# Articles on Conspiracy Theory in Early American History

**"Abolitionists"**
**"Alien and Sedition Acts"**
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**"Indians, North American"**
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These are very close to the published versions, but the published versions should be cited by scholars and students.

## ABOLITIONISTS

Overview

While great believers in the Slave Power Conspiracy and often party to anti-Catholic and other evangelically-oriented conspiracy theories themselves, American abolitionists were also frequently accused of conspiracy, especially in the South but also in the North. Improbable as it may seem from a modern vantage point, the heroic opponents of slavery were commonly depicted in the terms reserved for conspiracy theory's most despicable villains, like witches, Illuminati, and communists. South Carolina's William Henry Drayton pictured "these conspirators . . . at their midnight meetings, where the bubbling cauldron of abolition was filled with its pestilential materials." (Davis, 35) An 1852 writer in *DeBow's Review* of New Orleans actually compared abolitionism with communism (then newly invented), seeing them both as part of a blasphemous, hypocritical foreign campaign to overturn a social order ordained by "the thought of God" Himself: "What means this darkly-shadowed caricature of good -- this horrible disfigurement of Christian charity -- which, but that it stalks in terrible reality before us, would seem like the mockery of some fearful dream?" (L.S.M., 509)

From the Haitian Revolution on, slave rebellions real and imagined had been widely blamed on abolitionists, sometimes for just inspiring slaves from afar but increasingly, over time, for direct "intermeddling" with them. Some southerners even charged abolitionists with their slaves' day-to-day insubordination, as well as the harsh discipline allegedly necessary to suppress this insubordination. Indeed, proslavery publicist Edmund Ruffin argued in 1857 that only "abolition action" prevented slaves from being "the most comfortable, contented, and happy laboring class in the world"

(Ruffin, 549)  Ruffin and other white southerners envisioned the abolitionists as a vast network of open agitators and allied secret agents who had fanned out across the South, undercover as salesman, ministers, and teachers, and coaxed slaves to escape or, better yet, slaughter their masters. “There is no neighborhood in the Southern States into which Yankees have not penetrated,” claimed Ruffin, “and could freely operate as abolition agents” (Ruffin, 546) This was a ridiculously inaccurate statement, of course, since by the time this passage was written it had long since become illegal as well as unsafe in most of the South to oppose slavery or even unenthusiastically support it.

Abolitionists in the North spoke and wrote in public forums, but were always suspected of secret designs and hidden agendas. Funding and organizing the subversion of slavery in the South was one accusation. Others included complicity in a British plot to break up the Union and/or a secret neo-Federalist stratagem to destroy the Democratic Party. Not surprisingly, these anti-abolitionist theories often came from the ranks of northern Democrats eager to retain the favor of their southern wing.

Before detailing some of more specific beliefs about the abolitionists, it is vital to put them in more realistic perspective than anti-abolitionists usually provided. The idea of abolitionist involvement in engineering servile rebellion was mostly a fantasy, even in the case of the one abolitionist, John Brown, who actually tried it. Radical abolitionists were commonly sincere religious pacifists. Before Brown’s activities in the 1850s, almost no hard evidence exists of plots or non-defensive violence instigated by northern abolition activists. Abolitionists certainly protected fugitive slaves when they could, and aided some escapes in border regions and port cities, but they posed no physical and little economic threat to slaveholders, whose human and real property was worth more on the

eve of the Civil War than it ever had been before. Moreover, radical abolitionists never enjoyed widespread political influence, and the charge that they dominated Abraham Lincoln's Republican party (the so-called "Black Republicans") was both a partisan slur and an important part of the southern conspiracy theory about the northern antislavery sentiment.

The term "Black Republicans" also contained another connotation. It was the habit of all slavery's defenders (and their political allies) to conflate any degree of opposition to slavery with the most radical forms of abolitionism and egalitarianism they could imagine. So politicians and writers taking the much more widespread "free soil" position, opposing only slavery's further expansion, were treated as outright abolitionists, and those who showed any degree of concern for black rights were likely to be denounced as advocates of full social equality with blacks and "amalgamation" of the races.

It should be noted that the situation as described above took several decades of U.S. history to fully develop. Negative attitudes and outlandish beliefs about abolitionists had long circulated in areas like the lower South and the Caribbean, where the extremely large slave populations left whites feeling nervous and outnumbered. These conspiracy theories became far more widespread with the radicalization of anti-slavery that took place in the 1820s and 30s.

## From Moderation to Radicalism in the American Abolition Movement

Before the late 1820s, American abolitionism was almost painfully polite, tentative, and moderate. During the American Revolution, it was came to be generally

agreed outside the lower South that slavery was inconsistent with the egalitarians ideals of the Declaration of Independence and other revolutionary mission statements. The northern states abolished slavery in the years after the Revolution, though often by means of gradual emancipation laws that only freed the adult children of current slaves.

Quakers opposed slavery as a matter of conscience and lobbied for the abolition during the First Congress, but without results. The bulk of antislavery activity in the Early Republic was more Jeffersonian in approach, looking to end the international slave trade (which occurred in 1808) and find some means of phasing southern slavery out while minimizing economic and social disruptions. Slaveholders were to be compensated for their losses to abolition, and the creation of large free black population would be avoided by sending former slaves to colonies in Africa or some other faraway place. This was the formula promoted by the Early Republic's most prominent antislavery organization, the American Colonization Society, which counted James Madison, Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, and Francis Scott Key among its members and enjoyed the official aid of the US government and navy.

Despite the moderation of these early efforts, the slaveholding politicians of the lower South reacted harshly to the idea of even discussing limitations on slavery. The Carolinas and Georgia forced special protections and extra representation for slavery to be built into the federal constitution. The Quakers petitioning the First Congress were accused by South Carolina's Aedanus Burke of being British spies who were "for bringing this country under a foreign yoke." During the same debate, southern congressmen made veiled threats to leave the newborn union if such discussions continued, arguing that "every principle of policy and concern for . . . the peace and

tranquility of the United States, concur to show the propriety of dropping the subject [of slavery], and letting it sleep where it is" (*Debates and Proceedings in Congress*)

When northern congressmen voted to exclude slavery from the new state of Missouri in 1820, much less than what the Quakers had asked, the uproar was far worse. Thomas Jefferson declared it "the knell of the Union" (Jefferson, 1434) and the Virginia capital was "agitated as if affected by all the Volcanic eruptions of Vesuvius" (Brown, 438). Extremism in the defense of slavery was no vice, and moderation in the pursuit of abolition was increasingly not accepted as a virtue.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that black and many white abolitionists grew impatient with the moderate approach. Hence their rhetoric and tactics became much more radical beginning in the late 1820s. The new approach asked, in far less apologetic tones, for immediate, uncompensated abolition, without colonization, as a matter of moral right. Public notice of the shift in abolitionist thought was given by appearance of three new abolitionist publications between 1827 and 1830: *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American newspaper; white abolitionist printer William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper *The Liberator*; and, especially, the 1829 pamphlet, *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, by black used-clothing dealer David Walker. Walker and Garrison almost immediately became two of the most hated (and feared) men in all the South. Though the pamphlet itself was considerably less ferocious than its reputation, Walker's *Appeal* became notorious for its defense (as a last resort) of violence resistance to slavery, and for its then-unusually apocalyptic warnings about consequences of continued oppression of the black population: "I tell you Americans! that unless you speedily alter your course, you and your Country are gone! ! ! ! !"(Walker, 1829)

What frightened southerners even more was the fact that Walker, who came from the South but lived in Boston, actually managed to distribute some of his pamphlets in the South. A parcel of 60 copies arrived in Savannah, Georgia, in December 1829, just after the pamphlet was published, and more were soon found in the Carolinas, Virginia, and Louisiana. One of the antebellum South's frequent slave conspiracy panics quickly ensued. Numerous southern jurisdictions passed new laws against slave education and seditious or "incendiary" literature, of which North Carolina's was one of the harshest. Writing, publishing, or circulating any publication tending to "to excite insurrection, conspiracy, or resistance in the slaves or free Negroes" was made a crime punishable by a year in prison and whipping for the first offense, and death for the second offense (Eaton, 124). Abolitionist activity actually became a capital crime in much of the South, and this was only the beginning of decades-long campaign to purge ideological nonconformity from the region, at least as it pertained to slavery. Georgia newspaper editor Elijah Burritt had to flee for his life when it was discovered that he had received 20 copies of the *Appeal* at the post office.

Many southerners at the time, and along with some historians, have suspected some connection between's Walker's pamphlet and the 1831 Nat Turner slave rebellion in Virginia, in which 55 whites were killed. (Similar Walker links have been seen to a Christmas 1830 slave rebellion outside New Bern, N.C., but that outbreak was quickly and brutally suppressed before any whites could come to harm.) Virginia governor John Floyd received a likely fraudulent letter from one "Nero" claiming that Turner's raid was only beginning. "Many a white agent" like Burritt was already in place, Nero claimed, and the slaves were also enlisting the aid of the removal-threatened Indians in Georgia

(Hinks, 132). The most concrete link between Walker's *Appeal* and Nat Turner was probably their common roots in the spiritual and political ferment that was roiling through American black communities around that time -- there were serious slave uprisings in Jamaica and other Caribbean colonies during 1830 and 31. Rumors of imminent abolition may have played a role in the unrest, but rumors hardly required a network of agents to spread.

David Walker died in 1830, but his legacy as chief bugbear of southern slaveholder was amply carried on by the rise of William Lloyd Garrison and other aggressive immediatists during the 1830s. Garrison's *Liberator* was read mostly by a small audience of free blacks, but its most provocative passages seem to have been broadcast widely. Garrison argued in vitriolic terms not only for abolition, but also racial equality and the enfranchisement of blacks, stands that made him, in minds of many suspicious southerners, a sort of evil poster boy for the whole antislavery cause and possibly for all of northern culture.

Garrison promised he would be "as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice" in his campaign against slavery: "On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. No! no! Tell a man whose house is on fire, to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hand of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen" (Cain, 72). Later Garrison became even more infamous for denouncing the Constitution as "a covenant with death, an agreement with hell" because of its special favors for slavery. On at least one occasion Garrison publicly burned a copy of the document, endearing him to few northerners but burnishing his demonic credentials down south (Garrison, 35-36).

The Conspiracy is in the Mail: The Furor over the Abolitionist Media Campaign

The new radical abolitionists were by and large products of the Protestant religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening. Following the example of the evangelists who had spread the Awakening, abolitionists developed an aggressive, media-savvy campaign of "moral suasion" aimed at converting white Americans to their cause. The American Anti-Slavery Society was founded for this purpose in 1833, and well funded by the wealthy businessmen such as the Tappan brothers of New York. The new abolitionists sent hundreds of petitions to Congress asking for the abolition of slavery in Washington, DC, where there was no constitutional question of states rights to get in the way. At the same time, beginning in the mid-1830s, they unleashed a multimedia assault on American public opinion that the likes of which no one had ever seen before. Antislavery newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, slave narratives, touring speakers, musicians, songs, plays, and novels were all thrown into mix. In the process, the abolitionists became probably the first political group of any kind to send what we now call direct mail solicitations, or better known as junk mail, literature sent directly to citizens that the citizen did not request. Most controversially, the abolitionists sent their literature into the south, usually in defiance of local laws passed a few years earlier.

The southern reaction to this campaign showed the depth of slaveholders' fears about slavery. Even though slaves were 90-95% illiterate and alleged to be deeply loyal to their masters, Southern leaders seemed to entertain the possibility that a few words on paper might bring down their whole house of cards. They became much more aggressive to taking the position that *any* discussion of slavery in any context was incredibly

dangerous, a form of attempted murder against all southern whites. Abolitionist mailings were regarded in the same light that later generations would see letter bombs or anthrax or pornographic "spam" email. Northern capitalists were bankrolling the transmission of disruptive, alien values into decent American communities. Tennessee slaveholder and president Andrew Jackson thought that the abolitionists ought to "atone for this wicked attempt with their lives." Southern postmasters refused to even handle the stuff, and matters were soon arranged politically so that would not have to make the choice to violate their oaths of office.

In July 1835, the Charleston, South Carolina postmaster put the abolitionist mailings in a separate bag, and that night a mob of so-called "Lynch Men," led by former governor John Lyde Wilson, broke in and stole it. They then proceeded to make that "incendiary" literature live up to the term, making a bonfire with that was cheered by some 2000 spectators. Allegedly to protect the other less inflammatory mail, the Charleston postmaster asked that the postal service not accept further abolitionist mailings for the South into the system, and the postmaster in New York City, where the American Antislavery Society was based, agreed.

Postmaster General and Democratic political strategist Amos Kendall endorsed this decision and made it official policy. It was a federal crime to interfere with or refuse to deliver the mail, but Kendall argued that while federal officials had an obligation to execute the laws, they had a higher obligation to the communities in which they lived. If federal laws were "perverted" to destroy local communities, as the abolitionists allegedly had done, "it was patriotism to disregard" the laws (John, 271).

Southerners also began to insist that the North impose southern-style restrictions

on abolitionist free speech. Between 1834 and 1837, the free states endured an intense wave of anti-abolitionist rioting, much of it not spontaneous but orchestrated by Democratic politicians. Georgia Democrat John Forsyth wrote to New York presidential hopeful Martin Van Buren suggesting that, "a little more mob discipline of the white incendiaries would be wholesome . . . A portion of the magician's skill is required in this matter . . . and the sooner you set the imps to work the better" (Cole, 226).

Van Buren's imps got to work. Beginning in 1834, they organized public meetings against abolitionism all over the North, and also orchestrated 100s of riots and other acts of violence aimed at stopping the abolitionist media campaign, with abolitionist lecturers, meetings and newspapers the primary targets. Not all of these attacks needed to be arranged, but it was frequently noted that many of the mobs consisted of not street thugs but pillars of the community, "gentlemen of property and standing" (Richards). The tragic culmination of this anti-conspiracy conspiracy was the 1837 riot that killed one especially persistent abolitionist editor, Presbyterian minister Elijah P. Lovejoy, who was shot defending a new printing press – earlier mobs had destroyed three others -- in Alton, Illinois.

The controversy only died down once abolitionism was once again forced partly back into the political closet. This was one goal of the mail ban, and the main objective the so-called "gag rule" that Congress imposed from 1837 to 1844, automatically tabling all petitions about slavery and thus preventing their official consideration.

## Towards the Civil War

Though Congress was able to avoid the slavery issue until the Wilmot Proviso

reopened it in 1846, neither the issue nor the abolitionists nor fear of the abolitionists went away until after the Civil War. During the late 1830s and 1840s, some antislavery activists became disenchanted with “moral suasion” and split with the Garrisonians, turning to the strategy of creating an antislavery political party. The political abolitionists also had difficulties with the increasingly prominent role of non-traditional political actors – blacks and women – in the movement.

