,745.08 today. See, “How much is a dollar from the past worth today?” MeasuringWorth, 2020. Accessed at www.measuringworth.com/dollarvaluetoday/

⁷² Fisher Ames to John Rutledge, Jr., October 16, 1800. Quoted in Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President: First Term, 1801-1805* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1970), 225.

⁷³ See, for instance, Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 570.

sedition legislation, especially when it could be used against the Democratic-Republican press.⁷⁴ Hamilton and Jefferson, whose correspondence with others makes it clear they despised each other,⁷⁵ can be seen as the titans of their respective parties when it came to the partisan press.

Jefferson played a cagey, at times disingenuous, game of press chess, and his involvement with the newspapers may have gone back at least as far as 1765 when, it has been suggested, he joined other Virginia radicals in bringing the Maryland printer William Rind to Williamsburg to set up a competing sheet to the government newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette*.⁷⁶ By the end of the eighteenth century, Jefferson was in the thick of the increasingly venomous press scene. According to Alexander Hamilton's biographer Ron Chernow:

During the 1790s, as the number of American newspapers more than doubled, many partisan sheets specialized in vituperative character attacks, Jefferson acknowledged the strategic power of these newspapers for Federalists and Republicans alike. "The engine is the press," he told [James] Madison. "Every man must lay his purse and his pen under contribution."⁷⁷

Writing to Washington, Jefferson hammered Hamilton for inuendo and falsehoods in Federalist press, chiefly John Fenno's *Gazette of the United States*, using an alias:

As to the merits or demerits of his paper, they certainly concern me not. He and Fenno are rivals for the public favor. The one courts them by flattery, the other by censure: and I believe it will be admitted that the one has been as servile, as the other

⁷⁴ Arthur Scherr, "Alexander Hamilton and the Sedition Act: A Founder's Ambivalence on Freedom of the Press," *Journalism History* 46:1 (March 2020): 50-73. See also, Scherr, "To 'Alarm the Publick Mind': A Reexamination of Pamphlets and Newspapers in Philadelphia and the Early Republic," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 83, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 297-336.

⁷⁵ See, for instance, Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 9 September 1792, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-24-02-0330>.

⁷⁶ Roger P. Mellen, "Thomas Jefferson and the Origins of Newspaper Competition in Pre-Revolutionary Virginia," *Journalism History* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 151-161. Mellen argues the unlikelihood that Jefferson, himself, invited Rind to come to the capital of colonial Virginia but leaves open the possibility that men supported by the 22-year-old Jefferson, a law student, had a role.

⁷⁷ Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, 570.

severe. But is not the dignity, and even decency of government committed, when one of its principal ministers enlists himself as an anonymous writer or paragraphist [sic] for either the one or the other of them?—No government ought to be without censors: and where the press is free, no one ever will. If virtuous, it need not fear the fair operation of attack and defence. Nature has given to man no other means of sifting out the truth either in religion, law, or politics. I think it as honorable to the government neither to know, nor notice, it's sycophants or censors, as it would be undignified and criminal to pamper the former and persecute the latter.⁷⁸

If Jefferson did not have a direct interest in a newspaper, he had the next best thing: patronage with which to buy their support.⁷⁹ Favored editors received orders for government printing; they were appointed to government jobs; and, when political parties became more organized in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, they could expect direct subsidies from the parties.⁸⁰ Philip Freneau, editor of the *National Gazette* in Philadelphia, had been Madison's roommate at Princeton and was a clerk in Jefferson's State Department when he started the *Gazette* October 21, 1791. Historian Walt Brown says, "Jefferson's precise role in Freneau's decision to become editor is still unresolved," but the paper became more and more invested in and infested by Republican vituperation focusing on Hamilton's reputation.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 9 September 1792, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-24-02-0330>. Spelling, punctuation, and grammar in original. Jefferson was being particularly disingenuous in abusing Hamilton for writing anonymously because both he and Washington knew that pen names were common – even the style – of the period. John Dickinson wrote his famous "Letter from a Pennsylvania Farmer" over the name "The Farmer," and the tri-authored *Federalist Papers* were signed merely "Publius." Moreover, if Jefferson knew, there would have been no secret to the letter's authorship.

⁷⁹ Patricia L. Dooley, *The Early Republic: Primary Documents on Events from 1799-1820* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), Chapt. 4.

⁸⁰ Pasley, "The Tyranny of Printers."

⁸¹ Brown, "Federal Era III," 126.

We know that Jefferson met not infrequently with *Aurora* editors Bache and subsequently William Duane and was well acquainted with the newspaper's finances.⁸² And yet, Jefferson continued to publicly insist that he was not involved in the partisan press scene.

