Striving for Democracy

by Sean Wilentz

Americans, including many historians, like to think of the period from the end of the War of 1812 to the outbreak of the Civil War as an ebullient, egalitarian era, the age of the common man, when ordinary workingmen and farmers came into their own as full-throated citizens and voters. It was a time, so the story goes, when age-old prejudices linking virtue with property holding finally dissolved. Men of humble background who worked with their hands could aspire one day to gain wealth and social standing—and even, like Andrew Jackson or Abraham Lincoln, to become the nation's head of state. It was all a far cry from the high-blown, deferential New World republic that the Revolutionary generation had envisaged. Instead of a cultivated gentry elite, it would be the People—"King Numbers," in the disdainful phrase of the disgruntled Virginia aris-

Election Day, Philadelphia *(1815), by John S. Kimmel, a classic tableau of political harmony in the "Era of Good Feelings"*

tocrat, John Randolph of Roanoke—who would guide the nation's destiny. Democracy, a word that greatly troubled the Framers in Philadelphia in 1787, became a shibboleth for partisans of almost every persuasion.

More skeptical scholars have questioned this colorful, egalitarian tableau. Some have pointed out important antidemocratic features of the period. In several states, for example, expansion of the suffrage for white men before 1860 was accompanied by an abridgement of the suffrage and other political rights for free blacks, as well as (in the one state where such rights had existed, New Jersey) for women. Egalitarian with respect to class, these historians argue, the era was just the opposite with respect to race and gender. Moreover, although officeholding became less attached to family influence and noblesse oblige than it had been after the Revolution, politics remained firmly in the control of coteries of well-connected local partisans. Other historians have argued the opposite: that an excess of democracy opened the way for the rise of demagogues, whose agitation degraded politics and led directly to the Civil War.

For all of their differences, these impressions, popular and academic, share a misleading assumption that what Americans of the time called democracy was something coherent and unified. That assumption owes much to the influence of Alexis de Tocqueville, whose *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) continues to color most accounts of the period. Because Tocqueville was chiefly interested in understanding what American democracy had to teach France, he tended to render American realities as ideal types, in glittering epigrammatic generalizations. Even when he drew important distinctions (none more important than his contrast between southern slavery and northern freedom), his discussions of American politics and manners always returned to his ruminations about this thing called democracy. Yet there was no one American democracy in the early 19th century. When Americans spoke about democracy, they articulated clashing ideals. Those clashes, the deepest legacy of the early Republic, unleashed in peculiarly American ways issues of class, race, and region. Any account that glosses over those conflicts slights how much the early national period tells us about our unsettled and contentious political life even today. For what is most distinctive, finally, about American democracy is that it is not so much an ideal as an argument.

In the early Republic, two battles over democracy dominated public affairs, and in time became the warp and woof of national politics. First, there was a struggle over how economic power should be organized in a democracy. Second, conflict arose over increasingly different northern and southern conceptions of democracy.

The first debate—over politics, privilege, and economics—had supposedly been settled by the Jeffersonian victory in 1800. Among other things, that triumph thwarted Alexander Hamilton's plans for an American version of the British state, based on a strong military establishment, backed by a centralized system of taxation. The second battle, Americans hoped, had been laid to rest by the compromises over slavery worked out in the constitutional debates of 1787–88. Yet the democratizing politics of the early 19th century helped revive these issues dramatically during the misnamed Era of Good Feelings—the decade or so after 1815. That revival set the stage for both the political party battles

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In The Downfall of Mother Bank *(1833), President Jackson is hailed for removing government deposits from Nicholas Biddle's Bank of the United States.*

of the Jacksonian era and the sectional battles that culminated in southern secession and the Civil War.

The close of the War of 1812, historians have long noted, stirred a nationalist spirit that was celebrated from one end of the country to the other. Having escaped defeat at the hands of the British, Americans proclaimed that their Revolution had been vindicated. They set to work on plans to build up their economy and expand their empire of liberty. With the virtual demise of the Federalist Party after the New England Federalists' disastrous anti-war Hartford Convention in 1814, partisan conflict, so worrisome to the founding generation, seemed dead at last. "Equally gratifying is it to witness the increased harmony of opinion which pervades our Union," the newly inaugurated President James Monroe declared in 1817. "Discord does not belong in our system."