At the same time, southern fears of antislavery conspirators, and southern intolerance of dissent, grew worse by the year. No proselytizing was required to get in serious trouble with the proslavery thought vigilantes. In 1856, respected University of North Carolina professor Benjamin Sherwood Hedrick, and a colleague who defended him, were forced out of their jobs. Hedrick had admitted, in response to a question, that he might have voted for Republican candidate John C. Frémont, if Frémont had even been on the ballot!  Out in Kansas Territory, Buffalo Bill Cody’s father Isaac was stabbed twice with a bowie knife by a Missourian, after daring to admit his free soil, not abolitionist, views when asked a direct question. "You black Abolitionist, shut up!," Cody heard as the blade struck him (Cody, 41).

As southern intransigence deepened and the Slave Power seemed to grow stronger, abolitionists became more attracted to the direct action strategies of which southerners had long suspected them. Yet while rescuing fugitive slaves or moving west to keep Kansas free became popular missions for some, the idea that “vile emissaries of abolition, working like the moles under the ground” (Eaton, 100) were out engineering rebellions and “stealing” large numbers of slaves remained chiefly a southern conspiracy theory.

The famed Underground Railroad, for instance, was promoted almost as heavily by *proslavery* editors and politicians as it was by the abolitionists. There really was a network of people in the North, especially in Ohio and other free states near slave territory, who helped escaped slaves make their way north, but it was never as large or well-organized or elaborate as the term Underground Railroad suggests. The modern practice of designating historic homes of abolitionist sympathizers as "stations" along established "lines" exaggerates the historical reality. Abolitionists often used the new metaphor of a railroad to describe the coming of freedom as a train that was moving forward and could not be stopped --- "Get Off the Track!" was a popular abolitionist song, especially as performed by the antislavery singing stars, the Hutchinson Family Singers. Abolitionist publications liked to tweak Southern fears by running joke advertisements for fictitious railroads like the "Liberty Line," with many veiled references to the aid that escaped slaves would be given and a satirical drawing of blacks and whites riding in a literal train.

Once John Brown supplanted William Lloyd Garrison as chief abolitionist archetype in southern conspiracy theories after the 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry, secession and civil war came to seem absolutely imperative to many southerners. Here was just what they always knew the abolitionists wanted. Brown's plan for his "Provisional Army of the North" called for an armed assault on slavery in which a few northern whites and free blacks would set off a bloody race war. The plan failed dismally of course, but it had the backing of wealthy, important men back in New England. Moreover, Brown's dignified behavior and passionate speeches against slavery at the trial and in newspaper interviews made him a hero in the North, confirming all Southern fears about what little

regard their countrymen had for their safety. Southerners had been chilled by some of the implements that Brown had with him when captured, such as hundreds of custom cast-iron pikes to be handed out to freed slaves, and a map full of mysterious marks at locations all over the South. Down South, these marks were widely interpreted as locations where Brown had slave allies or white agents planted and ready to strike.

The Harper's Ferry raid and the north's reaction to it set off a "crisis of fear" in many parts of the South that continued right through the beginning of the war. Vigilance committees in many localities launched a wave of further terror and repression against suspected abolitionists. Even talking to blacks, or *looking* like an abolitionist, became dangerous. A free black barber in Knoxville, Tennessee was mistaken for Frederick Douglass and chased through the streets. A stonecutter working on the new South Carolina state capitol was whipped, tarred, feathered and deported for a stray remark.

This was the mood of South Carolina when Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860, in a four-way race that allowed to him to win even though he received no southern votes at all. With a Black Republican in the White House, paranoid South Carolinians saw no choice but to do what they had been threatening to do for years, secede from the union. Only separating from the American Republic could they be safe the hordes of John Browns and pike-wielding blacks that he would surely send.

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*See also*: Brown, John; Fugitive Slave Act; Slave Power; slave revolts

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## ALIEN AND SEDITION ACTS

Part of the most serious crackdown on peacetime dissent in U.S. history, mounted amid the most threatening crisis that the young nation ever faced, the Alien and Sedition Acts also comprised the most prominent “headline event” in U.S. history to be directly and openly rooted in fears of conspiracy.

### The XYZs of Political Paranoia in the 1790s

Though the young American republic was theoretically more stable and centralized than ever before, the first decade under the Constitution ratified in 1789 was fraught with political fears arising from both genuine threats and overreactions to wholly unexpected developments.

Perhaps the most important of these unexpected developments was the rapid emergence of political divisions that matured into parties competing to name the nation’s chief executive, a circumstance unprecedented in world history. Though parties are now considered a basic aspect of American democracy, this was far from intended by the Founders.

Believing that a republic could never survive the strain of constant battles for power, and that good, trustworthy leaders would never want to engage in those battles, the framers of the Constitution intentionally designed the new system to prevent the development of political parties or any other kind of organized competition for control of the national government. The hope was that the increased size and diversity of the territory being governed, coupled with a multi-layered structure of representation that included an appointed senate and an indirect elected president, would make it impossible for the

country's many local political factions and interests to organize themselves sufficiently to control the national government. Without the need to compete for public favor or please, learned, enlightened statesmen would be able to deliberate more or less in peace at the national capital, making wise, well-reasoned decisions for the good of all.

To the Founders, parties and other forms of organized opposition to government were inherently conspiratorial, especially when a legitimate republican government existed. When the people already ruled, efforts to defeat or stymie their chosen leaders were considered plots against the people themselves by cabals of "artful and designing men" out for private gain, tyrannical power, or some other sinister purpose. Those who followed such evil leaders showed themselves to be mere "tools" or "dupes," unworthy of the rights of independent citizenship. In a comment that somewhat hyperbolically reflected the feelings of many colleagues, Thomas Jefferson expressed revulsion at the very idea of joining a political party: "Such an addiction is the last degradation of a free and moral agent. If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all."

Despite this deep aversion to parties, the choices facing the young nation were simply too momentous and too divisive to be contained by the makeshift structure that the framers had devised. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton came into conflict immediately over financial policy and broader matters such as the basic structure of the new government and the future character of the nation. Jefferson became convinced that Hamilton was the leader of a "corrupt squadron" who sought "to get rid of the limitations imposed by the constitution" with the "ultimate object " of "a change, from the present republican form of government, to that of a monarchy" modeled on Great Britain's (Jefferson, 986). Hamilton, for his part, was equally

certain that Jefferson and his lieutenant James Madison led "a faction decidedly hostile to me and my administration, and . . . subversive of . . . good government and . . . the union, peace and happiness of the Country" (Hamilton, 738). Believing that they were fighting for the very soul of the new nation, Jefferson, Hamilton, and their respective allies instinctively reached out for support among their fellow politicians and the citizenry at large, eventually spawning a party conflict whether they intended to or not.

Unfortunately, American politicians of the 1790s engaged in party politics without ever learning to approve of the practice. They saw themselves as taking necessary if sometimes distasteful steps to save the republic, and their opponents as conspirators against it, plain and simple. Especially among the Federalist supporters of the Washington and Adams administration, there was no sense that there could be any such thing as a "loyal opposition," and it was perhaps inevitable that steps would taken to curb opposition to the government when the opportunity arose.

Political paranoia became far worse in the latter half of Washington's presidency, when the French Revolution grew more radical and war broke out between France and Great Britain. The question of which side to take in the conflict, if any, came to define American politics, and pushed foreign subversion to the head of the list of fears. While highly exaggerated in practice, fears of foreign subversion in this period were probably more plausible than at any other time in American history. The U.S. was no world power in the 1790s, but occupied a situation much closer to those of developing or "Third World" nations during and after the Cold War: small, weak, and subject to harsh buffeting by political, economic, and cultural winds coming from the more developed world.

Revolutionary France expected U.S. support as a sister republic and in return for France's aid to the U.S. during its own Revolutionary War. Beginning with "Citizen" Edmond Genet's arrival in 1793, French envoys did their best to draw Americans into the conflict from the Great Britain and influence American politics in favor of the French cause. Genet greeted crowds of well-wishers, handed out military commissions, and outfitted privateers, while later French ministers fed politically calculated information through friendly newspaper editors. The British kept a lower profile, but successfully pressed to keep the U.S. militarily neutral and commercially dependent on British trade (by means of the controversial Jay Treaty), while staying in secret, sometimes illicit, conflict with various American officials. The question of which Republicans generally took the side of France, or opposed closer ties to Great Britain; the Federalists generally took the opposite approach, and increasingly regarded France as a dire threat to American independence, the Christian religion, and everything else they held dear.

More important than the what French or British actually did was the growing conviction, within each of the emerging parties, that the other side was working, out of greed or fanaticism, in treasonous collusion with a foreign aggressor. Republicans regarded the Federalists as the "British party" and their leader Jefferson infamously labeled Washington, Hamilton, and Adams as traitors (in an inadvertently published letter), "men who were Samsons in the field & Solomons in the council, but who have had their heads shorn by the harlot England" (Jefferson, 1037). However, the Federalists gave far more than they got in this respect, calling their opponents "Jacobins" after the most radical, conspiratorial, and ultimately bloodthirsty faction of the French Revolution. This was equal parts a venomous partisan label and a sincere statement of who and what many Federalists

thought was driving the opposition to their policies, an international revolutionary conspiracy.

Through the battles over Hamilton's financial system, the French Revolution, and the Jay Treaty, the incipient party conflict had matured to the point of a contested presidential election by 1796, pitting Vice President John Adams against former Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. Deteriorating relations with France in the wake of Jay Treaty, including attacks on American shipping, French threats, and the distinct possibility of war, put the Federalists in a strong position. Adams won, and soon after the XYZ Affair inflamed the country against France and set up the belligerent national mood that made the Alien and Sedition Acts possible.

**Blockheads, Ruffians, and Wild Irishmen: The Press, Immigration, and the Origins of the Alien and Sedition Acts**

The Alien and Sedition Acts were the domestic planks of an aggressive national security program passed by the Federalists in preparation for an all out war against France that many of them desired but never managed to make happen. A military build-up was also put in motion, including the construction of a fleet of war-ships and a vastly enlarged army that included forces designed to rapidly mobilized against rebellious Americans as well as foreign invaders. This early homeland security legislation's specific targets were determined by two aspects of the party conflict that disturbed the Federalists most: the role of the press and the role of immigrants in the growing popular opposition to the policies of Washington, Hamilton, and Adams, and in the democratization of American political culture more generally.

The press was seen as a powerful political weapon that had fallen into the hands of conspirators, mercenaries, and fools. As the Founders and other American politicians perceived it, the press was the “great director of public opinion” and capable of destroying any government by turning its own people against it. "Give to any set of men the command of the press, and you give them the command of the country," declared an influential Pennsylvania Federalist (Addison, 1798, 18-19). Though still a relatively primitive medium by modern standards – a standard American newspaper featured only four pages, filled haphazardly with a seemingly random assortment of miscellaneous material without real headlines or illustrations – newspapers (along with pamphlets) were thought to have been instrumental in bringing about both the American and French Revolutions, as well as to numerous political developments in Great Britain. Founders on both sides of the 1790s political spectrum, including Jefferson, Hamilton, John Adams, and Samuel Adams had relied on the press as their “political engine” during the movement for independence from Great Britain.

The Founders began their new nation assuming that, with British tyranny defeated and republican government established, the press would now serve a more passive political role. It would build loyalty to the new regime, chiefly by providing the people with basic information about their government's activities, such as copies of the laws had been passed. As the first Washington administration gathered, it seemed more than enough when Boston businessman John Fenno showed up in the national capital and started *The Gazette of the United States*, a would-be national newspaper intended to "endear the general government to the people" (Pasley, 57) by printing documents and congressional proceedings, along

with letters, essays, and even poetry hailing President Washington and Vice President John Adams as gods among men.

When fundamental disagreements broke out among the leading Founders, however, the press was quickly drawn into the growing partisan conflict. To those who saw Hamilton as a not-so-hidden hand guiding the country toward monarchy and aristocracy, the *G.U.S.* began to seem positively sinister, an organ for government propaganda that might be able to overbear the voters' better judgment. Jefferson and Madison sought to counter the influence of the *G.U.S.* by helping create a new Philadelphia newspaper, the *National Gazette*, to lead the public charge against Hamilton's policies. The editor, the poet Philip Freneau (a college friend of Madison's), was given a no-work job in Jefferson's office. The newspaper provided Jefferson with a surrogate that would fight in the war for public opinion and still allow him remain above the fray and within the administration. When he was exposed as the *National Gazette*'s sponsor and confronted by President Washington, Jefferson claimed that Freneau's paper had "saved our constitution" from Hamilton (Pasley, 72).

While the *National Gazette* folded in 1793, it set a number of important precedents. In some places, it was the birthplace of the party system, since it was in the *National Gazette*'s pages that the very idea of an opposition political party (as opposed to a mere group of like-minded legislators) was first floated. Again and again in the following century, politicians and parties looked to newspapers as their primary public combatants in the bruising battles that followed the Jefferson-Hamilton split. The Philadelphia *Aurora*, founded by a grandson of Benjamin Franklin, took over as the leading Jeffersonian paper, and around it developed a loose national network of local newspapers that spread the

opposition movement's ideas around the country by copying from each other. Such newspaper networks became the primary means through which 19th-century American parties sought to influence the American public and a vital component of their campaigning.

The Federalists of the 1790s thought of themselves as the nation's rightful ruling class, "the wisest and best" rather than a political faction that had to compete for public favor and control of the government. The development of an opposition party and an opposition press was threatening, offensive, and patently a conspiracy. During the congressional debates on the Sedition Act, arch-conservative congressman John Allen of Connecticut read from a New York newspaper in which the strongest words used against President Adams was that he was "a person without patriotism, without philosophy" and "a mock Monarch." Allen flatly declared that, "If this be not a conspiracy against Government and people," he did not know what a conspiracy was (*Debates and Proceedings in Congress*).

The opposition press was doubly or triply bad because of the fact it was largely manned by men that the aristocratically-minded Federalists considered thoroughly unfit to "undertake the high task of enlightening the public mind." Whereas in colonial times most newspaper writing was done by men of education and social prestige, the lawyers, ministers, and merchants of the major towns, the political writing of 1790s fell increasingly to much lesser sorts of men, especially the generally self-educated artisan printers who produced the 100s hundreds of new journals that popped up across the country. "Too many of our Gazettes," lamented Rev. Samuel Miller, "are in the hands of persons destitute at once of the urbanity of gentlemen, the information of scholars, and the principles of virtue"

(Pasley, 198). The Alien and Sedition Acts' strongest supporters feared a kind of social and political subversion, in which worthy officials stood to lose their stations and reputations to upstarts and nobodies who would sling mud and rouse the rabble. Addison asserted, "It is a mortifying observation," Judge Alexander Addison wrote in one of many published charges to his grand jury, "that boys, blockheads, and ruffians, are often listened to, in preference to men of integrity, skill, and understanding" (Addison, 1800, 202-203).

Even more threatening than the printers were the immigrants. The British government harshly repressed the radical democracy movements that had grown up in England, Scotland, and Ireland in response to the French Revolution. Working-class journalists were among the most influential activists in those movements, and many of them were forced into exile during the mid-1790s to avoid mobs and jail. Not a few of these transatlantic "Jacobins," including the Alien and Sedition Act victims James Thomson Callender, William Duane, and John Daly Burk, ended up in the port cities of America, doing the work they knew best, for Democratic Republican newspapers. Duane became editor of the Philadelphia *Aurora*, the Republicans' most widely journal, and thus in many respects the national voice of the party.

