The 'Deepest Piece of Cunning'

Conspiracy Theory and the Society of the Cincinnati, 1783-1790

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Markus Hünemörder

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Erstgutachter: Prof. Dr. Berndt Ostendorf

Zweitgutachter: Prof. Dr. Michael Wala

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What is to be done with the Cincinnati: is that order of Chivalry, that Inroad upon our first Principle, Equality, to be connived at? It is the deepest Piece of Cunning yet attempted.

John Adams[1]

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[1] John Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 25 April 1785, Elbridge Gerry Papers, DLC.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This study is the result of my dual fascination with American politics, especially the Constitution, and American popular culture. Ever since my early studies in US history, I was struck with the power and flexibility of the Constitution and I became an admirer of the men and women who had drafted and debated that most persistent of democratic political systems. I quickly realized that the Antifederalists contributed as much as the Framers to the political culture of the United States. The critics of the Constitution focused on the preservation of individual rights and local autonomy, and through the Bill of Rights they left a legacy that modern Americans cherish even more than the ingenious system of checks and balances. Accordingly, I spent my early graduate studies learning about the ratification of the Constitution and wrote my master's thesis on the complex and rich debates in the state of Connecticut.

At the same time, I became aware of a tradition of radical political dissent in modern America, an abundance of conspiracy theories that also extended into popular culture. It was the time of Timothy McVeigh and the militia movement, of Waco, Ruby Ridge, Pat Robertson, and the X-Files. Suddenly conspiratorial explanations for current and historical events seemed everywhere. From Richard Hofstadter's writings I realized that conspiracy theories occurred in episodic waves throughout American history, and from Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood I learned that the founding fathers believed in a secret English plot against American liberty. I decided to investigate, but soon became aware that other scholars were already writing on conspiracy theories in post-World War II America. Clearly, I had to look off the beaten path for a case study in American political "paranoia."

It was then that I remembered a somewhat obscure document from my studies on the Connecticut ratification debates. Just before the Philadelphia Convention of 1787, Dr. Benjamin Gale, an eccentric physician from Killingworth, wrote a long letter to Erasmus Wolcott. In this diatribe, Gale complained about the machinations of the Society of the Cincinnati, a veterans organization of officers of the Continental Army. Gale charged that all the talk about the weakness of the Articles of Confederation was

merely a smokescreen for the treasonous ambition of the Cincinnati. According to Gale, this society planned to establish a military dictatorship or monarchy and assume the mantle of hereditary nobility for themselves. Gale was obviously an Antifederalist, one who not only attacked the movement for a new Constitution as unnecessary and dangerous, but who felt it was the result of a deliberate conspiracy against American freedom.

I had found my topic. Apparently, a conspiracy theory existed in the 1780s, the very period when the political culture and system of the United States was taking shape, and it accused the leaders of the Continental Army of anti-republican subversion. Small wonder then that such discourses of radical suspicion surfaced periodically over the course of American history. If some American revolutionaries felt that even George Washington and Henry Knox could be traitors, we should not be surprised that so many Americans question the report of the Warren commission or distrust the federal government and the United Nations. *The Deepest Piece of Cunning* is a journey to the origins of conspiracy theories in the United States. It should shed some light on the political controversies of the 1780s as well as the persistence of conspiracy theories in American political culture.

Abbreviations

ANB: John Arthur Garraty, and Mark C. Carnes, eds. *American National Biography*. 24 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

CtY: Yale University, Manuscripts and Archives Division

CtY-B: Yale University, Beinecke Library

DHFFC: Linda G. De Pauw, Charlene Bangs Bickford, Helen E. Veit, and Kenneth R. Bowling, eds. *Documentary History of the First Federal Congress of the United States of America: March 4, 1789-March 3, 1791*. 17 vols. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972-2003.

DHFFE: Gordon Den Boer, Merrill Jensen, and Robert A. Becker, eds. *The Documentary History of the First Federal Elections, 1788-1790*. 4 vols. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976.

DHRoC: Merrill Jensen, John P. Kaminski, and Gaspare J. Saladino, eds. *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*. 18 vols. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1976-2001.

DLC: Library of Congress, Washington DC

DSoc: Society of the Cincinnati Library, Anderson House, Washington DC

LDC: Paul H. Smith, ed. *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*. 26 vols. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Goverment Printing Office, 1976-2000.

NN: New York Public Library

Nhi: New York Historical Society

MHi: Masschusetts Historical Society, Boston

Nc-Ar: North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, N.C.