Yet the very election that elevated Monroe to the White House showed the depth of America's discord. In the spring of 1816, the Fourteenth Congress passed a compensation act that roughly doubled congressional pay—and created a tidal wave of populist revulsion. Congress, the critics declared, had made a selfish salary grab that violated the simple habits of republicanism. In the elections later that year, voters wreaked havoc on congressional incumbents. All told, more than half of the members of the House of Representatives judiciously declined to stand for re-election, while only 15 of the 81 who had supported the Compensation Act of 1816 were returned to Washington. Three states—Ohio, Delaware, and Vermont—elected entirely new congressional delegations. (The redoubtable young Speaker of the House, Henry Clay of Kentucky, held his seat only after completing a barnstorming tour to apologize abjectly to his constituents.) Even in an era when normal congressional turnover rates were high, it was a huge political awakening, one that John Randolph likened to the "great Leviathan roused into action." Although not explicitly concerned with economic issues, the controversy foretold future eruptions over the

John C. Calhoun

alleged antidemocratic corruption of the nation's political and economic elites.

Congress got the message, hastily repealed the hated Compensation Act, and preserved (or so President Monroe believed) the new nationalist consensus. But the next decade brought fresh political battles, at the local as well as the national level, which left politicians scrambling to reach accommodation with their constituents. In New England and New York, where once-powerful Federalists had been severely weakened by their opposition to the War of 1812, suffrage agitation at the grassroots and in state capitals led to the toppling of old property restrictions and other checks on popular government. Older states in the upper South shared in the agitation—but did so, significantly, to a lesser degree and with far less immediate results.

More furious and widespread political insurgencies followed in the wake of the calamitous financial panic of 1819. In the Northeast, farmers ruined by bank failures and workingmen paid off in now-worthless scrip rejected claims by their preachers and politicians that an inscrutable Providence had caused the depression. Antibank legislation and a variety of debtor relief efforts quickly followed. Further west, similar unrest rocked every state except Louisiana and Mississippi. Impoverished farmers and other rural debtors demanded more radical forms of legislative relief than petty enterprisers and imperiled bankers wanted to provide. Plebeian democratic outrage against banks and moneyed men, dormant since the 1790s, revived. Banks, above all, were the villains, wrote the editor of the *Cleveland Register*, because they enabled speculators to steal the hard-won earnings of honest and industrious farmers in order to create "monied aristocrarcies [*sic*]."

This growing sense of outrage—what the South Carolinian John C. Calhoun called "a general mass of disaffection"—utterly shattered the nationalist Republican consensus hailed by Monroe. After the panic, in particular, Old Republican attacks on banks and capitalist commerce gained a new lease on life. And those ideas now received backing from more than just the nostalgic, arcadian gentlemen admirers of Randolph and John Taylor of Caroline. The critics included hard-bitten debtors and workingmen, along with a new generation of self-styled democratic politicians, including the likes of Martin Van Buren, Felix Grundy, and, in time, Andrew Jackson.

Democratic reform, advancing more swiftly and dramatically in the North than in the South, became an additional vehicle for some of these same new politicians and their followers. The harmonious, nationalist "one-party" coalition, buckling under pressure from the bottom and the top, fell apart completely following the election of 1824, when Jackson's supporters charged that the nationalist John Quincy Adams had won the presidency by making a "corrupt bargain" with Henry Clay. Fresh realignments loomed.

There was, however, another momentous crisis of the period that cut across the emerging political battle lines in ways that appalled nationalists and proto-Jacksonians alike, and that profoundly affected the course of democratic development: the congressional debates from 1819 through 1821 over the extension of slavery and the admission of Missouri to

Henry Clay

the Union. A close reading of those debates shows that fundamental ideological and political shifts were under way, caused by the renaissance of slavery in the cotton South after 1800—a development the Revolutionary generation could not have foreseen. "The Missouri debate shocked Americans," one recent account of the period observes, "by revealing a resurgent slavery on a collision course with an aroused antislavery North." That northern arousal, aimed at restricting slavery's expansion by admitting Missouri as a free state, spread far beyond the halls of Congress.