Along with the refugee journalists came a politically noticeable number of other immigrants whom the Federalists found suspicious, especially the Irish who became an major presence in the capital city of Philadelphia during the 1790s. In the spring of 1797, Federalists tried to impose a tax on certificates of naturalization, hoping to keep out what Rep. Harrison Gray Otis of Massachusetts called the "hordes of wild Irishmen" who might "disturb our tranquility" (*Debates and Proceedings in Congress*). The Federalists'

prejudice ensured that the Irish and other recent immigrants would become an important voting bloc for their opponents.

Federalists feared that continued open, liberal policies on immigration, naturalization, and political dissent would allow the struggling monarchies of Europe to export their political troubles to the United States. As Otis put it, "the mass of vicious and disorganizing characters who could not live peaceably at home, and who, after unfurling the standard of rebellion in their own countries, might come hither to revolutionize ours" (*Debates and Proceedings in Congress*). While it was true that men like Duane were making a tremendous political impact here, the Federalists envisioned the country as threatened with nothing less than anarchy, to be engineered by hardened Jacobin cadres and carried out by wild Irish mobs and. Acerbic editor William Cobbett, as reactionary in America during this period as he was progressive in his later British years, painted the threat in his typically lurid palette:

> From various causes these United States have become the resting place of ninety nine hundredths of the factious villains, which Great Britain and Ireland have vomited from their shores. They are all schooled in sedition, are adepts at their trade. . . . Nothing short of a state of rebellion can content these wretches. All governments are to them are alike hateful. Like Lucifer, they carry a hell about with them in their own minds; and thus they prowl from country to country (Cobbett, 253, 256).

While Federalist worries were usually expressed in terms of generalized xenophobia, some full-blown conspiracy theories began to circulate as well. It was almost assumed that Republican politicians and editors, from Jefferson on down, were allies or catspaws of the French, especially the most radical elements of the revolution. Federalist ministers in New England promoted the idea that the refugees and their allies were agents of the Bavarian Illuminati, accused in Europe of masterminding the French Revolution.

In Philadelphia, some Federalists accused the United Irish Society, a pan-religious group devoted to republicanism and Irish nationalism, of plotting revolution against the U.S. In the critical interval between the XYZ revelations and the formulation of the Sedition Act, William Cobbett published a pamphlet, *Detection of a conspiracy, formed by the United Irishmen: with the evident intention of aiding the tyrants of France in subverting the government of the United States* (Cobbett, 241) accusing the group's just-organizing American chapters of planning to gain critical positions in the government, so that the country might be simply handed over to the invading French. In Ireland, the United Irishmen really did conspire with the French, and the Philadelphia Irish community really did contain a number of sympathizers and exiled activists. Yet while these radical Irish republicans certainly hated the British and blamed the Federalists for seeming to side with Ireland's oppressors, there is little evidence to suggest that they had any more sinister designs on the U.S. than the soon-to-be all-American goal of the throwing the Federalist rascals out of office.

The majority of Congress in 1798 did not make this distinction between opposition politics and conspiracy. As they saw it, the Republicans were following exactly the formula that had turned France into "a general slaughterhouse." At the beginning of the Revolution in France, John Allen recounted in arguing for the sedition bill, "those loud and enthusiastic advocates for liberty and equality took special care to occupy and command all the presses." By this means, the diabolical French revolutionaries gained control over "the poor, the ignorant, the passionate, and the vicious; over all these classes the freedom of the press shed its baneful effects, and the virtuous, the pacific, and the rich, were their victims." Now that this "plague" had reached the United States, the majority of the Fifth Congress

vowed not to meet the same fate as the *ancien regime* in France: "The Jacobins of our country, too, sir, are determined to preserve in their hands the same weapon [the press]; it is our duty to wrest it from them" (*Debates And Proceedings in Congress*).

**The Federalist "Reign of Terror": Enactment and Enforcement of the Domestic Security Program**

The details of laws themselves can be found in many other sources. The three bills dealing with immigrants came first. The Naturalization Act, passing June 18, 1798, lengthened the period needed for citizenship (and full political rights) from 5 to 14 years. The Alien Act and Alien Enemies Act, passing June 25 and July 6 respectively, gave the President sweeping powers to summarily imprison or deport suspicious aliens. The first Alien Act was perhaps the most appalling of the whole package. Even in peacetime, the law allowed the president to eject any alien he judged "dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States" or had "reasonable grounds to suspect are concerned in any treasonable or secret machinations against the government thereof." No trial or evidence was required, and the alien's only recourse was to apply to the president for a license allowing them to stay. Getting a license could require evidence showing and a bond guaranteeing that "that no injury or danger to the United Slates will arise from suffering such alien to reside therein." Fortunately, President Adams took a narrower view of his powers than Congress did, and never issued an order under the Alien Act.

The most infamous piece of the domestic security package came last. Though the transatlantic radicals working in the Republican press were the clear targets of the Alien Acts, the Sedition Act that finally passed on July 14, 1798 was even more blatantly

political. Clearly intended to minimize Republican chances in the 1798 and 1800 elections by shutting down their most effective form of campaigning, the law was set to expire at the end of Adams' term. It imposed penalties of up to two thousand dollars and two years in prison on anyone who should "write, print, utter, publish, or shall cause or procure to be written, printed, uttered, or published . . . any false, scandalous and malicious writing or writings against the government of the United States . . . with intent to defame the said government . . . or the said President, or to bring them . . . into contempt or disrepute; or to excite against them the hatred of the good people of the United States." The Federalists were careful to incorporate the most progressive legal standards available into the law, following the position laid down in the famous Zenger case from the colonial period. No one would be barred from saying or publishing anything before the fact, afterwards all bets were off. "The freedom of the press and opinions was never understood to give the right of publishing falsehoods and slanders," John Allen explained, "nor of exciting sedition, insurrection, and slaughter, with impunity."

This was state of the art free press theory, but wholly inadequate for the functioning democracy that was trying to emerge in the 1790s. While the Sedition Act was more lenient than similar laws in Europe, it nonetheless criminalized almost any criticism that might be made in protesting government policy or campaigning against an incumbent officer. It opened editors of opposition newspapers to court actions for almost any political essay or comment they might print, even a report of a public meeting, whether they wrote it or not. The Sedition Act allowed defendants to exonerate themselves in court by proving their assertions were true, but as Republican critics soon pointed out, political interpretations and opinion were almost impossible to conclusively prove or disprove. How would a

Republican defendant prove in court, for instance, that John Adams was a man "without patriotism or philosophy"?

In practice, few Sedition Act defendants had much opportunity to try serious legal defenses under the Sedition. The federal and northern state courts were dominated by Federalist judges, and they conducted the proceedings in a bitterly partisan manner. Judges interrupted the defense attorneys and often disallowed evidence and witnesses when defendants actually to prove their accusations were true. Orations denouncing the Republicans and warning about the dangers of unchecked political criticism were given from the bench, with juries present.

While falling a good deal short of a "reign of terror," as the Republicans called it, the Sedition Act was vigorously enforced. Every major Republican newspaper was hit in some fashion, along with many of the minor ones. Some 25 people were arrested under the Sedition Act, and they and other Republican journalists and speakers were harassed in other ways as well, including boycotts, beatings, private lawsuits, and in one case a contempt of Congress charge that forced editor William Duane into hiding.

Secretary of State Timothy Pickering nominated himself the scourge of Jacobinism, and began implementing the laws even before they were passed, forcing the deportation of John Daly Burk, a United Irishmen turned New York Republican editor and playwright, as the law was being debated. Pickering and others then began searching the Republican press avidly for comments that could be prosecuted. Another early target was Benjamin Franklin Bache, founding editor of the Philadelphia *Aurora*. The administration had earlier tried and failed to convict Bache of treasonous dealings with the French, but on June 26, 1798, federal judge Richard Peters had him arrested on a common law charge of seditious libel,

despite a Supreme Court ruling just three months earlier that the federal courts had no common law jurisdiction. Bache was forced to post $4000 bail, an enormous sum for those days, but died of yellow fever before he could come to trial.

The first victim of the Sedition Act proper was Republican congressman Matthew Lyon of Vermont, who was particularly hated for having spit on a Federalist in return for an insult and later fought back with fire tongs when the spat-upon gentleman tried to cane him on the House floor. Lyon got a $1,000 fine and 4 months in a jail kept by his worst enemy, all for reading a letter against Federalist foreign policy during his campaign for re-election.

Similar or even harsher punishment was given to ordinary citizens who spoke out. In Massachusetts, a drifter and former sailor named David Brown, a sort of village radical who gave speeches in taverns and occasionally wrote pamphlets, committed the awful crime of inspiring his Dedham, Massachusetts audience to erect a liberty pole with a political sign on it: "No stamp act, no sedition and no alien acts, no land tax. Downfall to the tyrants of America: peace and retirement to the President: long live the Vice President and the minority" (Smith, 260). Though he confessed and apologized, the penniless Brown was fined $450 by Judge Samuel Chase and sentenced to 18 months in prison.

Despite its eager enforcement, the Sedition Act must judged a failure, even on its own terms. While the prosecutions forced a few newspapers to suspend their operations, the Republican press more generally never missed a beat. The effect was quite the opposite in fact, as the Republicans filled their newspapers with horrifying accounts of theirs' and others' persecutions. Politically this was highly effective material that documented the Republican visions of the Federalists as tyrants and closet monarchists in league with the

British. The refugee radicals were careful to point out the similarities between Federalist repression and the British government crackdown that had forced so many of them into exile. At the same time, the Sedition Act politicized many young printers, often turning even neutral publishers into active Republicans once it became clear that printing both sides would not be tolerated by the authorities. The ironic end result of the Sedition Act was more Republican newspapers, not less, with 7 or 8 new journals a month popping up as the election of 1800 approached.

This hydra effect actually reinforced the Federalists' conviction that conspiracy was afoot, but if so it was a conspiracy to which many of them had conceded defeat by 1800. By means of the expanding Republican press, wrote one Federalist writer in the Hartford *Connecticut Courant*, "people from the highest to the lowest" achieved "a perfect union of opinion" (Pasley, 188). Two of those opinions were that the Federalist crusade against Jacobin conspirators had to end, especially once the "Quasi-War" with France died in 1800, and that a different set of leaders needed to be given command of the national government. Both of those things came to pass when Thomas Jefferson defeated John Adams in the presidential election, and took office March 4, 1801.

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*See also*: Democratic Republican Societies; Hamilton, Alexander; Jacobins; Jefferson, Thomas; XYZ Affair

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**Illuminati**

The Order of the Illuminati was a short-lived secret society in 18th-century Germany that became the linchpin of countless conspiracy theories and works of historical and religious speculation, ranging from reactionary attacks on the French Revolution to the countercultural writings of the 1960s and 70s. In terms of sheer longevity and versatility, few conspiracy theory "villains" can match the record of the Illuminati.

The legend began in the southwest German state of Bavaria, a militantly Catholic realm where the Reformation and the Enlightenment had been stoutly resisted by both the ruling family and the Jesuit clergy who controlled the cultural institutions. The Order of the Illuminati was born in the febrile brain of Dr. Adam Weishaupt, a Professor of Canon Law at Bavaria's most prestigious educational institution, the University of Ingolstadt. A leader of the liberal faction within the university that supported the introduction of non-Catholic books and scientific subjects into the university curriculum, Weishaupt felt that Jesuit rivals were sabotaging his career, and determined that only a secret organization could ever succeed in spreading the secular, rationalistic ideas of the Enlightenment in such a hostile environment.

Secret societies and fraternal orders were something of a rage among the elites of Europe and America during the 18th century. Living in a world where traditional beliefs seemed increasingly inadequate and traditional society was decaying, many sought out deeper knowledge and new forms of sociability to go with them. The exotic rituals and quasi-pagan "mysteries" available to initiates in Freemasonry and similar institutions were immensely appealing, and at their best taught a more modern and open-minded

value system than the official culture of the day. Membership was also an excellent way for ambitious men to make social and professional connections.

Weishaupt's new secret society was launched May 1, 1776, with five members. Loosely based on Masonic lodges, Illuminati chapters were intended to become "schools of wisdom," (Stauffer, 150) in which new ideas could be freely taught away from the prying eyes of priests and public officials. Weishaupt originally planned three grades of Illuminati, Novice, Minerval, and Illuminated Minerval, promising higher grades to come. The order was structured in a hierarchical, cult-like fashion in which the higher-ranking members were supposed to control the actions and thinking of their subordinates. Each novice -- young, rich, impressionable men were the preferred recruits – was to be instructed by a single Minerval who was to keep the identities of the other members secret. Advancement required the novitiate to prepare detailed reports on his life and character, including the books he owned and the names of his enemies, and to recruit new candidates. Then finally, after two years of study, the novice was elevated to Minerval status and got to attend Illuminati gatherings. Minervals were to form a kind of secret Enlightenment university hidden within the existing institutions of the society, where the order would work to see that its members highly placed.

This was a bold plan to spread an intellectual revolution through Catholic Europe, frightening in the degree to which it sought to control its agents, but it amounted to relatively little in practice. Intent on personal, dictatorial command of the order, Weishaupt quarreled frequently with other leading members, and the total number of Illuminati rose to perhaps 60 in its first four years of existence.

The order's fortunes took a temporary turn for the better when Baron Adolf Franz Friederich Knigge, a well-connected diplomat and leading Mason from the north of Germany, joined in 1780. The accession of Knigge greatly increased the geographic reach and social prestige of Illuminism, and created an alliance with Freemasonry that proved the key to the order's brief period of expansion. Knigge added a number of new grades, with cheeky, imposing titles like Priest, Prince, and Magus, and expanded the group's recruitment to include not just impressionable young students but also experienced men who already occupied positions of influence, especially Knigge's Masonic colleagues. Several of the new Illuminati grades corresponded to Masonic degrees and provided easy points of access for Masons into the higher ranks of the new order. Under Knigge's guidance, the Order of the Illuminati enjoyed its only period of real prestige or influence. Membership climbed into the thousands, and reached outside Bavaria into a number of other German-speaking states. A number of German princes and nobles became Illuminati, as did such lions of German culture as Goethe and Herder.

Then, beginning in 1784, just at the peak of the order's popularity, the hammer came down. Duke Charles Theodore of Bavaria issued a series of edicts banning all voluntary associations and societies that had been created without government permission, in time naming the Illuminati specifically as one of the outlawed groups. An investigation was begun and Illuminati who held any kind of official positions in the army, clergy, government, or educational system were forced to confess and recant their membership, promptly and sincerely, or lose their jobs. As in many cases where a government tries to suppress a conspiratorial organization, heavily embroidered confessions and lurid, semi-fictional tell-alls began appearing as the scandal mounted.

Weishaupt and Knigge escaped, but a number of other leading Illuminati were arrested, including one Xavier Zwack, a disgraced member whose trove of letters and documents included plans for creating a secret organization for women, essays defending atheism and suicide, claims that the Illuminati had the power of life or death over their members, and information on secret ink, counterfeiting, poison, and even abortion.