Abstract

In May 1783, the officers of the Continental Army of the United States of America organized themselves into the Society of the Cincinnati. Soon after, the veterans organization became the focus of an elaborate conspiracy theory which falsely accused the officers of trying to establish a hereditary nobility and subvert the young republic. Over the course of the mid-1780s, prominent revolutionary politicans such as John Adams and Elbridge Gerry joined in the outcry. The conspiracy theory became a major political controversy, and even impeded efforts to reform the Articles of Confederation. However, despite their frantic tone and lack of a factual basis, the accusations were not merely a fringe phenomenon created by political crackpots. Instead, the conspiracy theory was deeply embedded in American political culture. When the political and economic problems of the 1780s threatened to disrupt the republican experiment, many revolutionaries looked for a threat that might explain the crisis. They found that threat in the Cincinnati, whose military background, federal organization, and aristocratic trappings made them suspect.

Introduction

Conspiracy Theory and America

Conspiracy theories abound in the United States of America and worldwide, taking a multitude of forms and covering a wide variety of topics. One contemporary example is the hate-filled anti-Semitic accusation that the US federal government is in reality a "Zionist Occupational Government" bent on disarming, subjugating, and eventually exterminating white Americans. Charges such as these can be found in the infamous Turner Diaries[1], which helped inspire Timothy McVeigh to bomb the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995. Variant versions of this conspiracy theory portray the United Nations as monitoring the American populace with unmarked black helicopters, in preparation for a takeover of the United States by international troops. Still others blame the Trilateral commission, the Bilderbergers, the Council on Foreign Relations, or a variety of international bankers, communists, liberal intellectuals, or Jews for secretly establishing a secular, international, and collectivist New World Order hell-bent on destroying the American family, economic system, and way of life. Often, these accusations carry a strong eschatological element which identifies Satan as the ultimate conspirator and predicts an apocalyptic struggle between the evil forces of conspiracy and the righteous wrath of the people, once the veil of deceit is lifted.[2] In some cases, believers in such conspiracy theories – among them elements of the American militia movement[3] – arm themselves to the teeth in expectation of the day when jack-booted government thugs try to break down the door.

Less violent, but even more prevalent, are the various theories surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. Rejecting the "lone gunman" explanation of the Warren Commission report, thousands of Americans have turned conspiracy theories about Kennedy's death into a veritable cottage industry of books, newsletters, websites, and conferences. According to various "assassination buffs," Kennedy became the victim of Cuban exiles, a CIA faction, the Mafia, the oil industry, the military-industrial complex or a combination of any of these groups.[4] Among disadvantaged

groups in American society, conspiracy theories flourish as well. Some radical feminists interpret the continuing discrimination against women not so much as a structural problem of society, but as the conscious effort of an age-old male conspiracy.[5] Among African-Americans, conspiracy theorists blame the problems created by drug addiction, gang violence, and AIDS on efforts by white racists in the government to exterminate Blacks.[6] Narratives of conspiracy are not limited to the planet Earth only. The alleged 1947 UFO crash in Roswell, New Mexico has added space aliens to the list of secret manipulators. Some conspiracy theorists hold extraterrestrials responsible for cattle mutilations and the abduction of humans for nefarious scientific experiments. Variant theories see all aliens as menacing, while others claim that a benevolent faction is waging a secret war against the invaders on behalf of mankind.[7]

The popular culture of the 1990s is full of conspiracy theory material. Oliver Stone's movie *JFK* brought one variant of the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theory to millions of viewers on the big screen. In *Conspiracy Theory*, Mel Gibson played a conspiracy-believing misfit who just happened to be right. The most prominent example, the television show *The X-Files*, featured the exploits of an eccentric FBI agent trying to unravel a government conspiracy to cover up the secret agenda of extraterrestrials on Earth. The show ran for nine years, producing an even more conspiracy-themed spin-off named *The Lone Gunmen*, a Hollywood movie, and a number of copycat shows. Even in the newest media of popular culture, conspiracy theories abound. The collectible trading card game *Illuminati: The New World Order* has its players take on the roles of secret societies, vying with each other over control influential institutions, persons, and resources in an effort to take over the world. The eerie computer game *Deus Ex* casts the player as an anti-terrorist agent in the employ of the United Nations who slowly discovers the hidden forces behind a terrifying worldwide epidemic. The massive commercial success of these products, as well as the vibrant fan culture that they have generated, demonstrate the attraction and staying power of conspiracy theories in contemporary American culture.