The restrictionist cause gained a following only gradually after Representative James Tallmadge of New York introduced two amendments, in February 1819, barring slavery in Missouri. At first, restrictionist views appeared chiefly in the writings of the aging New Jersey patrician Elias Boudinot, the editorials of Theodore Dwight in the *New York Daily Advertiser*, and the speeches of New York's antislavery senator Rufus King. By the late summer of 1819, however, the increasingly bitter debates in Washington, combined with lurid reports of atrocities committed by proslavery men in Missouri, began raising the temperature of northern public opinion to a fever pitch.

In New Jersey, an antislavery meeting chaired by Boudinot made plans for future action across the North. These efforts found their headquarters in New York City, where, on November 13, more than 2,000 citizens gathered to approve antislavery resolutions and establish Revolutionary-style committees of correspondence to communicate with allies in other states. By December, according to one New Hampshire congressman, it had become "political suicide" for any free-state officeholder "to tolerate slavery beyond its present limits." From New Jersey, Boudinot reported that the protests appeared "to have run like a flaming fire thro our middle states and cause[d] great anxiety."

Much of that anxiety was, naturally, centered in the South. The violence of the southern reaction in Congress to Tallmadge's proposals had laid to rest, once and for all, the lingering myth that many of the South's leading citizens harbored deep antislavery convictions. Significantly, however, there was no mass popular response on anything approaching the scale of the northern mobilization. In part, ordinary southerners were much less alarmed at the controversy than either their northern counterparts or their slaveholder representatives in Congress were. And in part, southern politicians were wary of sponsoring too much public discussion of the issue back home, lest the slaves somehow overhear it and get their minds foolishly and dangerously set on freedom. "Public meetings will be held and legislative resolutions will probably be passed," the *Richmond Enquirer* correctly predicted about the North late in 1819. "But in the slave-holding states, not one meeting, not one resolution."

Martin Van Buren

Nationalist Republicans and their emerging Jacksonian adversaries were just as upset as the slaveholders were about Northern unrest. While John Calhoun—still a leading nationalist, not yet the chief theoretician of states' rights—led the public efforts to calm southern fears, President Monroe and his allies (including the Philadelphia banker Nicholas Biddle) worked skillfully behind the scenes to check both pro- and antislavery activists. In New York, the young and ambitious Martin Van Buren smoothly acted to neutralize Senator Rufus King as an antislavery tribune. And finally, when southern die-hards refused to let the matter rest even after the House approved Missouri statehood with slavery, Henry Clay cobbled together a compromise

that linked Missouri's admission to the Union with Maine's. Slavery was also to be banned in any state admitted from the Louisiana Purchase territories north of latitude 36°30'.

Calhoun, Biddle, Van Buren, Clay: with the exception of Andrew Jackson, the list of moderate compromisers in the Missouri debates reads like the general staffs of the opposing parties in the other national political struggles to come in the 1830s. Divided over so many of the economic and political issues inflamed by mass protests since 1815, these moderates were united on the need to keep sectional animosities at bay. They were determined to suppress the slavery issue in national affairs. And so American politics would unfold over the next 30 years, as party leaders made the conflicts over economics and privilege the premier points of party rhetoric, while checking the conflicts over slavery.

In the national political mainstream, what remained of antidemocratic sentiment seemed to disappear in the 1830s and 1840s, so much so that, as Tocqueville observed, even "the wealthy man" who harbored "a great distaste for [his] country's democratic institutions" could be found "boasting in public of the blessings of republican government and the advantages of democratic forms." Yet the major parties did fight, passionately, over what democracy meant.

The followers of Andrew Jackson—who once described himself as an upholder of "good old jeffersonian democratic principles"—proclaimed that all history had been a battle between the few and the many. Democracy, by these lights, was the chief political weapon of "the great labouring classes," namely ordinary farmers and workingmen, in their battles against monopolists, "paper bank" financiers, and other moneyed, would-be aristocrats. (By classing slaveholders among the farmers, the Jacksonians solidified their southern base.)

The Whigs, meanwhile, were no less emphatic in calling themselves (as one of their chief publicists, Calvin Colton, wrote) "uncompromising *American Democrat[s]*." But the Whigs celebrated a supposed harmony of interests between the few and the many. Democracy, in the Whig view, arose not out of social conflict but by the individual exertions of moral, prudent citizens, in an America that was, as Colton put it, "a country of *self-made men*, than which nothing better could be said of any state of society."