A highly imaginative stew of prospective sin and projected skullduggery, Zwack's papers became the basis for the Illuminati legend that mushroomed almost simultaneously with the Bavarian order's final suppression in 1787. Its fame was first spread by a host of German language works published attacking and defending the order, including several intemperate productions from founder Adam Weishaupt itself. Taking the seized documents and the controversial literature out of its original context, the embattled defenders of Church and King came to see the Illuminati as both representatives of, and the prime movers behind, all the insidious forces of innovation, free thought, and revolution that seemed to threaten their world. European reactionaries simply refused to believe that such a diabolical organization could be killed, seeing its hand in the other major and minor political upheavals of the 18th century.

The most notable and shocking of these developments, of course, was the French Revolution that began in 1789. Once the French Jacobins had pushed the country to regicide and mass murder in the early 1790s, apologists for the old regime cast about for explanations and many settled, improbably enough, on the Bavarian Illuminati as the culprits.

The basics of the grand Illuminati conspiracy theory were first mapped out by University of Glasgow scientist John Robison, a Mason who gradually became convinced

that the secrecy provided by Masonic lodges and similar institutions "had been used in every country for venting and propagating sentiments in religion and politics, that could not have been circulated in public without exposing the author to great danger." This protection encouraged free thinkers and libertines to "become more bold, and to teach doctrines subversive of all our notions of morality . . . of all satisfaction and contentment with our present life, so long as we live in a state of civil subordination." This insight might have had some merit as a description of Europe's intellectual ferment during the 18th century, but Robison literalized it into the charge that "AN ASSOCIATION HAS BEEN FORMED for the express purpose of ROOTING OUT ALL THE RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENTS, AND OVERTURNING ALL THE EXISTING GOVERNMENTS OF EUROPE" (Stauffer, 203).

In his 1797 book *Proofs of a Conspiracy*, Robison outlined his theories in massive though often mistaken detail, tracing the origins of the conspiracy back to French freemasons whose ideas had spread to Germany and allegedly spawned the Illuminati, an association intended to not just enlighten Europe, but eventually "govern the world" (Stauffer, 208). Along with many of his contemporaries, Robison believed that the Illuminati had not really been suppressed in 1787, but had merely gone underground and assumed new and more dangerous guises. Robison labored for 60 pages to establish a link between the Bavarians and the French revolutionaries, relying on a few fleeting contacts between some mid-level Illuminati leaders and two well-connected French Masons who became prominent French politicians during the 1790s, Mirabeau and Talleyrand. Supposedly the French immediately adopted Weishaupt's plan "in all its branches," creating "illuminated" lodges all over France, including, Robison claimed, the

infamous Jacobin club that produced the Revolution's most radical and bloodthirsty faction (Stauffer, 213).

Almost simultaneously with Robison, a French writer was working out an even more elaborate version of the same theory. In *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Jacobinisme*, the Jesuit priest Augustin Barruel described a "triple conspiracy" of "*sophistes*" specializing in "Impiety," "Rebellion," and "Anarchy." It all began with a conspiracy of philosophers, led by Enlightenment figures such as Voltaire and the Encyclopedists, whose anti-Christian writings sapped the intellectual and political prestige of the Catholic Church. At the same time, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau expounded the doctrines of Liberty and Equality, and Freemasons took up their cause, inculcating impressionable young men with the blasphemous notions that "all men are equals and brothers; all men are free." The Illuminati then emerged to bring the philosophers and Masons together behind a program of cultural and political revolution, seeking to destroy not only the Christian churches and Christian monarchs of Europe, but "every religion natural or revealed. . . every government . . . all civil society . . . all property whatsoever." This "complete academy of Conspirators" brought their plans to fruition by creating the Jacobin clubs and fomenting the French Revolution (Stauffer, 217-18).

These Illuminati-based explanations of the French Revolution and the other radical movements of the time spread quickly to the United States, where war with the French Republic seemed to be looming and the Federalists in power were being severely criticized in the press. Many of these press critics were political refugees from suppressed

radical movements in England, Scotland, and Ireland and strong sympathizers with the ideals of the French Revolution, adding fuel to a sense of alien subversion.

The authors of the Illuminati conspiracy theory had warned America that it was in danger. Robison claimed that the Bavarian Illuminati had planted cells in America before their official suppression, and Barruel cried that the *Illumines* were coming, the *Illumines* were coming, fresh from their successes in France: "As the plague flies on the wings of the wind, so do their triumphant legions infect America. . . . The immensity of the ocean is but a feeble barrier against the universal conspiracy of the Sect" (Stauffer, 226-27). loh

Robison and Barruel found eager readers among the Federalists, especially in New England, where the legatees of the old Puritan clergy wielded great political influence and deplored what they perceived a declining level of religious belief since colonial times. Believing that Thomas Jefferson's Democratic Republicans were in cahoots with the French in any case, Federalists were all too prepared to believe that their political enemies might be part of a much broader and deeper conspiracy against not just George Washington and John Adams, but religion and morality in general.

In the spring and summer of 1798, a full-fledged Illuminati scare broke out, turning the conspiracy theory into a leading topic of political debate and contributing to the paranoid atmosphere that produced the Alien and Sedition Acts. Robison and Barruel were endorsed in widely published and discussed sermons by some of New England's most famous divines. Leading off was the Rev. Jedidiah Morse, pastor of First Church, Charlestown, Mass., and also America's leading authority on geography. Morse launched the controversy before a large audience in Boston on May 9, declared a day of "solemn humiliation, fasting, and prayer" by President John Adams.  Morse published two other

Illuminati sermons later that year, along with innumerable newspaper articles defending and trying to substantiate his charges. Pressed for specifics, he named Thomas Jefferson, the figurehead and presidential candidate of a rapidly coalescing opposition party, as the likely chief of the American Illuminati.

While no means universally accepted, even by those of his own political persuasion, the Illuminati theory was given further sanction that summer by Rev. David Tappan, a Harvard professor of divinity, and especially by Rev. Timothy Dwight, who as president of Yale College was virtually the spiritual leader of New England's Congregational-Federalist establishment. Having preached and written often against the rise of "infidelity," Dwight fell hard for the Illuminati theory, lending his considerable prestige to one of the most histrionic of the attacks, addressed to the people of New Haven during their 1798 Fourth of July celebration. Speaking on the "The Duty of Americans in the Present Crisis," Dwight called upon his fellow citizens to stand against these enemies, who embodied "the cruelty and rapacity of the Beast," lest their sons become "the dragoons of Marat" and their "daughters the concubines of the Illuminati" (Stauffer, 250-51).

Morse and Dwight were in deadly earnest, but some Federalist politicians and publicists tried to exploit the Illuminati fears for political gain. One of Jefferson's nastiest critics, newspaper editor William Cobbett, helped oversee the publication of Robison's book in America, and President Dwight's politician brother Theodore gave speeches and wrote articles purporting to show that Jefferson was "the very child of *modern illumination*, the foe of man, and the enemy of his country" (Stauffer, 283).

Despite the large amounts of ink and breath that Federalists expended on it, the Illuminati scare largely fizzled as a political phenomenon. The opposition press ridiculed the charges and even many Federalists were openly skeptical. What was worse, Jeffersonian Republican journals such as the Boston *Independent Chronicle* and the Philadelphia *Aurora*, and clever Republican orators such New Haven's Abraham Bishop, worked fairly successfully to turn the charges around. If there was any real conspiracy to suborn the nation's religious, cultural, and political institutions, it was the one being mounted by the "political priests" of New England, who hoped to suppress the religious and political freedoms that Americans enjoyed, and protect the privileges of New England's tax-supported Congregational churches, by smearing their political opponents and leading a witch-hunt for Illuminati and other subversives.

Ranging back through the region's history to Puritan witch trials and blue laws, Democratic Republican critics depicted Federalist New England as a benighted place where a "union of church and state" labored to keep the people misinformed and docile. Timothy Dwight was labeled the Pope of New England, a cutting epithet in a country where the Catholic Church was widely and deeply disdained. Many of the articles and pamphlets were written from the viewpoint of New England clergymen or politicians who had been ostracized and sometimes forced from their positions for their liberal political opinions. The general tenor and strategy of the attacks are captured in the title of John C. Ogden's pamphlet, *A View of the New England Illuminati: who are indefatigably engaged in destroying the religion and government of the United States; under a feigned regard for their safety*. Along with hundreds of newspaper articles by Ogden and others, Abraham Bishop's widely reprinted speech and pamphlet on "the extent and power of

political delusion," emanating from Pope Dwight's own stomping grounds, proved highly popular and effective.

Though hysterical attacks on the Republicans continued, the specific charge that they were part of an Illuminati conspiracy dropped out of Federalist use once Jefferson assumed the presidency in 1801. Jefferson's own allies kept up the counter-charge for several more years as they tried unsuccessfully to gain power within the New England states. Occasionally they came close to building a conspiracy theory of their own, revolving around the alleged "union of church and state." In 1802, Bishop published a kind of parody of Robison's book, also titled *Proofs of a Conspiracy*, that documented the means by which New England's Federalist elite clung to power and repressed dissent.

While never mainstream again after 1800, the Robison-Barruel theory of the Illuminati as secret prime movers in world events has figured in the beliefs of many, if not most, major conservative conspiracy theorists since that time. Anti-Semites, Christian Identity, Nesta Webster, the John Birch Society – all found Robison's material too good to pass up and assigned a major role to the Illuminati as progenitors or allies of whatever group they feared. Religious reactionaries have been especially attracted to the Illuminati legend, which makes the forces of secularism seem so efficient, powerful, and dangerous that they simply must be countered. By the same token, many Americans influenced by the 1960s counter-culture have embraced belief in the Illuminati, sometimes tongue-in-cheek or only imaginatively, out of an *attraction* for the idea that a secret network of enlightened individuals might be able to spread hidden knowledge and bring about sweeping cultural, social, and political change.

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*See also*: Alien and Sedition Acts; Barruel, Augustin; *Illuminatus*; Morse, Jedidiah; Robison, John

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**Indians, North American**

Native Americans were the featured villains in what were probably the first non-supernatural conspiracy fears experienced by European migrants to America.

Fear and Loathing in the American Woods

The early American frontier was in many ways a deeply fearful place, especially in the first decades of white settlement in any given region. Settlers knew little about their new home's existing occupants, and possessed only the sketchiest notions of how many there were, where they lived, and what their intentions might be. Though as many as 7 million people lived above the Rio Grande at the time of first contact, Europeans thought of North America as, in Pilgrim leader William Bradford's words, a "hideous and desolate wilderness" (Nash, 23-24).

In traditional Judaeo-Christian culture, wilderness was a place to be feared rather than cherished, a place where monsters and devils lived to test the faith of good, civilized people. Especially among the New England Puritans, it was commonly believed that the Indians were devil worshippers out to do their master's bidding, though not actual devils themselves. (However, it was considered quite likely that the Indians lived among real monsters, including dragons!) Thus the expectation of confronting ultimate evil was built into the Puritans' sense of their "errand into the wilderness"(Nash, 23-43).

Certainly not all the colonists shared the Puritans' high level of theological dread, but some fear of the Indians was fairly constant and not without justification, since over the first three centuries of European settlement, there was always some part of North

America where the natives were resisting their own conquest and displacement. This resistance often took the form of a raiding style of warfare that was intended to spread terror and usually preferred striking at weakly defended targets, like an outlying cabin or an isolated outpost. Always seeking ways of fighting that minimized their own casualties, Indian war leaders were not above using devious tactics such as ambushes, sneak attacks and feigning peaceful intentions. One of the great Indian victories during Pontiac's Rebellion (or War or Conspiracy, depending on your point of view) of 1763, the Ojibways' triumph over the British at Ft. Michilimackinac was accomplished by lulling the soldiers into complacency with a friendly game of ball. The Indian players hit the ball into the open gates of the fort, chased after it, then suddenly attacked with weapons the Ojibway women had smuggled inside the post while the whites were watching the game.

Though the European armies of the Early Modern Period were no slouches at wreaking death and destruction on the civilian population, Indian warfare was perceived as particularly and intimately awful. In some ways Indians were better at distinguishing their targets than whites were – the French were often spared in raids on European outposts – but their military customs made few allowances for non-combatants. Indian massacre stories invariably featured a scene in which a warrior tore an infant from her mother's arms and dashed her head against a hearth or a tree; this became a cliché, but by no means one without a basis in reality. Numerous common practices of Indian warfare haunted the dreams of European settlers, soldiers, and officials, especially the scalping or other mutilation of victims' bodies and the taking of captives to be assimilated into Indian society.

(It should be noted that whites fighting Indians made few such allowances themselves, and showed far less interest than the Indians in taking captives. Nevertheless, white attacks on Indian villages were called “raids” or “battles,” while successful Indian attacks on white settlements or military posts were termed “massacres.”)

This fear of assimilation by an alien, collectively-minded society, a recurrent theme in the annals of American conspiracy theory, has one of its roots in tales of captivity among the Indians. Some of the stories even admitted what historians have found to true, that many captives, especially women and children, were successfully assimiliated, and showed little desire to return to European ways. Ever more lurid Indian captivity narratives became a staple of American popular culture, and perhaps its first unique contribution to world literature.

The earlier comment about Indians haunting settlers’ dreams should be taken quite literally. Recent interpretations of the 1692 Salem witchcraft crisis have emphasized the role of New England’s late 17$^{th}$-century Indian wars (1675-78 and 1688-91) in generating the psychological stress and supernatural fears that exploded in Massachusetts. A large number of the accusers had some direct or immediate family experience with the Indian wars, and those who didn’t had probably read Mary Rowlandson’s popular, then recently published book on her experience as a captive during the earlier conflict, King Philip’s War. The witchcraft evil was thought to have first come from Indian powwows in the forest, and the devil appeared to several Massachusetts women as “a thing like an Indian,” or “a Tawny man.” (McWilliams, 589, 594-95) Accuser Mary Toothaker of Billerica finally admitted under questioning that she had lashed out because she was “troubled w’h feare about the Indians, & used to dream

of fighting with them." Toothaker claimed to have signed up with the devil herself because he had "promised to keep her from the Indians." (McWilliams, 595)

At least these colonial New Englanders had some direct or nearly direct experience of the Indians they feared so much. In later centuries, far more white Americans eagerly consumed Indian atrocity stories around the family table and in popular literature and newspapers than ever interacted with Indians or witnessed an Indian raid. Given the emphasis placed on the depredations of "murderous savages" in their information about the Indians, it is perhaps not surprising that 19th-century migrants heading to the Pacific coast on the Overland Trail brought hair-trigger emotions to all their thoughts and actions concerning Indians. Many reporting their scalps itching at the very thought of Indians. Most westering travellers suffered "far more," according to historian Glenda Riley, "from their own anxieties what *could* happen to them than from what actually *did* happen." (Riley, 427-28)

Unfortunately, the Indians themselves did suffer, at the hands of settlers who were easily panicked into acts of violence and prejudice, and eager to support harsh government policies against Indians, having learned to deal with their anxieties by fearing and hating the natives.