Historically, too, the United States has provided fertile ground for conspiracy theories in many shapes and forms. Critics of Franklin Roosevelt accused the president

of deliberately opening Pearl Harbor to a Japanese attack in order to drag the United States into World War II against the will of the people. During the 1950s, anti-communist witch hunters saw the United States on the brink of a "Red" takeover from within, and responded with investigations, loyalty oaths, hearings, blacklists, and police raids. In doing so, they repeated a post-World War I pattern which had produced the infamous Palmer raids and a career boost for J. Edgar Hoover. Some leaders of the Populist movement in the late 19th century warned of a conspiratorial cabal, the "international gold ring" bent on subjugating the people.[8] During the antebellum era, nativists and protestant alarmists saw a life-threatening danger in the allegedly subversive activities and unholy rituals of the Catholic Church, the Mormons or the Freemasons.[9] In the 1790s, the Congregationalist clergy of New England warned their parishes of the diabolical intentions of the Illuminati, whom they blamed for drenching the French Revolution in blood and planning to do the same in America.[10]

Even the very creation of the United States was connected to conspiracy theory. Many founding fathers interpreted the various political crises of the 1760s and 1770s not as simple disagreements between England and her colonies, but as a ministerial conspiracy to enslave the American colonists, and eventually all free Englishmen. Things came to a head when, in reaction to the Boston Tea Party of 1773, Parliament passed the Coercive Acts in order to discipline Massachusetts. Alarmed Americans called these measures the Intolerable Acts and interpreted them as a deliberate effort to choke the colonies economically, abolish the rule of law and trial by jury, and prepare the American colonies for direct despotic rule. By 1774 many prominent and moderate colonial leaders including Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, George Mason, and John Dickinson, were convinced that English policies were deliberately designed to end political freedom in America. The Continental Congress itself endorsed such an interpretation in its 1774 Declaration of Rights and Grievances which vehemently protested against "such acts and measures as have been adopted since the last war, which demonstrate a system formed to enslave America." Shortly thereafter, war began, and in 1776 the American states declared their independence, arguing that a "long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce

them to absolute despotism". While the conflicts between the colonists and the British empire were real enough, the revolutionaries displayed a penchant to see malevolent conspiracy rather than fundamental political differences at work.[11]

The revolutionaries' tendency towards suspicion did not end with the peace of Paris. Between 1783 and the ratification and establishment of the new Constitution in 1788-1790 the infant United States experienced many social, economic, and political crises, prompting historian John Fiske to call it the "critical period."[12] It was during this time that Americans had to come to terms with their political independence. The revolutionaries discovered that there was considerable disagreement as to the future shape of the American republic, especially about how to prevent abuses of power. They also had to deal with the fact that while all men may have been created equal, they did not remain so. The obvious inequalities of race and gender aside, even white patriot men turned out to be socially and economically too diverse for comfort. As the United States faced the economic repercussions of dropping out of the British trade system at a time when its political institutions were at their most malleable, there were those who feared that republican equality might prove fragile and that designing men were out to take the place of crown-appointed officials, military commanders and even nobility. This fear of aristocracy in the critical period took many forms from erudite debate to riotous mob action; it also generated a controversy that has largely escaped the attention of historians: the conspiracy theory about the Society of the Cincinnati.

The Conspiracy Theory about the Society of the Cincinnati

In the spring of 1783, during the last months of the Continental Army, a group of officers surrounding Maj. Gen. Henry Knox and Maj. Gen. Friedrich von Steuben planned a way to continue the friendship and solidarity of revolutionary war commanders in peacetime. Their aim was twofold: first of all, Knox and the others envisioned a mutual aid and benefit association, which could help impoverished members as well as the widows and orphans of deceased comrades. Secondly, the officers had important political interests in common: Congress had promised them pensions in the form of a lump sum equal to five years pay, a policy known as commutation. However,

the precarious financial situation of the United States made the payment of commutation dubious. Many officers supported the formation of a stronger national government that was more likely to honor its obligations. Consequently, the planned veterans organization could also function as a political pressure group.[13]

Knox, Steuben, and the other officers named their society after Cincinnatus, a Roman general, who (at least in the idealized story known to the classically educated American elite) had left his farm at the behest of the Senate, assumed leadership of the army, defeated Rome's enemies, and subsequently rejected all offers of political power to return to his plow. The name was also a clear reference to General Washington's reputation as a selfless patriot who intended to give up command of the Continental Army as soon as the war was over. Most officers felt that they, on a less exalted level, deserved that reputation, as well. They envisioned a federal Society of the Cincinnati, as well as state branches, annual meetings, a badge of honor, the admission of foreign and honorary members, and the continuation of membership through the oldest male descendant. In its early months, the society was virtually unknown to the public, but officers joined in large numbers and founded state societies, including a French branch to accommodate America's crucial allies. Washington, although uninvolved with the organization of the society, accepted the presidency. On the whole, the Cincinnati were quite successful at organizing veteran officers, making the society one of the very few associations existing in the entire United States.