Beneath this divide, meanwhile, sectional differences on the subject of democracy also widened, as the South's growing connection to slavery stunted democratic development. This stunting was caused largely by the fact (so obvious that it often goes unnoticed) that the bulk of the dependent southern work force, the slaves, were not simply un-enfranchised but relegated to what the Harvard University sociologist Orlando Patterson has called "social death." Labor issues, increasingly contested by northern workers in the 1830s and 1840s, lay outside the purview of southern political controversy, at least as far as the slaves were concerned.

Moreover, the intellectual cornerstone of the slaveholders' democracy was the traditional precept that personal dependency rendered a man dangerous to the polity and unfit for citizenship. That precept was quickly losing favor in the more expansively democratic North. It was this very principle, which Calhoun, J. H. Hammond, and other incipient southern nationalists lauded as part of the genius of southern institutions, that led many free-soilers and incipient Republicans to castigate the South as a cryptoaristocratic "mudsill democracy."

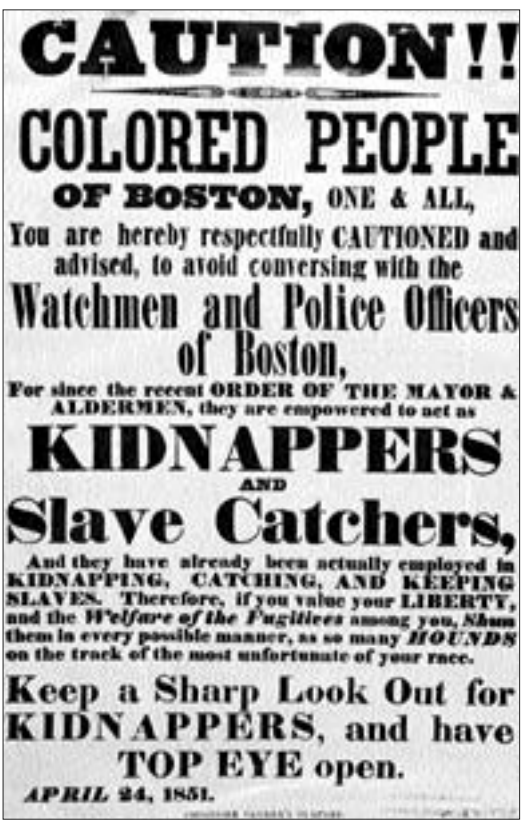
Southern politics was, to be sure, democratic enough to stimulate fractious disputes. Some engaged rival factions of elite families and some pitted the planters against nonslaveholding yeomen, tenants, and laborers. Still, southern politics became structured ever more in ways that thwarted challenges to the slaveholders' dominion. The imposing power of the masters accounts for why battles over suffrage reform and representation lasted

much longer in some of the older southern states than they did in the North. As late as 1857, for example, North Carolina's 50-acre property requirement for voting in state senate elections disfranchised an estimated one-half of the state's voters. Many other constitutional provisions and electoral codes helped keep southern political offices, from governors to county sheriffs, firmly in the hands of the slaveholders or their personal clients.

Southern social and cultural norms reinforced the slaveholders' political power. With its widely dispersed rural citizenry and relatively poor inland transportation networks (apart from the rivers and other cotton routes), the South proved less hospitable to the sorts of independent political organizing and discussion that blossomed in the North. On those few occasions, other than election days, when ordinary citizens would gather in public—above all, compulsory militia musters—local notables often presided, and used the opportunity for political proselytizing. Much of that proselytizing had to do with slavery, as rival politicians tried to surpass each other in portraying themselves as defenders of white men's equality, states' rights, and the peculiar institution. Should anyone dare to speak or write too rashly (or, in time, too publicly) against slavery, thereby raising the specter of slave insurrection, the slaveholders quickly gained popular and legislative support to suppress the miscreants, their assemblies, and their publications.

The backwardness of southern democracy was, it should be emphasized, only relative. Northern politics, at least party politics in the 1830s and 1840s, was run primarily by small clusters of insiders, chiefly lawyers and other professionals, who were adept at screening out discomfiting public opinions and their advocates. Anyone naive enough to look for a participatory democracy of white men in the party machinations of the Jacksonian and antebellum North is bound to be quickly disillusioned. Nevertheless, compared with the South, democracy in the North was flourishing. No one class or class fraction held sway over politics as the slaveholders did in the South. A much greater variety of ethnic and, more important, religious loyalties, cutting across class and geographical lines, made northern politics more complex and vibrant. It was this fluidity that made possible the rise of popular political movements such as the Liberty and Free-Soil Parties, successors to the pro-restrictionist movement of the Missouri crisis. Despite their unanimity, the Whig and Democratic parties faced enormous difficulties in their efforts to keep the slavery issue out of national debates.