Executing the laws

Nord points out that “Under the Sedition Law, twenty-five persons were arrested, ten tried, and ten convicted⁸³ – mostly Republican printers. Nearly every opposition newspaper suffered under the ‘reign of terror,’ as Jefferson called it. The Republicans responded with the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, which declared the law unconstitutional and which came perilously close to the states’ rights doctrine of ‘nullification.’ The century ended in violent controversy over the nature of the state, and newspapers were at the center of it.”⁸⁴

Historian Wendell Bird says that “Most of those prosecutions of opposition newspaper editors and publishers involved an unexpected arrest that could prevent publication for months, and an unhealthful jail that could bring illness or death, necessitating a strong measure of courage to run a Republican newspaper.”⁸⁵

In Vermont, U.S. Congressman Matthew Lyon, editor of the *Scourge of Aristocracy and Repository of Important Political Truths*, became the first newspaperman convicted under the Sedition Act. He was sentenced to four months in jail and fined \$1,000 plus court costs of

⁸² See, for instance, Malone, *Jefferson the President*, 225-226.

⁸³ Further research suggests that more than twice the previously accepted number of prosecutions were carried out under the Sedition Act of 1798. Wendell Bird, “New Light on the Sedition Act of 1789: The Missing Half of the Prosecutions,” *Law and History Review* 34, no. 3 (August 2016): 541-614.

⁸⁴ Nord, “Newspapers and American Nationhood,” 401.

⁸⁵ Bird, “New Light,” 607.

\$60.96.⁸⁶ While he was in jail, Lyon won a run-off election for re-election to Congress, further heightening his celebrity and martyrdom in the cause of a free press.

Even before the Sedition Act became law, Federalists had succeeded in bringing several Republican editors to heel on charges of seditious libel. One of the most renowned was Benjamin Franklin Bache, who for his continued attacks on government acts and officials, was charged with common law seditious libel on June 26, 1798, shortly before the Sedition Act went into effect July 14. While waiting trial in October, he contracted yellow fever on September 5 and died five days later.⁸⁷ In his place at the *Aurora* stepped William Duane, who kept up his paper's attacks on the Federalists. He managed to evade several congressional attempts to arrest him, finally going into hiding until Congress adjourned.⁸⁸

Humphrey says the last major Republican editor prosecuted under the Sedition Act was James T. Callender. His crime was for a pamphlet, *The Prospect Before Us*, rather than what he wrote for newspapers in Philadelphia and Baltimore that he had previously filled with similarly rabid anti-Federalism. In a trial before a decidedly Federalist judge, Callender was jailed and fined, though after Jefferson's inauguration the sentence was cancelled and the fine revoked.⁸⁹

The Sedition Act was scheduled to expire at the end of Adams' presidency in 1801, but when Jefferson won the election of 1800, prosecutions largely stopped.

⁸⁶ Humphrey, *Press of the Young Republic*, 62.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁸⁹ Jellison, "That Scoundrel Callender," 66.

Turn about

Jefferson's inauguration in 1801 was not the peaceful end of the infighting that had been going on since the Revolution, "it merely turned the tables," Nord says. "Now the Republicans were in, the Federalists out. And the Federalist press – newspapers such as William Coleman's *New-York Evening Post* – carried the opposition from the periphery (now New England and New York) to the center (now Washington)." Nord adds,

The Federalist press during the early years of the nineteenth century was just as diverse and seditious as the Republican press of the 1790s. New England newspapers did all they could to undermine Jefferson's diplomacy, subvert the embargo of 1807, and obstruct the war effort that followed. If Republicans of the South and West had embraced nullification in 1798, the Federalists of the Northeast courted secession in 1804 and 1814. And newspapers again were in the thick of it.⁹⁰

As virtually all editors did – regardless of their intentions – when they began publication, John Fenno promised readers:

A paper ... established upon NATIONAL, INDEPENDENT, AND IMPARTIAL PRINCIPLES --- which shall take up the premised Articles upon a COMPETENT PLAN, it is presumed, will be highly interesting, and will meet with public approbation and patronage.

The Editor of this Publication is determined to leave no avenue of Information unexplored: -- He solicits the assistance of Persons of leisure and abilities – which, united with his own assiduity, he flatters himself will render the Gazette of the United States not unworthy general engagement – and is, with due respect, the publick's [sic] humble servant.⁹¹

Such openness to ideas, however, would be openness to Federalist ideas in Fenno's case.

In June, a letter signed "A Friend to Freedom of the Press," appeared in the *New-York Packet* complaining that Fenno had refused to publish a letter from the French Duke of Orleans.⁹²

⁹⁰ Nord, "Newspapers and American Nationhood," 401.

⁹¹ John Fenno, "To the PUBLICK," *Gazette of the United States*, New York, April 15, 1789.

⁹² "Miscellany," *New-York Packet*, June 13, 1789.