Both the political and the organizational aspects of the society came under attack throughout the 1780s. American tradition, especially in the wake of the revolution, included a deep distrust of standing armies, special privilege, and aristocracy; the Cincinnati seemed to include elements of all three. In New England, extra-legal conventions protested commutation as a policy designed to privilege a specific class of citizens over others; the society became the focal point of these accusations. In South Carolina, Judge Aedanus Burke published a widely-read pamphlet that described the society as a nascent nobility.[14] While Burke acknowledged the heroism of the veteran officers, he feared that they and their descendants would become an aristocracy that would doom republicanism in America. In the fall of 1783 and the spring of 1784,

newspapers especially in Connecticut and Massachusetts accused the society of ambition, arrogance, and subversion. A conspiracy theory emerged that saw the Cincinnati as bent on gaining special financial privileges through commutation, forming hereditary nobility through the rule of descent, connected to the aristocracy of Europe, meeting annually to make political decisions, and then enforcing those decisions through political influence and military power.[15] In short, critics saw the Cincinnati as the nucleus of a secret government, operating outside republican rules, to the benefit of the few and the detriment of the many.

The list of the Cincinnati's accusers included many names that were every bit as famous as the officers themselves. While nobody could quite match Washington's prestige, the man who came closest wrote scathing sarcasm against the "hereditary knights": Benjamin Franklin.[16] Many of the leading politicians of the revolution were even more critical. Jefferson repeatedly tried to persuade Washington to dissolve the society.[17] Samuel Adams feared they would establish feudal domains in the Ohio territory.[18] Elbridge Gerry, probably the sharpest critic of the society, tried to organize Congressional resistance against the Cincinnati.[19] John Jay feared that the Cincinnati would disrupt republican unity.[20] John Adams was so distraught by the prospect of hereditary nobility in the United States that he privately announced his resignation from public life. Although Adams never went through with his premature retirement, he continued to fear the subversive potential of the society as a grave threat to republicanism in America. In a 1785 letter to Gerry he summarized his fears: "What is to be done with the Cincinnati…? It is the deepest Piece of Cunning yet attempted."[21]

The Cincinnati met the accusations with ridicule, counter-attacks, defensive arguments, and reform. Washington, ever mindful of his reputation, and convinced by his correspondence with Jefferson and others that he was on thin ice, persuaded the General Society at its first meeting in April 1784 to drop the most problematic features, such as heredity and honorary memberships. He probably would have preferred to dissolve the organization altogether, but the society's enthusiastic reception in France effectively precluded that option. The well-publicized reforms of 1784 did a lot to quiet the uproar. However, Knox's repeated conclusions that the criticism had died out

proved premature.[22] Many critics simply felt that the abolition of heredity was merely a tactical move by the soldier-aristocrats and had little practical effect as long a the organization continued to exist. Ironically, few of the critics noticed that the reforms of 1784 died a slow death because of the refusal of several state societies to ratify them; in 1800 the general society had to admit that the reform had failed and that the original charter was still in effect.[23]

Fear of the Cincinnati also proved an obstacle to the revision of the Articles of Confederation, the most momentous political debate of the early republic. In 1785, the Massachusetts delegates to the Continental Congress wrote to governor James Bowdoin, warning against calling a convention to reform the Articles, for fear that the Cincinnati would dominate any such effort.[24] Several critics charged that the entire debate over a stronger national government was merely a machination of the Cincinnati to pick up their nefarious plans where they had left off in 1784 and replace republican government with aristocratic tyranny.[25] The conspiracy theory also affected the question of constitutional ratification, as the conspiracy theory became one aspect of the Antifederalist argument against the Constitution. Allegations against the society surfaced in newspapers and elsewhere throughout the late 1780s and into the early 1790s. It was only over the course of the 1790s and 1800s that the Cincinnati faded from the public mind, as the opposition between the Federalist and Republican parties succeeded earlier divisions and controversies.

At the same time, the Cincinnati faded not only out of mind, but also nearly out of existence. A number of state societies dissolved in the decades after ratification, and after 1787, the triennial meeting of the general society never attained a quorum of sufficient state societies in attendance. The fate of the French society showed that, despite the unpleasant accusations of conspiracy in America, things could get even worse: as the French Revolution devolved into the *terreur,* many Cincinnati went to the guillotine. Over the years, the society came close to vanishing, until it was revived in the second half of the nineteenth century. Eventually, the Cincinnati became the prototype for all hereditary patriotic societies, such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the first example of a veterans organization in the United States. Today, it is

alive and well, with over 2,000 members and a magnificent headquarters of the General Society on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, D.C. And as hereditary aristocracy faded as the nightmare of the American political imagination, the controversy became the province of infrequent treatment in historical scholarship.

Historiography

In most treatises on the 1780s, the public outrage against the Society of the Cincinnati received little more than a few paragraphs. Only a few articles and monographs went into more depth, usually in the form of institutional histories. The early treatment of the society frequently proved erroneous; some authors mistakenly claimed that the Cincinnati effectively abolished heredity in 1784, or that the controversy ceased at this point. Moreover, the historiography on the critical period produced little agreement on how to evaluate the society's role in the formation of the American republic. While several historians pointed out the exaggeration of the accusations and stressed the innocence of the Cincinnati, others came close to endorsing the conspiracy theory.