Indeed, the great irony of national politics after 1830 was that mainstream efforts to suppress debates over slavery only widened the breach between North and


CAUTION!!

COLORED PEOPLE

OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,

You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the

Watchmen and Police Officers of Boston,

For since the recent ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN, they are empowered to act as

KIDNAPPERS AND Slave Catchers,

And they have already been actually employed in KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES. Therefore, if you value your LIBERTY, and the *Welfare of the Fugitives* among you, *Shun* them in every possible manner, as so many *HOUNDS* on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.

Keep a Sharp Look Out for KIDNAPPERS, and have TOP EYE open.

APRIL 24, 1851.

With placards like this, the Vigilance Committee of Boston helped make slavery a Northern issue.

South. Politicians of both major parties thwarted Calhoun and the sectionalist nullification movement in 1832. They also backed efforts to silence the abolitionists. Yet in the North, attacks on the fairly small abolitionist minority (by raucous, sometimes pro-southern mobs as well as by the slaveholders themselves) made non-abolitionists ask whether slavery could coexist with democratic institutions. Between 1836 and 1842, the continuing controversy over the Gag Rule, which automatically squelched any discussion of antislavery petitions in Congress, heightened northern fears that an arrogant slaveholder aristocracy was trying to impose its will on the entire country. And after 1840, when one wing of the abolitionist movement joined forces with Whig and Democratic dissidents and entered electoral politics, the machinery of mass democracy helped expand the antislavery cause into a sectional political crusade.

The planters, for their part, became increasingly unnerved at the boldness of northern criticism and the failure of northern political leaders to squelch it. While clamping down on any hints of homegrown antislavery dissent, they oversaw the final, pained completion of white male suffrage and more equal representation in the South—with the explicit aim, voiced by Henry Wise of Virginia, of enhancing the "common safety" against "our Northern brethren on the subject of slavery." Having forged a democracy built on slavery, they would brook no interference. In the mid-1840s, convinced that they needed additional political bulwarks, Calhoun and his allies set about securing Jackson and Van Buren's Democratic Party as their own. Thereafter, in a point-counterpoint long familiar to historians, northern democracy and southern democracy crystallized as antagonistic political forces, and the fighting turned lethal.

The Civil War settled the issue of slavery, as bequeathed by the early national period. It did not, however, settle America's arguments over democracy. In the controversies over populism in the 1890s, the Great Depression in the 1930s, and the War on Poverty in the 1960s, Americans would return to their debates over how economic power and privilege ought to be squared with political democracy. And in the continuing controversies over racial justice, states' rights, and civil rights, from the close of Reconstruction to the present, we have struggled with the abiding effects of slavery and the outcome of the Civil War. At times, political alignments have resembled those of the Jackson era, most notably during the ascendancy of the New Deal coalition. But at other times (though the party labels might change), sectional differences have been more pronounced, as with the rise of a southern-based conservative Republican Party since the 1960s.

Here, finally, is the full and lasting legacy of the early Republic. The old impressions of the bustling, democratizing new nation certainly carry a measure of truth. Politically, as well as economically, changes that were well under way by 1815—including the linking of capitalism and democracy highlighted by Gordon S. Wood and other scholars—decisively reshaped the country and have continued to shape American political perceptions and behavior ever since. But no one of these changes or linkages can account for the politics of the early Republic and after, just as no one image of democracy can stand as the single, agreed-upon American way. Whatever our agreements—about the illegitimacy of kingship and aristocracy, or about popular sovereignty and the rule of law, or about the sanctity of private property—ours has been a democracy ever in conflict, ever unfinished, on the subject of what a proper American democracy should be. Those conflicts arose with the democratizing movements that followed the American Revolution, and they have survived, in different forms, for nearly two centuries. In that respect, whether we consider the Americans of that long-ago time as friends or as enemies (or as both), they are us.