## The Myth of the Superchief

While it would be stretching the definition of conspiracy theory to include all fears of Indian attack in this category, much of what settlers, soldiers, and government officials believed about the Indians certainly does qualify. Whites often became convinced that the Indians of different villages, tribes, and languages were leagued

against them, and secretly plotting mayhem even when relations were peaceful and friendly. In some respects, a conspiracy model of Indian behavior came naturally to Europeans, who struggled to understand or even perceive the complex cultural, social, and political distinctions among the various Indian groups they encountered. As with many cross-cultural conspiracy theories, it was easy to move from lumping all Indians together culturally to believing that all Indians were working together against the colonists.

This pattern emerged even before the beginning of permanent settlement. The leaders of the 1585 lost colony of Roanoke abandoned their island off the coast of present North Carolina out of a belief that Pemisapan, the *weroance* of the local Indian village, had organized a region-wide conspiracy, involving many tribes, to starve and then wipe out the colony. According to historian Michael Oberg, Pemisapan had probably done nothing more than "grown weary of an intolerant, violent, contagious, and dependent people," (83) and, quite understandably, moved his village off Roanoke Island to a more congenial neighborhood. Even so, colony commander Ralph Lane led a force that brought back the *weroance*'s head, the culmination of a pattern of precipitous, threatening actions by Lane. "No conspiracy is needed," writes Oberg, to explain the growing hostility of the region's Indians to the Roanoke colony (82). The English settlement abruptly shifted locations after Pemisapan's death, and disappeared completely a few years after that.

Pemisapan represents the original version of two ideas that became standard parts of conspiracy theories about the Indians: the Indian mastermind or monarch in control of tens of thousands of warriors, and the unfaithful Indian ally or convert. From

"Pemisapan's Conspiracy" on, serious or widespread Indian resistance was usually attributed by Europeans and later chroniclers to the machinations of some preternaturally brilliant, all-powerful "superchief" (Bourne, 202). This analysis may have been somewhat accurate for the Powhatan Indian rebellions against Virginia in 1622 and 1644, which almost destroyed the colony and are generally thought to be the work of the war chief turned paramount chief Opechanacanough, Pocahontas's uncle and the reputed power behind her father Powhatan's throne.

The reputations of most other putative Indian masterminds were built on much shakier foundations. In many cases, a widespread conflict were blamed on someone who was really only a major figure in some critical early encounter, or promoted himself as the primary conspirator in a later treaty with the white authorities.

For instance, New England propagandists depicted their apocalyptic, region-wide Indian war of 1675-78 as the work of Philip, sachem of Pokanoket, whom they dubbed "King Philip" to re-emphasize their claim that the conflict was , as Russell Bourne puts it, "not a series of separate raids by provoked people but a brilliantly orchestrated war, conducted by a devilish military genius." (Bourne, 118) Besides personalizing the conflict as conspiracy theories so often do, this conspiratorial view of the New England Indians' resistance was an political and ethical convenience for whites, who were authorized by their belief in this evil plot to ignore the role of their own behavior in the Indians' unrest, take extreme measures against tribes whose land rights conflicted with their ambitions, and to declare the problem solved when the designated villain was eliminated.

Philip (who changed his name from Metacom when he became sachem) was the son of Massassoit, the Indian chief who had befriended the Pilgrims and allowed their Plymouth Colony to survive. Relations had deteriorated after Massassoit's death as the local fur trade dried up and agricultural settlement expanded, bringing livestock that consumed the Indians' open-field crops and forcing them into economic dependence upon whites. Philip and his people also chafed under Plymouth's unequal laws, which had recently been use to try and hang three of Philip's followers. Plymouth leaders coveted the Pokanokets' land, and eagerly accepted rumors circulated against Philip by the sachem's Indian political rivals, to the effect the sachem planned a major war, possibly in concert with the French. When Philip was recorded at a meeting with Rhode Island officials complaining about his peoples' mistreatment by Plymouth, and vowing that he was "determined not to live until I have no country," (Bourne, 107) the mantle of conspiratorial mastermind was fitted and ready to be forced on him.

Philip was thought to be seeking the extermination of New England's white population. The Pokanokets did begin hostilities with a much-exaggerated raid on the nearby town of Swansea, but Philip himself spent the war running while the Narragansetts, Abenakis, and other tribes around New England did most of the fighting. He nevertheless always remained New England's primary target, and by the end of the war, his village had vanished, his wife and son had been sold into slavery, and his dismembered body was on display in the town of Plymouth.

Pontiac played a similarly inflated role in accounts of the 1763 "conspiracy" that bears his name. An obscure Odawa war leader (not a chief), Pontiac touched off a frontier-wide uprising but actually led only one phase of it, the failed siege of Ft. Detroit.

Both he and the British tried to advance their interests in the aftermath of the war, concluding a peace treaty that bolstered British claims to the Trans-Appalachian West and acknowledged Pontiac an Indian potentate, but probably got the former rebel assassinated as a traitor to the Indian cause. As they had long done with the alleged "conquests" of the Iroquois "Empire," the British authorities and the Anglo-American colonists exaggerated Pontiac's power and status in ways that magnified both the military threat he posed and the glory and power that accrued to those who had pacified him. The operative theory regarding Pontiac and many other superchiefs was well expressed in "Ponteach, or the Savages of America," a drama published in 1766 by French and Indian War hero Robert Rogers. Rogers's Ponteach is a haughty forest emperor laid tragically low by his pride. "This Country's mine, and here I reign as King," a king whose "Empire's measured only by the Sun," the character asserts in explaining his disdain for British authority (Rogers, 128, 144).

In fact, it is unlikely that general Indian uprisings could ever have been the work of a single conspiratorial mastermind, or even a knot of them. The primitive nature of the available means of communication alone – symbolic war belts of clamshell beads ("wampum") were used to coordinate the 1763 risings – precluded any sort of command and control. Conspiracies were unlikely for more fundamental cultural reasons as well. Most North American Indian tribes lacked any sort of true chief executive who could impose his will on his followers. A chief, unlike a European general, governor, or king, drew his power not from law or force, but only from the respect and love that his prowess, wisdom and generosity had garnered among his people, who could obey him or not as they chose.

The superchief mythology, from the exaggerations of the leader's influence and the depth of his scheming to the popular dramas (and often place names) that celebrated his nobility in defeat, was applied successively to every significant Indian resistance leader after Pontiac, from John Logan of the 1774 Lord Dunmore's War (immortalized in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* for his oratorical prowess) to Tecumseh, Black Hawk, and Osceola in the early 19th century and, in a somewhat less conspiratorial vein, to such far western Indian rebels as Cochise, Geronimo, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse. It was applied retroactively to Philip in one of the antebellum era's most popular plays, "Metamora."

The celebrity that the superchief myth brought all of these men should not obscure how damaging it was to Indian people when they were still struggling to stay in their homelands. In their time, the names of all of these leaders were capable of plunging whole frontiers into panic, and such panics usually brought on white military campaigns that would be followed by the expropriation of Indian lands.

## "Our Most Dangerous Enemies": Indian Converts and Allies as Victims of Conspiracy Fears

Far more harmful than the "superchief" myth, in the terms of the brutality it inspired in whites, was the related conspiracy theory that all Indians alike were actual or potential enemies, no matter what attitude they professed to hold toward whites. Even Indians who had become Christians, pursued white occupations, and lived peaceably near white towns for decades were treated as likely traitors, spies, and saboteurs.

Since the beginning of European contact, the colonizers had been urging the natives to lay down their weapons, adopt European ways of life, and convert to the Christian religion. Most Indians resisted this pressure when they could, but for many resistance became impossible once European settlement had engulfed their homelands. Some responded to the urgings of Christian missionaries and adopted the faith, while others sought to simply live as quietly as they could, at peace with the settlers or even joining in the whites' battles with other Indians. In most of the colonies, then, there were at least small communities of peaceful and often Christian Indians living near white towns and farms. In times of general Indian conspiracy scares, these communities became deeply suspicious to whites, and often suffered as much or more than the tribes actually engaged in hostilities.

The residents of Puritan missionary John Eliot's "praying towns" discovered this during King Philip's War. Stories circulated of "Praying Indians" joining in raids on Christian towns and spying for the rebels. According to historian Jenny Hale Pulsipher, "The English were quick to believe tales of Christian Indian perfidy," and the burning of English barns or haystacks "became pretexts for English violence against the praying towns." (Pulsipher, 475) The Christian Indians at Wamesit had to abandon their village and food supplies in late 1675 after furious English militiamen fired on them without warning on two separate occasions, in one incident wounding a number of women and children, a twelve-year-old fatally. Various Puritan commentators questioned the sincerity of Indian religious conversions and depicted the "Praying Indians" as contemptible mockeries of Christianity. Sometimes with and sometimes without official approval, New England troops sacked the villages of Indian Christians and Indian allies.

Meanwhile, the authorities shut down many praying towns and interned numerous friendly natives on barren Deer Island in Boston Harbor. Some praying Indians even shared the fate of Philip's family, enslavement in the Caribbean.

Upon other groups of peaceful, Christian Indians were visited with some of the worst atrocities in the annals of European-Indian relations in North America. The infamous Paxton Boys massacre, for instance, was part of the fallout from the conspiracy theories surrounding Pontiac. The Pennsylvania frontier had been wracked by Indians raids both during the 1763 rebellion and the French and Indian War that preceded it. There were a number of Christian Indian villages in the colony, including Conestoga, where a handful of people eked out meager living selling bowls and baskets. Looking for payback and charging that some of the Conestoga men had fought with Pontiac, a number of men from the town of Paxton, on the Susquehanna River in east-central Pennsylvania, concluded that these supposedly friendly Indians amounted to a "Basket & Broommaking Banditty" who were "in Reality our most dangerous enemies." (Merrell, 286)

A week and a half before Christmas, 1763, 54 Scots-Irish men from Paxton rode to Conestoga, and shot and hacked to death six Indians they found there, allegedly in revenge for Pontiac's Rebellion. Local authorities gathered the surviving Conestogas (who had been lucky enough to be out) and placed them in a workhouse for protection. The men from Paxton soon rode in and killed the rest.

Far from horrifying their fellow Pennsylvanians, the "Paxton Boys" found themselves at the head of a popular cause. Their numbers swelled with new recruits, the Paxton boys rode down to Philadelphia, in arms, to take some Christian Delaware Indians being protected there and topple the government itself if necessary. A manifesto was

issued in which the supposedly Quaker-dominated government of Pennsylvania was charged with being insensitive to frontier needs because it was too soft on the Indians. A poem called "The Cloven Foot Discovered" (Parkman, 716) expressed the settlers' view that whites who gave sympathy or aid to any Indians all were traitors to their fellow colonists and fellow travelers of the Indians' secret plots against the frontier settlements:

> Go, good Christians, never spare
> To give your Indians Clothes to wear
> Send 'em good Beef, and Pork, and Bread,
> Guns, Powders, Flints, and Stores of Lead,
> To Shoot Your Neighbours Through the Head; . . .
> Encourage every friendly Savage
> To murder, burn, destroy, and ravage.

Only some fast talking by leading Pennsylvania politician Benjamin Franklin finally defused the Paxton Boys situation, but not before more than 50 of the "protected" Christian Delawares died of diseases in the city.

Time and again in early America, peaceful Christian Indians found that the most dangerous place to be was anywhere near their supposed allies and co-religionists, the Anglo-American settlers. No matter how devout a Christian and firmly committed to peace and friendship with whites a group of Indians might be, many settlers assumed all Indians were secretly conspiring against them, and in the right circumstances might slaughter whatever Indians they happened to run across. The biggest problem that the young United States had in recruiting Indian allies during the Revolutionary War was the fact that pro-American chiefs kept getting killed by American soldiers.

By far the most heinous example of intentional "friendly fire" on Indians during the Revolution can be found in a 1782 incident that came to be known as the Gnadenhutten massacre, in present east-central Ohio. The "Ohio Country" was a bitter

battleground between the British and Indians on the one hand, and the settlers just south of the Ohio River in Kentucky on the other. German-American missionaries from a sect called the Moravians had converted large numbers of Delaware Indians who lived in this area to Christianity and kept them on the American side. The Moravians were pacifists, so once converted these Indians did not even believe in fighting.

The Christian Indians of Gnadenhutten happened to be harvesting their corn when one day in 1782 when a war party of American settlers appeared. They were pursuing some hostile Indians who had been seen in the area.. The settlers charged the friendly villagers of Gnadenhutten with being warriors, pointing to the existence of European implements, such as axes, spoons and tea kettles, in this village of Indians who had adopted white lifestyles, as evidence they had killed and stolen from whites. On the strength of this flimsy evidence, the Gnadenhutten Indians were sentenced to death. They spent the night praying to the European God, and in the morning the settlers dragged the Indians out of their cabins in groups of two or three and executed them with a mallet so as not to waste ammunition.

These sorts of incidents often turned white suspicions about Christian and friendly Indians into self-fulfilling prophecies. With friends like the American settlers, many Indians reasoned, who needed enemies? During wars and war scares with neighboring colonial powers like Great Britain, France, and Spain, most Indians with any access to the "foreign" power were quite willing to work with them against the settlers and/or the United States if they possibly could, though the Indians' fondest desire was always to be left relatively independent of any European power.

Colonial and U.S. officials frequently turned this rational pattern of Indian behavior into the basis of another sort of conspiracy theory, of the Indians as cat's-paws of foreigners out to split off pieces of their territory or curb American expansion. Andrew Jackson first made a name for himself by brutally precluding the possibility that the southeastern Indians might collaborate with the Spanish or British to block the U.S. from accessing the Gulf Coast and its ports. This was the basic aim of his campaigns against the Creeks, the British, and the Seminoles between 1813 and 1818, which began with a settler panic about a "massacre" at Ft. Mims in Alabama, and ended with the summary execution of two British citizens and an Indian religious leader and the forcible U.S. annexation of Spanish Florida.

But at least Jackson's enemies were genuinely hostile to the United States. Unfortunately, the mistreatment of friendly and Christian Indians continued long after the point had passed when Indians posed any real threat to the United States and even in cases where they could hardly have done more to demonstrate their loyalty. Perhaps the most egregious example of many occurred in Civil War era Minnesota. A group of Winnebago Indians, previously removed by the government from their Wisconsin homeland, were living peacefully in the manner of white farmers in the area around Blue Earth. When a Sioux uprising broke out in 1862, the Winnebago were forced out of their homes as a security threat, and sent to a new reservation in a barren section of present Nebraska. The Winnebago had no connection to the Sioux outbreak, and could not have made much of a military contribution to it in any case, since most of the fighting-age Winnebago men were serving in the Union army at the time. The Winnebago veterans

would find no homes to return to after the war. At that point many of them doubtless wished they had been conspiring against the United States.