The earliest condemnation of the Cincinnati in a historical treatise occurred in Mercy Otis Warren's *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution.* Published in 1805, her comprehensive work viewed the Federalist efforts of the 1780s and 1790s as an assault on the true spirit of republicanism. Within that framework, Warren saw the Cincinnati as one of the driving forces of reaction in the United States. Her stance was hardly surprising – she had subscribed to the conspiracy theory in the 1780s as well. Warren identified French officers, Steuben, and Knox as the driving forces of anti-republican sentiment in the army. Extensively quoting anti-Cincinnati sources, Warren identified the society as "a deep laid plan, which discovered sagacity to look forward, genius to take advantage, and art to appropriate to themselves the opening prospects of dignity and rank, which had fired the minds of ambitious men." Warren did not blame the Cincinnati alone, but rather thought them one aspect of a greater Federalist conspiracy for "erecting a government for the United States, in which should be introduced ranks, privileged orders, and arbitrary powers." Nevertheless, she identified the society as one of the major stepping stones in the effort

to subvert the American Revolution, which only Jefferson's election to the presidency in 1800 finally halted.[26]

As the revolutionary generation died out and reverence for all the founding fathers, regardless of political affiliation, became the norm, critical interpretations like Warren's became rarer. With the emergence of the progressive school in the first half of the 20th century, however, critical accounts of the Cincinnati once again surfaced. In his seminal study *An Economic Interpretation of the American Constitution*, Charles Beard claimed that the Constitution was primarily the work of public creditors who stood to profit from a firm central government that had the power to tax. Beard identified the Cincinnati as among the "warmest advocates" of the new system and characterized their political influence thus: "as they were organized and were, many of them, of exalted private and public worth and could act in concert through all the states, their influence was foreseen and feared by its opponents." Beard was interested in class conflict, not in aristocratic subversion; thus, his interpretation was unconnected to the conspiracy theory of the 1780s. Nevertheless, Beard's view of the society was very critical, placing the Cincinnati at the heart of the creditor-class effort.[27]

Other authors endorsed the accusations against the Cincinnati more readily. W. E. Woodward noted in 1926 that "there was a well-grounded effort to create a permanent nobility by an organization of former army officers called the Society of the Cincinnati, in which membership was hereditary."[28] Millard W. Hansen followed in Warren's footsteps by concluding that the counter-revolutionary forces had succeeded in America by 1787, and that "among this aristocratic class, which in the years 1787-1789 finally established a government which adequately protected them from democratic attack upon their privileges, the Society of the Cincinnati formed the extremist faction."[29] In a somewhat obscure article from 1940, Eckert Goodman concluded that the Cincinnati were "the closest thing to an Old World aristocracy that this country has ever produced."[30]

After World War II, possibly because military veterans now enjoyed greater overall prestige and also because the pressures of McCarthy-style anti-communism made the notion of sharp divisions in American society unpopular, historians were less

eager to condemn the Cincinnati. Nevertheless, not all were happy with the role the society played in the critical period. In his carefully researched and important 1948 essay, "The Society of the Cincinnati in New England 1783-1800," Wallace E. Davies described the rise and fall of the accusations against the officers in considerable detail. However, while he did not denounce the Cincinnati as the vanguard of a successful aristocratic counter-revolution, he remained unsure about their intentions. "It does not follow that the apprehensions were entirely imaginary," Davies cautioned, "for what might have developed had there not been so instant and so extensive an outcry, in New England as elsewhere, can remain only surmise."[31]

Similarly, Sidney Kaplan did not in 1952 feel that the Cincinnati were counter-revolutionary aristocrats. However, he did identify them as a well organized and crafty political pressure group which was intrinsically tied to land speculation in the Ohio valley. Kaplan pointed to the simultaneous membership of many Cincinnati in the Ohio company and the Freemasons, and concluded that at least a faction in the society was massively interested in putting down Shays' Rebellion and strengthening the movement for a stronger central government. However, Kaplan cautioned, only a small minority actually endorsed monarchy and aristocracy. According to Kaplan, the Cincinnati managed to convert the society's clear anti-Shays commitment into political and economic gains, securing land grants in the Northwest and taking their structures with them. Within a year of ending Shays' Rebellion, "the old quadrumvirate - officer, Ohio Associate, Mason and Cincinnatus - had reestablished itself considerably west of Boston."[32]

Since then, few serious studies of the critical period have been very critical of the Cincinnati. However, earlier interpretations, and even the full-fledged conspiracy theory still made themselves felt in ill-researched or sensationalist newspaper articles. As late as 1986, in "They would have installed Washington as a Dictator" the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that "officers of George Washington's Continental Army wanted to…set up a military dictatorship over the 13 colonies. But Washington argued that a dictatorship might be somewhat inappropriate."[33] A 1982 article in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "Did Ancient Society of the Cincinnati Try To Give U.S. a King?"[34]

equally demonstrated the enticing qualities of Cincinnati-bashing to present-day news-papermen.