Refusing to publish opposing ideas seems to have been at the heart of several dustups during the period. In Vermont, Congressman Matthew Lyon, seeking re-election, could not get the opposition *Rutland Herald* to print his opinions and so started his own paper, the *Scourge of Aristocracy and Repository of Important Political Truths*. One thing led to another until he ended up charged under the Sedition Act of 1798.⁹³

A silver lining?

If the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century body politic was wracked by repeated cudgeling through their respective newspapers, historians nevertheless argue that good came out of the experience.

Historian Jeffrey Pasley argues that “newspapers and other productions of the same partisan press were critical to making the various elements of the political culture work as politics,” adding that:

Since public events could only be held intermittently, and attended only by a minority of the population of one small region at any given time, even an extremely well attended celebration or a particularly eloquent oration could have few wide-reaching or lasting political effects unless an account was printed in a newspaper. This was particularly true given the vast geography extent of the nation and even some of the states and individual congressional districts. ... In such a situation, Alexis de Toqueville noted, members of a party or any political group needed “some means of talking every day without seeing one another and of acting together without meeting.”⁹⁴

Pasley further explains that:

Print transformed toasts, holiday celebrations, and parades from quaint local customs into vital forms of political communication. The whole practice of holding

⁹³ Humphrey, *Press of the Young Republic*, 62.

⁹⁴ Jeffrey L. Pasley, “The Cheese and the Words,” in *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*, Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, eds. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 42. See also, David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

political banquets culminating in carefully worded toasts would have been politically meaningless without the newspaper report that allowed a few booze-soaked phrases to become a community's testament to the world.⁹⁵

Nord, distinguishing between a "state" – "the formal structures of political sovereignty" – and a "nation" – "a people who share a culture, the institutions of culture, and a history" – and nationalism" – "the organized political voice of a nation"⁹⁶ – argues that "in their efforts to subvert the state, they helped to build the nation. American nationhood coalesced in the constitutional crises of the state. Though organizers of faction, newspapers helped to standardize a political language of state, which came, in turn, to serve as the mythic language of the nation."⁹⁷

Some of the letters printed amid the political rough and tumble portended issues that would gain greater traction in a later age. One letter, which appeared in Bache's *General Advertiser, and Political, Commercial, Agricultural and Literary Journal* and was reprinted in the *Gazette of the United States*, focused on women's rights. Purporting have overheard "several young ladies" who despaired the state of government, the correspondent signed only as "C" offered a transcript:

Charlotte [referring to an unpopular milita act]: ... I suppose that we young women must learn militia duty, and turn out with both musquet [sic] and bayonet.

Thalestris. Upon my word, I long for this happy change of affairs. We shall then expunge the odious *obey* from the wedding ceremony. ... Then, my girls, we shall first be absolute mistresses of our houses, and then in very short time govern the state also. ...

Roxana. ... Oh may the glorious day soon dawn, when our sex shall be delivered from an ignominious slavery of 6,000 years; a slavery founded on the story of our first mother's eating a forbidden apple: a slavery exercised by pedants, sophists, blockheads, drones, drunkards, fops, gamesters, bloods, bigots, rakes, voluptuaries over the far more

⁹⁵ Pasley, "The Cheese and the Words," 42.

⁹⁶ Nord, "Newspapers and American Nationhood," 395.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 395-396.

sensible, lovely part of the human species. In fifty quarto volumes of ancient and modern history, you will not find fifty illustrious female names; heroes, statesmen, divines, philosophers, artists, are all of the masculine gender. ... They have disputed for many centuries about the best form of government, without producing one good pattern – I boldly affirm, not one, not even in this country; because *the federal constitution has the great defect of being too good*, that is, of supposing more virtue in the people than they really have; of supposing them wise, generous, brave, when they cannot see their true interest, when they love self, and hate martial exercises.⁹⁸

Thalestris then offers the hope that “100,000 sisters in the United States” will join in the dream, anticipating “the glorious day when American ladies shall be Commanders, Presidents of Congress, Ambassadors, Governors, Secretaries of State, Professors, Judges, Preachers ...”⁹⁹

In the end, though, the competition between the public (male) and domestic (female) spheres seems to tip toward the domestic. Maria, another of the young women, declares her sisters’ schemes utopian and submits, “The laws of Providence are immutable: Man must do the rough work of society: Woman shines in the tender cares and elegant arts of domestic life. Let us carry a counter-petition to Congress, signed by *ten thousand fair Americans*; let us boldly declare that we will never marry a man who cannot, in case of need, protect us and our children.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ “Mr. Bache,” *General Advertiser and Political, Commercial, Agricultural and Literary Journal*, Philadelphia, January 20, 1791; “From the General Advertiser,” *Gazette of the United States*, January 22, 1791,

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.