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**JACKSON, ANDREW**

As a general, official, candidate, and especially as seventh president of the United States, Andrew Jackson (1767-1845) was and is one of the most polarizing figures on the American scene. Because of the Jacksonians' occasionally lurid rhetoric and Manichean approach to certain policy issues, historians have long been in the habit of including Jackson and his followers in the ranks of "paranoid" or conspiracy theory-prone political movements. This interpretation comes most powerfully from the post-World War II "consensus" historians, led by Richard Hofstadter, with their blanket dismissal of class, economic, and ideological conflict as forces in American history. The Jacksonians constantly described American society in these terms, and practiced a politics of angry confrontation, so the consensus historians set them down as demagogues using class rhetoric to mask a capitalist agenda, or as conspiracy theorists who, as David Brion Davis puts it, saw "the growing inequality of wealth as the product of an aristocratic conspiracy against the rights of the laboring classes" (Davis, 69)

This view is inadequate. Coming to prominence in a time of sweeping change -- what more recent scholars have labeled the "Market Revolution" – the Jacksonians were expressing serious concerns when they attacked their Monster Banks and hydras of corruption. This revolution saw millions of Americans become wage laborers for the first time, subject to the will of employers and forced to meet their daily needs by buying goods and services in the marketplace. Inequalities of wealth deepened as many traditional trades were decimated by industrialization. The legal and institutional order was remade in ways that maximized the power and protected the earnings of capitalist entrepreneurs over against the rest of society. Finally, two major economic depressions

punctuated the Jacksonian era, the Panics of 1819 and 1837, and in those crashes millions of Americans found themselves suddenly susceptible to the fortunes and policies of unfamiliar institutions like banks and corporations, run by and for the benefit a new class of economic power brokers. In sum, while we may find the Jacksonians' analysis of the Market Revolution extreme and their policy responses to it crude and simplistic, the problems they perceived were no paranoid delusions.

Jackson himself probably was a bit paranoid. Much of his political career was spent crusading against various enemies and evildoers, some open, some hidden, most not especially evil by any objective analysis. Jackson tended to turn any issue into a quest for personal vindication, and while this tendency was an important flaw in Jackson's character as a leader, it should not lead us to conclude that he was always *merely* paranoid. In many cases, they really were out to get him. The following is just a sampling of the occasions when Jackson detected conspirators at work against him, and vice versa.

## The Election of 1824 and the "Corrupt Bargain"

Though Andrew Jackson's candidacy began as a merely local, tactical maneuver, the hero of New Orleans emerged rapidly as a popular favorite, disrupting the presidential plans of House Speaker Henry Clay and Monroe administration Cabinet members John Quincy Adams, William Crawford, and John C. Calhoun. Jackson's sudden rise was one of the seminal events in American political history, potentially placing the power of presidential selection into the hands of popular majorities for the first time.

Unfortunately, the American political system was unprepared for this development. The established means of nominating presidential candidates, the congressional caucus, fell apart when only on quarter of the members attended. Crawford

was nominated but the supporters of Jackson, Adams, and Clay ignored the caucus decision, setting up a four-way presidential race that was guaranteed to be difficult to resolve. Jackson finished first in the popular and Electoral College voting, but fell short of the required majority in the college. This meant the final decision would have to be made in the House of Representatives.

The Jacksonians expected the House to simplify ratify the people's choice, but that was not a constitutional requirement. Though some feared riots if Jackson was not elected, the House voting on February 9, 1825 had the look of a deal between the Adams and Clay forces. The states that had given their Electoral College votes to Clay went to Adams, along with several Jackson states, making Adams president. Rumors of a conspiracy to thwart the people's will circulated heavily, and one week later they seemed to come true, when Adams announced Clay as his choice for secretary of state. Adams and Clay both denied that there had been any arrangement, but the circumstantial evidence for a perhaps unstated understanding between them is strong.

The Jacksonians exploded in anger, denouncing the election as a "corrupt bargain" against the people and Adams as a morally and democratically illegitimate president. Jackson's own reaction was typically violent: "So you see, the Judas of the West has closed the contract and will receive the thirty pieces of silver. [H]is end will be the same" (Dangerfield, 228). His supporters used the battle cry of "bargain and sale" to undermine the Adams administration's every move, finding sinister motives behind even the most high-minded initiatives and the least significant decisions. Adams and Clay were dubbed "the coalition," a pejorative term in those days, used to denote an alliance based purely on self-interest and lust for power.

Missouri senator and ardent Jacksonian Thomas Hart Benton led a congressional investigation of corruption in the administration. The committee issued a report comparing Adams and Clay to the kings and prime ministers of England before the American Revolution. The coalition was supposedly out to seize absolute power by using the government's revenue to buy up supporters, specifically by appointing partisans to office and subsidizing friendly newspapers. Later a Committee on Retrenchment was formed, during the campaign year of 1828, to look further into Adams's alleged excesses. Of course, this so-called "spoils system" of partisan appointments expanded dramatically once the Jacksonians were in power, despite their cries for "reform" while Adams was president.

Ironically, all these attacks were directed at what was probably one of the least partisan administrations in U.S. history. Most of the charges were exaggerated or fictitious, but all were made plausible by the circumstances of Adams' election. Whether corrupt, a bargain, or not, the Adams-Clay coalition was based on assumptions about the role of democracy in the constitutional system that suddenly became outmoded in the 1820s. The Founders may have placed the election of the president in the hands of the Electoral College and Congress, but in practice it had become the province of the people themselves.

## Slaying the Monster Bank

Probably the best-known examples of Jacksonian "paranoia" can be found in the so-called Bank War, in which Jackson destroyed the Second Bank of the United States first by vetoing a bill renewing its charter and then by removing the government's

deposits from the bank. Couched in some of the most radical rhetoric ever to come out of the White House, Jackson's crusade against the bank struck the institution's defenders and most later commentators as extreme and hyperbolic if not downright pathological.

Like the attacks on the "coalition," Jacksonian fears about the institution they sometimes called the Monster were rooted in serious concerns. Giant national institutions of any kind were virtually non-existent in this period. The Bank of the United States was perhaps the first national business corporation, and the only other real national institution of any kind, the federal government, had no presence in most communities besides the local post office. The B.U.S. was not the Federal Reserve or a government treasury. Instead, it was a privately-owned, profit-making commercial bank, with branches across the country, that happened to enjoy the very great privilege of holding the government's money on deposit.

From the inception of its first incarnation back under Hamilton and Washington, the B.U.S. had been highly controversial, as much for its potential for political abuse as for its economic power. Especially under the direction of Nicholas Biddle, who assumed the presidency of the Second B.U.S. in 1823, the national bank set the example followed by most major American corporations since, working to maximize its influence by forging close ties with politicians. Loans to lawmakers and political journalists were made freely, and several of the most prominent congressional leaders, including Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, were hired by the bank in their private capacity as lawyers. The influential New York *Courier and Enquirer* switched from opposition to support of the B.U.S. after a loan came through. This sort of influence-buying is what the Jacksonians

were thinking of when they denounced the B.U.S. as a "hydra of corruption" (Watson, 154).

Banks themselves were unfamiliar, suspicious institutions to most Americans of the early 19th century. Bank-loaned paper money that was felt to be, in essence, fake money (in contrast to gold and silver) that encouraged wreckless, groundless speculative investments. Jackson told Biddle he had been "afraid" of banks ever since reading about the South Sea Bubble, a disastrous British investment mania of the early 18th century. Jackson had also personally experienced a bank-driven financial boom and bust. The B.U.S. was widely blamed for a banking and land speculation bubble that had burst and plunged the country into a depression beginning in 1819. Newly re-established at the end of the War of 1812, the national bank had first failed to restrain a rapid overexpansion of credit by new state and local banks and then suddenly cracked down a few years later to save itself. An epidemic of bankruptcy, unemployment, and homelessness ensued, followed swiftly by tens of thousands of debt collection lawsuits that sent many debtors to jail. Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson were only two among many major figures who barely escaped total ruin in the Panic of 1819, and many other similar and lesser Americans were not so lucky.

Jackson's home region and electoral base, the West, was especially hard hit. The new western cities like St. Louis and Cincinnati had been the center of the land boom, and in aggressively collecting debts after the crash, the B.U.S. stripped hundreds of western farmers and businessmen of their property. By some reports, most of Cincinnati ended up owned by the B.U.S. Westerners responded with political outrage that would fuel Jacksonianism later on. New senator and future Jacksonian Thomas Hart Benton of

Missouri reported that his trip to Washington was "one long ride amidst the crashings and explosions of banks" (Chambers, 101). In Washington, Benton helped launch the antibank crusade that Jackson would finish a decade later, giving voice to many westerner's sense of sudden enslavement to an evil foreign entity. "All the flourishing cities of the west are mortgaged to this money power," Benton thundered. "They are in the jaws of the monster! A lump of butter in the mouth of a dog! One gulp, one swallow, and all is gone!" (Watson, 39)

The ideas of Jacksonians like "Old Bullion" Benton, so named for his advocacy of a "hard money" currency of gold and silver coins only, can be seen as typical conspiracy theories to the extent that they blame large, disturbing changes on one villainous institution. As with many other conspiracy theories, this act of scapegoating allowed Jacksonians to avoid both acknowledging the global, systemic forces at work and admitting that any fundamental or irreversible damage had been done to American society. A villain or monster could be defeated more readily than the Market Revolution or industrial capitalism.

The depth of Andrew Jackson's own antipathy to the B.U.S. was not widely known during his first two presidential campaigns and for most of his first term as president. It came out only when his longtime political enemy Henry Clay, now a senator, decided to press for early re-charter of the B.U.S. (The existing charter did not expire until 1836.) Clay expected a veto and hoped to use the issue against Jackson in the 1832 presidential race. Though Thomas Hart Benton led a stiff resistance and the Jacksonians had a majority in Congress, enough of them defected to allow the re-charter bill to pass on July 3, 1832. The whole thing smelled of corruption to Jackson, who was sick and

suffering intense pain at the time from an old bullet wound in his arm. He took the re-charter drive as a personal challenge that had to beaten back: "The Bank . . . is trying to kill me, but *I will kill it*" (Watson, 143).

The message that Jackson and his aides concocted to explain the veto remains a shocking presidential document, crackling with anger and critical of dominant elements of American society in a way that would be impossible to imagine today. Hardest for his opponents to take was Jackson's harsh class rhetoric, condemning the wealthy for conspiring against democracy and the welfare of the nation: "The rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes," the veto message argued.

The document set the terms for the "Bank War" that followed, boiling down a host of fears about the social and political impact of the rise of corporate capitalism into this one battle against a monstrously large and dangerous bank. While also attacking the bank as unconstitutional and overly beholden to foreign investors, Jackson focused his greatest ire on the way government involvement with business inevitably led to the subversion of democratic institutions and values:

> Many of our rich men have not been content with equal protection and equal benefits, but have besought us to make them richer by act of Congress. By attempting to gratify their desires we have in the results of our legislation arrayed section against section, interest against interest, and man against man, in a fearful commotion which threatens to shake the foundations of our Union.

Bank president Nicholas Biddle and his allies thought this was crazy talk, that the veto message would ruin Jackson: "It has all the fury of chained panther biting the bars of his cage. It is really a manifesto of anarchy" (Watson, 150). So convinced was Biddle that the message would contribute to Jackson's downfall he had 1000s of copies printed up and mailed at bank expense.

Obviously, this was far from the case. Jackson was resoundingly reelected in 1832, an election which his opponents tried to turn into a referendum on the Bank War, with the aid of the BU.S. itself. As his second term opened, Jackson was determined to finish what he had started. Fearful that Biddle's political loans and lobbying might secure another, perhaps veto-proof recharter bill sometime in the Monster's remaining four years of life, Jackson and his advisors planned a preemptive strike. They would withdraw the government's money from the B.U.S. and deposit it in a number of different state banks, thereby crippling Biddle's institution both financially and politically.

The recipient institutions were denounced as "pet banks" by administration critics, and they were indeed more Democrat-friendly in their politics than the B.U.S. One longstanding interpretation of the Bank War posits a "Wall Street Conspiracy" led by Jackson's henchman, vice president, and successor, Martin Van Buren of New York. The B.U.S. was based in Philadelphia, then the nation's financial center, and historian Bray Hammond argued in the 1950s that Van Buren and New York bankers had schemed to destroy Philadelphia's preeminence by getting the government's money shifted to New York and elsewhere. Later historians have debunked the idea of a Wall Street conspiracy, pointing out that the financial community as a whole strongly opposed the removal of the deposits.

The removal of the deposits was a precipitous step, of questionable legality and wisdom, that could really only be justified by in terms of the lurid conspiratorial rhetoric about monsters and hydras that the Jacksonians had been using. The Secretary of the Treasury, not the president, controlled the location of the deposits, and Jackson had to fire two different Treasury secretaries in 1833 before finding one that would comply,

Roger B. Taney, a co-author of the veto message. Even worse was the fact that many of the evils that the Jacksonians had blamed on the B.U.S. would be made worse by spreading the money around to other commercial banks even further from the government's control. If banking itself was a problem, then it became far worse during the Bank War era, with the states chartering some 347 new banks between 1830 and 1837.

Where the removal of deposits did succeed admirably was in provoking a response from Nicholas Biddle that proved the Jacksonians' point about the threat that the B.U.S. posed. "This worthy president thinks that because he has scalped Indians and imprisoned judges he is to have his way with the Bank," Biddle wrote, "He is mistaken" (Watson, 157). As Jackson's congressional opponents sought unsuccessfully to reverse the policy or punish the president, Biddle engineered an artificial recession, calling in the Bank's loans more quickly than necessary, contracting credit and increasing unemployment sharply across the nation as businesses suddenly found themselves unable to finance their operations. Biddle hoped the induced panic would galvanize the business community in support of the bank, but the opposite turned out to be true. He had more or less conceded defeat in the fall of 1834, and allowed prosperity to return.

The "Riot Year" and the Attempted Assassination of Andrew Jackson

Though not well-known as such today, the period of Bank War was as restless, troubled, and paranoid as any in American history. Indeed, the "Great Riot Year" of 1834 rivals 1919 or 1968 for the sheer depth and breadth of unrest. As the removal of the deposits and Biddle's recession unfolded, a wave of political violence broke out the likes

of which the country had not seen since the Revolution. Every imaginable political and social division generated riots that pitted Jacksonian Democrats vs. their opponents, workers vs. employers, whites vs. blacks, "natives" vs. immigrants, Protestants vs. Catholics, and various local communities against such perceived fringe dwellers as abolitionists, Mormons, and even riverboat gamblers.

Unsurprisingly, some of this violent ill-will was directed at Andrew Jackson, who rabble-rousing Bank War rhetoric was blamed by some for the wave of unrest. In Feb. 1834, Jackson received a note that said, "Damn your old soul, remove them deposits back again, and re-charter the Bank, or you will certainly be shot in less than two weeks, and that by myself!!!" (Cole, 221)

This was the first of many threats that Jackson received. Rumors spread that a rebel army of 5,000, possibly financed by the Bank of the United States, was being organized in Baltimore to overthrow the president, and when Jackson was warned, he promised to hang them all high if such a army dared to come after him.