While some historians were in one way or another critical of the Cincinnati, many others dismissed the accusations against the society. In 1858, Alexander Johnston offered one of the earliest defensive accounts.[35] Johnston sketched out a brief institutional history of the Cincinnati and connected the accusations against them with the controversies about pensions and the status of the military in the 1780s. He was also one of the earliest authors to note that the society never really abolished hereditary succession. Johnston ridiculed the society's critics as "watchful guardians of the commonweal," who "with an alacrity they never exhibited in the hour of real peril, flew to their pens" to raise a hue and cry against the Cincinnati "which, at our day, seems perfectly incredible."[36] Similarly John Fiske, a much more prominent historian, described the opposition to the Cincinnati as "a howl of indignation all over the country."[37] Fiske's account was in some ways flawed, as he did not mention the failure of the 1784 reforms and also repeated an erroneous but widespread rumor that Rhode Island had disenfranchised the society's members in the 1780s. Like Johnston, however, Fiske was quite certain that the Cincinnati were innocent and the accusations groundless.

In the 1920s through 1940s, a number of members of the Cincinnati rose to their institution's defense. Warren Winslow[38] published a short institutional history in 1929 in which he acknowledged the controversy of the 1780s, but attributed any misgivings to a misunderstanding of the society's innocent fraternal and charitable purpose. A few years later, another Cincinnatus, William S. Thomas, produced a somewhat more detailed institutional history that, unsurprisingly, also took the innocence of the society for granted. He also pointed out that one of the society's early critics, Benjamin Franklin, accepted honorary membership in 1789.[39]

By far the most prolific of the Cincinnati historians was Edgar Erskine Hume, who in the 1930s waged a one-man crusade to shed light on nearly every aspect of Cincinnati history, and to once and for all establish the society's innocent character. In "Early Opposition to the Cincinnati," Hume provided the most detailed account of the

accusations to date, including many aspects that other authors had not unearthed, such as an attempt to disfranchise the Cincinnati in North Carolina. Hume could not resist inserting a few jibes against the society's critics. Referring to the similar professional background of Aedanus Burke, the most widely published anti-Cincinnati author, and Hugh Brackenridge, who satirized the society in the 1790s, Hume wryly commented: "The Cincinnati seemed to draw the fire of eccentric judges with early theological training and brief military service!"[40] Like his fellow Cincinnati, Hume clearly implied that the reason for the clamor lay in the jealousy of those who had not bled for their country but begrudged the officers their prestige.

Hume greatly contributed to historical scholarship about the society with a large number of essays on the involvement of Steuben, Lafayette, Washington, and many others with the society.[41] By far the greatest and most lasting contribution Hume made to the study of the Cincinnati was his documentary edition *General Washington's Correspondence Concerning the Society of the Cincinnati.* At a time when historians could only rely on Fitzpatrick's edition of Washington's papers, which did not include both sides of his correspondence, Hume's book was priceless. Even today, with Abbot and Twohig's much more comprehensive series available, *General Washington's Correspondence* is still the best tool to shed light on Washington's problematic relationship with the Society of the Cincinnati.[42]

In one very peculiar instance, defense and praise of the Cincinnati became a political argument utilized by the far right. In 1941, the *National Republic: A Magazine of Fundamental Americanism* published an article on the society, praising the Cincinnati as paragons of American virtue and patriotism, ridiculing the accusations and downplaying the criticism of Jefferson and Franklin.[43] The author of the article, John J. Birch, was not the namesake of Robert Welch's anti-communist society, but the *National Republic's* political bent placed it firmly in the same camp. Even non-radical authors were sometimes unwilling to let the Cincinnati's critics get away with badmouthing the heroes of the American Revolution. In a 1973 article in *Army*, Patrick Frazier sourly commented: "Whenever our nation experiences turbulent times, the conspiracy theory crops up and fingers are pointed at one element of society or gov-

ernment. Public suspicion of the military began at the very birth of our nation, and it formed against the very men who had just fought to free it for the principles stated in the Declaration of Independence."[44]

Since then, many accounts have either attributed the controversy to the envy of the non-military revolutionaries or simply pointed at the groundlessness of the charges given the Cincinnati's limited resources and harmless ambitions. The 1966 *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* asserted that "the Cincinnati turned out to be nothing but an innocent club."[45] Richard B. Morris in *The Forging of the Union,* part of the New American Nation series, likewise evaluated the anti-Cincinnati accusations as chimerical. "Retrospectively," Morris argued, "the anxieties aroused both in France and America over the Order of the Cincinnati seem all out of scale with that society's aims and capacities. ... The order still functions, but has yet to prove a threat to the people's liberties."[46] In recent decades, the presumption of the Cincinnati's innocence has permeated the historiography of the critical period. The historian's benefit of hindsight – and the obvious lack of Cincinnati domination over present-day politics – made that assessment all but inescapable.

Many other standard accounts of the critical period mentioned the Cincinnati controversy at least in passing. Merrill Jensen in *The New Nation* attributed the accusations against the society to anti-military sentiment in the post-war United States.[47] Catherine Drinker Bowen pointed to the ticklish situation of having the 1787 federal convention and the second meeting of the general society of the Cincinnati at nearly the same place and time.[48] Jackson Turner Main noted that the opposition against the Cincinnati was linked to other proto-Antifederalist issues of the mid-1780s, such as the outcry against commutation and the national impost.[49] Robert A. Rutland dismissed the outcry against the Cincinnati as Antifederalist propaganda, but acknowledged the conviction of "thousands" of Americans that "the Cincinnati was a discredited antirepublican organization."[50] In a recent synthesis on the revolutionary period, Harry M. Ward used the attacks against the Cincinnati to demonstrate that public opinion in post-

revolutionary America rejected the notion of hereditary aristocracy in favor of a natural aristocracy based on merit.[51]

Several authors of the ideological school, which stressed the influence of English radical Whig ideology in the thinking of the American Revolution, also took notice of the Cincinnati controversy. In *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Gordon Wood asserted that there was a very real movement in America to dismantle deferential authority and notions of superior rank.[52] In the wake of the revolution, radical egalitarians opposed any kind of distinction, whether in dress, education, the display of luxuries, or hereditary honors. In *The Creation of the American Republic*, Wood had already explained that the "ferocious attacks on the Order of the Cincinnati in the 1780's actually represented only the most notable expression of these egalitarian resentments."[53] In a 1982 article, Wood also pointed out the prevalence of conspiracy theories in the late 18th century in general, without specifically mentioning the Cincinnati controversy.[54] Forrest McDonald argued along similar lines in linking the fear of Cincinnati machinations to the ideology of the American Revolution; he pointed out that "the most striking attribute of the ideology was its belief that there were conspiracies against freedom."[55] Thus, in the eyes of these historians, the attacks against the society stemmed from a more general suspicion of power and intrigue inherent in the ideological assumptions of the American Revolution.

Since the Society of the Cincinnati survived its decline in the early 19th century and endured to become one of the oldest organizations in the United States, a sizeable amount of literature has developed describing its institutional history. Members of the society conducted much of this research, as in the works of Thomas, Warren, and Hume. Most frequently, Cincinnati historians chronicled the society's evolution at the state level, typically with a strong focus on official proceedings and membership rosters. Indeed, genealogy played a major role in much of the earlier research, given the fact that the society had to replenish its membership in the 19th century, when many state societies were reconstituted. Even today, finding out about the military career of ancestors remains a major concern for established and prospective members of the Cin-

cinnati. Membership in the society was traditionally tied to the state line; thus the historical interest in the activities of the state societies was hardly surprising. However, the numerous histories of the state societies rarely concerned themselves with the controversies of the 1780s.[56]

Still, some scholars took up the task of writing the history of the society in general. Going well beyond the limited scope of the institutional histories of Thomas and Warren, three relatively recent studies have strived to illuminate the Cincinnati's history, especially during its formative period. The most recent of these studies, a master's thesis by Bryan S. Johnson, was somewhat limited in scope. It nevertheless provided an accurate, basic overview. In his study, Johnson expressed sympathy for, if not agreement with the critics' concerns, commenting that "their fears held in public and private as to the possibility of monarchy and the creation of a hereditary nobility were as real in 1783 as our contemporary fears of nuclear warfare."[57]

Three decades earlier, Richard F. Saunders provided a more detailed account in his doctoral thesis at the University of Georgia – the only non-member to write a major study on the society's history.[58] Although hampered by the general society's refusal to make their archives available to non-members (a policy since revised), Saunders managed to delve into most aspects of the society's early history with remarkable depth.[59] Commenting at length on the problematic relationship between civilian and military authority in the critical period, Saunders attributed the accusations against the Cincinnati both to republican vigilance and the fear of some politicians that military achievement might become the sole basis for status and power in the new republic. Saunders noted that many Cincinnati endorsed Federalist policies in the 1780s, but concluded that this more accurately reflected the natural interests and competitive advantages of the social class that had made them officers in the first place, rather than any concerted efforts of the society.