Finally, just after the close of the "riot year" (which led into a year that was actually more violent by some measures) there was a real attempt on Jackson's life. On Jan. 30, 1835, an unemployed house painter named Richard Lawrence approached within eight feet of Jackson as he was leaving the Capitol after a congressman's funeral. As Jackson was receiving applause of the crowd gathered outside, leaning on Treasury Secretary Levi Woodbury, Lawrence drew a pistol and fired with a loud bang; then he produced drew a second pistol and fired again. Jackson hesitated to see if he was shot. Miraculously, he wasn't: it was a damp, muggy day and the pistol cap had failed to set fire to the powder, in both guns! Though he needed help to walk at this point in his life,

Old Hickory lived up to his tough-guy reputation on this occasion, letting go of Woodbury and going after Lawrence with his cane.

By all accounts, Richard Lawrence was the original lone gunman. Depressed, angry, and occasionally delusive, Lawrence had previously tried to kill his own sister and threatened other acquaintances. In explaining his motives for trying to assassinate Jackson, the painter sometimes followed Jackson's political opponents in blaming the president for the hard economic times, but at other times Lawrence claimed that the president had murdered his father or was blocking his bid to take his rightful place as King of England. A jury eventually wasted little time acquitting Lawrence by reason of insanity.

Nevertheless, conspiracy theories circulated about the attempt on Jackson, usually tailored to the political interests of those who spread them. Some rumor or other linked "almost every eminent politician" in Washington with the would-be assassin (Rohrs, 150). Led by the administration spokespaper, the *Washington Globe*, the Jacksonian press questioned Lawrence's insanity and blamed the fiery speeches of Jackson opponents, especially one given by South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun two days before the attack, for inspiring the attack. (Entertainment options in early Washington being limited, the shooter really did hear Calhoun's speech.) One of the doctors who had examined Lawrence was cited as agreeing that political controversy could have driven him to murder.

Jackson himself believed that Lawrence had been hired by Mississippi senator George Poindexter, a personally violent man who was also one of the administration's most violent critics. Jackson told some visitors on the day of the attack that Poindexter

had turned to Lawrence because he was too cowardly to kill Jackson himself. Witnesses were found who testified to seeing Lawrence at Poindexter's house. The evidence against "Old Poins" was serious enough to warrant congressional investigation, but the testimony of the two men who had been willing give affidavits against Poindexter, Mordecai Foy and David Stewart, fell apart under scrutiny. Stewart could not correctly describe Lawrence and Foy turned out not to know where Poindexter's house was. Other evidence surfaced indicating that government contractor Charles Coltman might have offered work to Stewart, a blacksmith, for testimony incriminating Poindexter. The Poindexter conspiracy theory itself began to look like, as the anti-Jackson *United States Telegraph* put it, "one of the foulest conspiracies ever set on foot" (Rohrs, 159).

This last accusation should serve as a reminder that Andrew Jackson and his supporters had no monopoly on conspiratorial thinking. Regarding the attempted assassination, the opposition press (along with George Poindexter) argued that the whole thing was a set up. They accused the Jacksonians of arranging Richard Lawrence's attack themselves to keep Jackson high in the public's favor despite the widespread unrest and the continuing fallout from the Bank War. The fact that both Lawrence's pistols failed to fire properly was regarded as too unlikely to be accidental, and the Jacksonians had made political hay out of threats to Jackson in the past. Lawrence himself blamed the humid weather, but the investigation showed that the pistols had been loaded correctly and both performed flawlessly when tested. Of course, modern forensic methods were still a distant dream in 1835, so it is probably best not to place too much stock in the tests. No link between Lawrence and the Jacksonians could ever be found, and once Lawrence and

Poindexter were cleared, the whole matter descended to the level of mere partisan innuendo.

However, it was an index of the no-holds-barred nature of Jacksonian era politics that charges of conspiracy and assassination were made so openly in such mainstream venues. The modern equivalent would have been the *New York Times* and Lyndon Johnson – not do-it-yourself conspiracy theorists -- accusing Richard Nixon or Barry Goldwater of hiring Lee Harvey Oswald immediately after the Kennedy assassination.

The American Whigs vs. "King Andrew the First"

No review of the Jacksonian era would be complete without some mention of the more general conspiracy fears expressed by Andrew Jackson's opponents. Beginning with the 1828 campaign, Jackson had been the subject of some of the most remarkably over-the-top vilification ever visited on a presidential candidate. Aiming to frighten pious Christians across the settled regions of the North, anti-Jackson newspapers depicted him as a martinet, bigamist, murderer, and all-around madman whose rule might literally bring hell on earth. Items like the famous "coffin handbill" detailed Jackson's career as a duelist and as a cruel "military chieftain" who had executed prisoners and his own men on numerous occasions. A John Quincy Adams campaign song recovered by modern folklorists (Brand, 1999) warned voters against Jackson in the starkest possible terms:

> Little know ye who's comin'
> Little know ye who's comin'
> Little know ye who's comin'
> If John Quincy not be comin'
> Fire's comin, swords are comin'
> Pistols, guns and knives are comin'
> Famine's comin, famine's comin'
> If John Quincy not be comin'

And so on until the big finish:

> Fear's are comin,' tears are comin'
> Plague and pestilence are comin'
> Satan's comin', Satan's comin.'
> If John Quincy not be comin'.

The anti-Jacksonians were a disparate group that finally coalesced during his second term into a new national political organization, the Whig party. The new party's name was rooted in the opposition's rather conspiratorial or at least histrionic take on Jackson's conduct during the Bank War. "Whig" was the named used by both the parliamentary opponents of absolute monarchy in England as well as the American opponents of British tyranny during the Revolution. The 19th century American Whigs adopted the name because it encapsulated their basic message that Jackson sought to become, or already was, a dictator or king. "King Andrew the First," a famous Whig cartoon (http://loc.harpweek.com/LCPoliticalCartoons/DisplayCartoonMedium.asp?MaxID=42&UniqueID=17&Year=1833&YearMark=1830 ) labeled the president, picturing a crowned Old Hickory with robes and scepter, trampling on the Constitution.

While the President Who Would Be King was undoubtedly a partisan campaign theme, the leading Whigs seemed to mean it in deadly earnest. Jackson had a long record, going back to his military career, of shrugging off legal restraints and treating himself as the supreme authority. A number of future Whigs had been bitterly critical of General Jackson's unauthorized conquest of Spanish Florida back in 1818. Henry Clay had given a celebrated speech depicting Jackson as a potential military dictator in the mold of Julius Caesar, Oliver Cromwell, and Napoleon Bonaparte.

Jackson's opponents warned voters about his dictatorial tendencies during his first two presidential campaigns, and they found ample evidence in Old Hickory's presidency to support their fears. Southern anti-Jacksonians like Calhoun and Poindexter were alarmed by Jackson's uncompromising stance and threats of force during the Nullification Crisis of 1831-33. For most northern and western Whigs, the most troubling aspect of Jackson's presidency was his use of the veto power against the Bank of the United States and a number of so-called "internal improvement" measures, mostly road and canal bills. All of these measures were highly prized by Henry Clay and other supporters of Clay's so-called "American System" of aggressive, government-sponsored economic development, but the veto itself was a major concern.

The veto power had always been controversial because it was an attribute of absolute monarchy that the English Whigs had stripped from their kings in the Glorious Revolution of 1689. Early U.S. state governors often did not possess a veto. The presidential veto had been used only a handful of times before the Jackson administration, and even then (according to the Whigs) only on constitutional grounds, never because a President simply disapproved of a policy and wanted to impose his will on the rest of the government. Later in American history, it became expected that the president would set the policy agenda for Congress, but in the early days of the republic this was regarded by many as executive "usurpation," a corrupt violation of the constitutional separation of powers. Thus Washington, D.C.'s oldest and most established newspaper, the *National Intelligencer*, could write, in apparent seriousness, that Jackson's bank veto had rendered the Constitution a "dead letter" and the "will of a DICTATOR . . . the Supreme Law!" (Watson, 152)

In fairness to the Whigs, their charges concerned the tendency of Jackson's actions and the character of his leadership, and usually did not posit a literal monarchical conspiracy. Yet if Jackson sought to kill a symbolic monster in crusading against the Bank of the United States, the Whigs had their own monster in Jackson himself.

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**References to this entry from: Lawrence, Richard; Bank of the United States or Bank War; Wall Street**

**Lewis, Meriwether**

The great explorer furnishes perhaps the earliest example of what became a great American tradition: the beloved celebrity whose ignominious, untimely death spawned conspiracy theories intended to restore some of the hero's dignity. Lewis's apparent suicide at a remote inn off the Natchez Trace in October 1809, when he was only 35 years old, ignited a slowly simmering cauldron of alternative explanations. By the conspiracy-happy 1990s, these included assassination by agents of Gen. James Wilkinson, with a cover-up orchestrated by Thomas Jefferson himself.

**Background**

A soldier by occupation, the Virginia-born Lewis was Jefferson's private secretary for a time before achieving early, international fame by successfully leading an expedition to the Pacific and back between 1803 and 1806. Firming up the U.S. claim to the just-completed Louisiana Purchase and laying the groundwork for later expansion into the Pacific Northwest while also bringing back a wealth of scientific information, Lewis and his colleague William Clark became the new nation's first real celebrities, probably surpassing many of the Founders themselves. President Jefferson rewarded his protégé with an appointment as governor of the Louisiana Territory he had just explored, a post that Jefferson regarded as the second-highest in the land.

Despite his experience as Jefferson's presidential "staff," Lewis was no politician, and found his post-expedition life deeply disappointing. Delaying his move to the territorial capital for almost a year, Lewis hunted for a wife and planned to publish the journals of the expedition, but never managed to either project off the ground. Once

ensconced at St. Louis, Lewis performed terribly as territorial governor, clashing with more experienced politicians like Territorial Secretary Frederick Bates, who called his superior "a big baby," and getting the affairs of his office muddled enough to have some of expenditures rejected by the War Department. In September 1809, Lewis set out on a trip to Washington to clear his name and see his publishers.

## Southern Death Trip

The trip did not go very well. Though conspiracy theorists point out that little was said of it while Lewis was alive, Jefferson, William Clark, and others admitted after his death that the new governor had developed serious psychological problems, including intense, habitual hypochondria, for which Lewis often medicated himself; a terrible drinking problem; and what we would call today depression. Alcoholism was a common affliction in the frontier military and seems to have worsened under the stress of Lewis's political and personal failures. Only two hundred miles into the journey, downriver from St. Louis at New Madrid, Lewis had to be taken ashore from his boat and treated for some real, imagined, or self-induced illness. He made out his last will and testament and only reembarked on the voyage when earthquakes broke out in the area, leading his fearful valet to have his master put back on the boat.

At his next port of call, Fort Pickering near present-day Memphis, Lewis arrived in a state of "mental derangement," inebriated and suicidal. The fort commander, Major Gilbert Russell, had Lewis removed from his boat and detained him for two weeks, restricting his alcohol intake to "claret and a little white wine" and posting guards to prevent the explorer from doing violence to himself. Lewis recovered his senses and

promised never to touch intoxicants again. He borrowed money and horses from Russell, and set out for Washington overland, via the Natchez Trace, on September 29, 1809.

Apparently Lewis fell off the wagon rather quickly during his last journey. His traveling companion after Fort Pickering, Indian agent James Neelly, found him "deranged" again as they crossed the Chickasaw Nation, where they had to stop and let Lewis rest for two days. Shortly after, Neelly brought the suspicion of generations of conspiracy theorists on himself by going after some lost horses and sending Lewis on alone, planning to meet 50 miles farther up the Trace, at place called Grinder's Stand in present-day Lewis County, Tennessee, the home of white family that accommodated travelers.

Lewis appeared at the Grinder (also spelled Griner) house on the evening of October 10, 1809, and though the accounts of what happened there differ in some particulars, all agree that the governor was in a highly agitated state of mind. Priscilla Griner, the lady of the house and the only witness to give testimony, remembered Lewis pacing back and forth in the room where he was lodged talking loudly to himself "like a lawyer." In the wee hours of Oct. 11, Griner heard two pistol shots but was too frightened to investigate. Through the cracks in the log building, however, she saw that Lewis had blasted away part of his own skull, shot himself in the side, and also tried to cut his own throat with a razor, but none of it was enough to bring immediate death. Cowering with her children, Griner heard the explorer asking for water but ignored his pleas out of fright and saw him crawl off moaning. There are several variations of Lewis's last words, but one appropriate remark recurs: "How hard it is to die."

Conspiracy Theories

Few questions were raised about Lewis's death at the time, but beginning in the 1840s, stories began to circulate that he was murdered, especially in Tennessee. Even then, according to historian Dawson A. Phelps, the story did not receive much public comment for another half century, by which time the murder interpretation had become an established tradition among the locals and the Lewis family. From the 1890s on, it began to receive occasional endorsements from Lewis and Clark scholars.

Even this tradition was not necessarily a conspiracy theory. Those distraught by the pathfinder's pathetic end may have taken comfort in the idea of murder-not-suicide, but the few concrete ideas the circulated about who might have killed him or why were vague and rather mundane in nature. The leading explanation was Lewis had been killed by robbers, perhaps his own servant Pernier. The evidence for a conspiracy or even murder is thin to non-existent, resting largely on legend, rumors generations removed from the source, and the willing disbelief of later admirers that the great man could have been capable of such degrading and desperate behavior. Some have fingered lone eyewitness Priscilla Griner as an accomplice who lied to cover up for her supposedly absent husband Robert and unknown others. The legends tell of Robert being tried for murder but acquitted for lack of evidence.

It is certainly true that Mrs. Griner's credibility as a witness is less than total, but that actually undermines the conspiracy theory further. Priscilla embroidered her original story for an interviewer 29 years after Lewis's death, adding material that made the events look more suspicious.  Her later account included the claim was that two men

came to the house looking for lodging and quarreled with Lewis, along with other conspiratorial details: three shots instead of two, meaning that Lewis's two pistols (the kind that had to be loaded after each shot) could not have done the job; and an apparent exchange of clothing between Lewis and his servant sometime in the night.

The most thoroughgoing Lewis conspiracy theory was propounded by muckraking popular historian (and Pulitzer Prize winner) David Leon Chandler in his 1994 book, *The Jefferson Conspiracies*. Departing from the usual practice, Chandler endorsed Mrs. Griner's revised 1838 account in full, and surmised that Lewis was murdered while trying to escape in his servant's clothes, possibly by or with the help of his erstwhile companion Neely. As the title of the book made obvious, Chandler was eager to be the Woodward and Bernstein of the early American republic and trace the murder all the way back to the White House, or at least Monticello. Recounting the history of the Aaron Burr conspiracy and the treasonous activities of Gen. Wilkinson (a Spanish spy and Burr crony as well as the ranking official in the frontier army), Chandler theorized that Lewis carried some sort of evidence against Wilkinson and was hunted down by the general's henchmen, who then fabricated the tales of drunkenness and suicide that became the official interpretation.

Chandler was able to give Jefferson himself only a small role in the titular conspiracies. His major accusation was that the just-retired president helped forestall further investigation by accepting the suicide explanation too quickly and lending credence to the idea that Lewis was an alcoholic. Jefferson's alleged motive was to avoid exposing Wilkinson, whose integrity Jefferson had publicly certified by maintaining him

in an important military post and by using him as the star government witness in Aaron Burr's recent treason trial.

While Jefferson's confidence in Wilkinson was politically calculated and extremely misplaced, Chandler's theories hold very little water. Resting the crux of his argument on the half-hearted nature of the investigation, he echoed the modern assassination conspiracy literature, but begged the question of what sort of investigation could possibly have been conducted at so remote a location at such an early date. If one accepts the far-fetched premise of hired political assassins stalking the American woods in 1809, to kill a national hero, then Lewis's best friend and fellow explorer, William Clark, also has to be included in the conspiracy. No man knew Lewis, got along with him better, or respected him more, but Clark accepted the official account just as readily as Jefferson.

The "Jefferson conspiracy" against Meriwether Lewis is best considered as anachronistic speculation that tells us more about late 20th century popular culture than it does about Lewis or Jefferson.

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**MONK, MARIA**

Maria Monk (1816-?1849) was the heroine and putative author of a mostly fictional but wildly popular book depicting the secret crimes that many Protestants were sure took place behind the closed doors of Catholic convents. The book was first published in 1836 under the title *The Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal*. By some estimates, it was surpassed among antebellum bestsellers only by the Bible and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, two other favorites of the northern middle classes and the evangelical Protestant reformers whose causes relied on them. Known as the "Uncle Tom's Cabin of Know-Nothingism," *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* remains to this day one of the most influential of all anti-Catholic texts, illustrating the powerful role that exaggerated survivor/defector narratives have played in bolstering conspiracy fears (Billington, 108).

Many facts of Maria Monk's life are sketchy and disputed, but it's generally agreed that she grew up near Montreal, the wayward daughter of a soldier's widow who supported her family by cleaning houses for the army. Raised as a Protestant, by some means or another Maria ended up under the care of Catholic nuns, escaped from their institution, and left for New York City in 1835, pregnant and in the company of Rev. William K. Hoyt, an anti-Catholic activist.

Beyond those basic facts, the accounts differ dramatically. Her mother claimed that Maria had suffered brain damage in a grisly childhood accident involving a "slate pencil," and became mentally unstable and sexually uncontrollable as a result. According to Mrs. Monk, the Catholic institution from which her daughter escaped was a "Magdalen asylum" for the redemption of prostitutes, and William Hoyt had paid Maria to blame her conditions on priests, when Hoyt himself was likely the guilty party (Billington, 101).

As described in *Awful Disclosures*, Maria's own story was far more inspirational. She told of entering the Hotel Dieu convent for her education and converting to Catholicism. After a brief stint away from the convent, including an alleged marriage, Monk decided to become a nun herself. Upon taking the veil, she was initiated, if her account is to be believed, into a nightmare world of psychological manipulation, sexual exploitation, and mass murder. Taken aside by the Mother Superior, Maria was informed that one of a nun's "great duties was to obey the priests in all things," which included servicing them sexually. When Maria virtuously objected, the Superior explained to her that priests needed nuns for this purpose because they were "not situated like other men, being forbidden to marry." Moreover, the Catholic clergy deserved some release, because they "lived secluded, laborious, self-denying lives for our salvation." Finally, Maria was assured, priests could not sin, and whatever they wanted was both right and "pleasing in the sight of God" (Monk, 38).

The sisters at Hotel Dieu also had to assist with the horrifying measures required to hide the priests' activities. When babies were born in the convent, they were "always baptized, and immediately strangled," which was actually good for the children since they would never be tempted to sin and got to enjoy "everlasting happiness" immediately (Monk, 39). In the *Awful Disclosures*, Maria reported her discovery of a pit in the convent cellar where the little bodies were thrown in and covered with lime to promote rapid decomposition. The same fate awaited any nuns who balked at their duties, or spoke openly of the crimes committed there. Monk claimed to have witnessed a recalcitrant sister condemned to death, and then summarily executed – in the presence of bishop – by

means of smothering between two feather mattresses. Priests and nuns jumped on top and trampled her for good measure.

In its original form, the narrative ended with Maria, pregnant with the child of one "Father Phelan, Priest of the Parish Church of Montreal," (Monk, 177) escaping from the convent and arriving, apparently unaided at a New York almshouse. Pursued by agents of the church and deathly ill, she finally unburdened herself to a hospital chaplain, who gave her a Bible and introduced her to the joys of Protestantism, depicted as a form of Christianity based exclusively on the reading of God's word and "the free exercise of . . . reason" (Monk, 179)

Monk's story (if indeed it was hers and not a tale invented by her promoters) dovetailed nicely with the accusations that Protestant extremists had been making in a then-current controversy over the alleged threat that convents posed to American girls, which was linked with a much broader anti-Catholic movement. *Awful Disclosures* documented the charges much more sensationally than the recent *Six Months in a Convent* (1835), the rather mild narrative of "escaped" nun Rebecca Reed, who had been a sister at the Ursuline convent in Charles Town, Massachusetts that anti-Catholic rioters had burned down in 1834. *Awful Disclosures* had the juicy details that Reed's book lacked, and while not explicit by modern standards, some scholars consider it the first work of pornography published in the United States, for its frank appeal to prurient interests.

It is unlike that Maria Monk herself actually wrote the book that bears her name and difficult to know whether she concocted the tales within it, which became more extensive and detailed in subsequent editions that boasted numerous invented illustrations

and even a floor plan of the convent. In New York, she fell in with a circle of anti-Catholic activists including Rev. John Jay Slocum, Arthur Tappan, Rev. George Bourne, and Theodore Dwight, Jr. (some of whom were actively involved in other more worthy evangelical causes such as temperance and abolitionism). The narrative has been credited to several different members of the group, but it is certain that they were all heavily involved in publicizing the ex-nun's story. The *Awful Disclosures* first saw print in an anti-Catholic newspaper, New York's leading publisher, Harper Brothers, working through a dummy corporation named after two of their employees, finally brought it out as a book in 1836. Immediately popular, it has remained in heavy circulation ever since.

Unsurprisingly, Maria Monk's book was controversial as well widely read. The Protestant religious press promoted it as an absolutely truthful account of Catholic corruption and superstition, and Maria herself became a popular figure. At the same time, Catholics and other opponents of the evangelical activists responded vigorously. Posters denouncing Monk were distributed throughout New York, and a heavily documented book, *Awful Exposure of the Atrocious Plot Formed by Certain Individuals against the Clergy and Nuns of Lower Canada*, was published refuting her charges (Billington, 102). The Democratic, and (like its party) generally pro-Catholic newspaper, the *New York Herald* attacked *Awful Disclosures* repeatedly as a "gross and atrocious fabrication" (Castagna, 675). Rev. Slocum rushed out with another book rebutting the refutations, and a public meeting was held in which Monk and her critics confronted each other.

Inevitably the controversy produced calls for a public investigation of the Hotel Dieu convent, and the results of those investigations made it much more difficult for reasonable people to give *Awful Disclosures* any further credence. Catholic officials

denied requests to allow Maria herself to come back with an investigating committee, but finally did allow two American Protestant ministers to visit and inspect the convent. They reported finding nothing at all that substantiated Monk's accusations; even the physical lay-out of the Hotel Dieu failed to match her description. Not long after, New York editor and author William L. Stone conducted an even more thorough investigation. Combing through the convent almost inch-by-inch, even sniffing jars in the basement in search of dead babies, Stone grew to doubt that Maria Monk had ever lived there at all. Though he had been active in the anti-Catholic movement and predisposed to believe Monk's story, Stone came away impressed with the cheerfulness and tranquility of life at the Montreal convent, and wrote a report aiming to liberate his countrymen from "the bondage of prejudice" (Franchot, 161) against these particular Catholics.

The hardcore anti-Catholic press denounced the investigations (along with another Monk pregnancy) as Jesuit plots, even suggesting the possibility that the convent had been rapidly remodeled simply to cast doubt on Maria Monk's account. Her public standing was nevertheless devastated by the investigation, and in 1837 she left New York and mostly dropped from view, her mental condition evidently deteriorating. She saw only a tiny fraction of the profits from her bestselling book, despite some lawsuits, and seemed to have drifted into petty crime, poverty, and possibly prostitution. Most accounts have her arrested for stealing from a customer at the Five Points brothel where she probably worked toward the end of her life, and then dying in jail on Riker's Island in 1849. Her *Awful Disclosures* lived on, and on.

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**Morse, Jedidiah**

Rev. Jedidiah Morse (1761-1826) was one of the Early American Republic's best-known authors and clergymen, serving as pastor of the First Congregational Church of Charlestown, Mass. (now part of Boston) for 30 years. Besides his pastoral duties and frequent service as an orator on civic and political occasions, Morse was a pioneer in U.S. geography, producing one of the first popular books on the subject, *Geography Made Easy* (1784), just a year after his graduation from Yale College. This was followed by a series of other works, most notably the two-volume *American Universal Geography* (1793), which altogether went through hundreds of editions. In an age when domestic travel was still difficult, expensive, and infrequent, it is not too much to say that Jedidiah Morse taught most Americans of his day most of what they knew of the country beyond their own immediate horizons.

Perhaps counter balancing his other accomplishments, Morse was also a pioneer in the field of U.S. conspiracy theory. In the hysterical era of the XYZ Affair and the Alien and Sedition Acts, Morse lent his considerable energy and prestige to the project of turning the Bavarian Illuminati into a mainstream political issue. Joined by many other prominent New England divines, including Yale College president Timothy Dwight, Morse almost succeeded.

Like many other old-fashioned New England Calvinists, Morse was deeply alarmed at the seeming rise of "infidelity" in the 1790s, a category into which they put not just the outright rejection of Christian belief, but also its liberalization into less supernatural, more rational forms such as unitarianism and deism. Besides mankind's innate wickedness, Morse and his colleagues blamed radical politics, especially the

French Revolution and its American sympathizers, for the decline of faith, and vice versa. The year 1794 was a turning point. Robespierre's Reign of Terror raged in France, while the Democratic Republican Societies and the Whiskey Rebellion disturbed the political piece at home. That same year, deist speaker and organizer Elihu Palmer toured the U.S., and Thomas Paine's attack on revealed religion, *The Age of Reason*, first arrived on American shores. Under the infidels' influence, Morse believed, "uncleanness, Sabbath breaking & all the flood of iniquity which springs from these" ran riot among the people. To pillars of New England's Federalist/Congregationalist "Standing Order," under which the churches were supported by taxes and ministers used their pulpits to support the ruling political elite, it seemed that a "mental epidemic" was sweeping the country (Phillips, 68).

It only got worse as the 1790s wore on. Criticism of the government, and political activism against it, grew more intense during the battle over the Jay Treaty with England in 1796 and the presidency in the 1796 election. The pious Federalist John Adams beat the free-thinking Jefferson in that election, but with war against the French looming, Federalist hysteria came to a fever pitch.

It was in this atmosphere, in 1797, that Jedidiah Morse, Timothy Dwight, and their colleagues discovered John Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy*, find in its account of the Illuminati campaign to destroy all religions and governments a ready explanation for all many political and cultural trends that disturbed them. Morse launched his personal campaign against the Illuminati by giving two sermons on the national fast day proclaimed by President Adams for May 9, 1798, one at this own church and one at North Church, Boston. Following New England tradition, where sermons were popular

reading matter and often served as political tracts, Morse's effort was published soon afterwards.

In his *Sermon on the National Fast Day,* Morse attacked the "deep-laid plan" of the French Republic "to destroy the confidence of the [American] people" in the men and institutions that governed them, a plan being implemented not just by the French themselves, but also by their local minions, the Democratic Republicans (Stauffer, 230). What was worse, they had criticized the clergy, too, suggesting that some secret, even deeper design was "in operation, hostile to true liberty and religion," preparing the way "for the spread" here of "that atheistical philosophy" which was "deluging the Old World in misery and blood." Morse recommended Robison's book as a judicious explanation of everything that was happening, attributing it all to "the dark conspiracies of the Illuminati" (Stauffer, 232-33).

Initially the response was less sensational than Morse must have hoped, but the controversy kept him and the Illuminati in the public eye for most of the next two years. Democratic Republican newspapers questioned Robison's veracity, printing negative reviews of the book from the British press, and demanded proof of the charges. Not much proof was to be had, but Morse gamely struck back with newspaper articles and clippings defending Robison and attacking their critics. At the same, Salem minister William Bentley, a rare Jeffersonian among the Massachusetts clergy, supplied equal amounts of material damning Morse's position and his sources.

The controversy was renewed and expanded with a round of published Thanksgiving sermons from Morse and many other New England ministers over the winter of 1798-99. Morse's included an appendix that tried to document a view of

American events closely following the pattern of Robison's and the Abbé Barruel's accounts of the French Revolution. The Democratic Republican Societies of 1793-94, were not mere debating clubs, he tried to show, but extensions of the Illuminati. They had been founded by a French agent, "Citizen" Edmond Genet, and merely went underground and reappeared under other names after President Washington had publicly blamed them for the Whiskey Rebellion.

Morse finally seemed to get his Illuminati witch-hunt on firm ground with a third published sermon, originally given on another national fast day, April 25, 1799. This time a triumphant Morse claimed finally to have his possession "complete and indubitable proof that such societies do exist, and have for many years existed, in the United States" (Stauffer, 292). The smoking gun was a letter detailing the membership and organization (all the way back in 1786) of a somewhat irregular Masonic organization called Wisdom Lodge in Portsmouth, Virginia, made up chiefly of emigrants from Ste. Domingue and France. There were suggestions of other American lodges being in contact with Wisdom Lodge, and a Mother Club in France, but the connection to the Bavarian Illuminati was tenuous at best and the evidence of any real influence non-existent.

Nevertheless, Morse felt the case was sealed, and the Illuminati theory gained gained a bit of ground, until it was derailed by a new controversy over Morse's own integrity. It happened that both Morse and his antagonist William Bentley were in correspondence with the German geographer Christoph Ebeling. To both men, Ebeling had written letters castigating Robison's book, contradicting many of the alleged facts it cited, and dismissing the idea that the Bavarian Illuminati still existed in any form. Rumors of the letters began to circulate in the summer of 1799. The following Fall,

Bentley saw to it that the text of his Ebeling letter appeared in several newspapers, anonymously but describing the writer and recipient in such a way that readers might assume the Massachusetts man who received the letter was Morse himself.

The Illuminati theory's chief American backer was forced on the defensive, unable to come clean without admitting that he had covered up incriminating information even though it was provided by a respected colleague. By the end of 1799, Republican newspapers were openly ridiculing Morse and his ideas, and building a sort of satirical conspiracy theory about the "New England Illuminati," an oligarchy of "political priests" of which Morse was said to be a ringleader.

Morse soon had to drop the Illuminati theory from his repertoire, though he continued to fight for the old-time Puritan religion in other ways over the rest of his life. His skills as a controversialist and publishing entrepreneur were put to good use resisting the teaching of liberal theology at Harvard, promoting missions to the Indians and western migrants, and helping establish Andover Theological Seminary, the New England Tract Society, and the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society.

The family tradition of scientific and artistic achievement mixed with conspiracy was carried on by Jedidiah's son, Samuel F.B. Morse.

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