However, the definitive work on the institutional history of the Society of the Cincinnati was the work of a member, Minor Myers. In 1983, just in time for the bicentennial of the society, he published *Liberty Without Anarchy*, which remains the most detailed and accurate account of the society's inception, development, and persis-

tence into the present day. While Myers clearly celebrated the Cincinnati's prestigious tradition, he was also surprisingly critical of some of its original members' politics. Myers cautioned that "during the critical years of 1786 and 1787, some of its leaders, and possibly some of the state societies in New England, did contemplate constitutional changes, and certainly some Cincinnati by that point *were* advocates of monarchy."[60] However, he claimed that the charges leveled against the society as an institution were completely unfounded – the Cincinnati did not aim to become a hereditary nobility for America. Unfortunately, although he certainly included all the highlights, Myers book did not devote too much space to the accusations against the Cincinnati. He also did not offer much of an explanation for the existence and political explosiveness of the conspiracy theory against them. As to the activities of the institution, however, Myers has clearly succeeded Hume as the premier historian of the Society of the Cincinnati.

An American Conspiracy Theory

As this short historiographical sketch demonstrates, the conspiracy theory against the Society of the Cincinnati remains puzzling. One anonymous researcher who left his notes at the Cincinnati headquarters in Washington, probably sometime in the 1950s, summarized his confusion thus: "Opposition to the Society proceeded either from jealousy among persons of socialistic tendencies and fear of the possibility that the Cincinnati might form an oligarchy or privileged class that would trample under foot the feebly constituted representative form of government of the United States under the Articles of Confederation, or else the opposition was founded upon office holders and legislators fears that their powers would be taken from them by this patrician class."[61] It is hard to imagine a more contradictory statement: were the society's critics socialists? Jealous politicians? Defenders of representative government? The question remains how and why a virulent conspiracy theory could arise just after the successful termination of the Revolutionary War, accusing the very group that had brought about military success. It is the purpose of this study to answer that question, and to comment on the role of conspiracy theories in American political culture of the eighteenth century and beyond.

One might be tempted to dismiss the outcry against the Cincinnati as the ravings of madmen, the grumbling of malcontents, or the propaganda of radicals. However, the fame and status of many of the society's critics effectively negates such conclusions. John and Samuel Adams, Jefferson, Gerry, Rufus King, Jay, and Franklin all expressed their alarm about the Cincinnati's formation. These founding fathers stood at the center of American politics, not its margins, and many ordinary Americans shared their misgivings. Therefore, the conspiracy theory leveled against the Society of the Cincinnati was not simply an amusing episode of a period long gone. Rather, it represented an oppositional interpretation of America's political genesis, an outcry against an allegedly subversive and corruptive institution at the very time when American political institutions and culture were just taking shape.

The Cincinnati controversy reflected many issues, such as equality, privilege, power, and militarism, which lay at core of American politics – and still do. Accusations against the society played a role in shaping the debate about the Constitution, the central document of American political identity. Echoes of this conspiracy theory can still be felt in the various anti-centralist, anti-elitist arguments and movements of the present day. Both in the form of regular political debate and conspiracy theory, a discourse of distrust against centralized authority, and the insistence on the rights of "the people" against the machinations of the few runs like a red thread through much of American history. The Cincinnati controversy helped shape this dissenting tradition in the United States. It was in many ways a specifically American conspiracy theory.

Since this study reads a political controversy of the critical period through the conceptual framework of conspiracy theory, some theoretical background is needed. Chapter one, *The Theory of Conspiracy,* provides an overview of explanations that various scholars have offered for the widespread existence and persistence of conspiracy theories in the United States and elsewhere. These theorists' evaluations range from condemning conspiracy theories as a political pathology to interpretations that see utopian idealism at work. Furthermore, this chapter presents the various political and cultural functions that conspiracy theories may fulfill, ranging from simple scapegoating

mechanisms to sophisticated hermeneutic considerations. The question of cultural specificity plays an important role, since despite the universal proliferation of conspiracy theories, every such controversy arises out of specific parameters. Finally, chapter one provides a working definition of conspiracy theory as well as an analytic framework to help make sense of the conspiracy theory surrounding the Society of the Cincinnati.

Myers' work makes it unnecessary to provide yet another detailed institutional history of the Cincinnati. Nevertheless, the historical background of the society's formation is crucially important to the understanding of the conspiracy theory. Chapter two, *The Price of Peace*, comments on the uneasy relationship between Congress, the states, the Continental Army, and the public during the years of the revolutionary war. It outlines such issues as military pensions, commutation, and the Congressional impost proposals of 1781 and 1783, as well as the specter of a coup d'etat in the months before a final peace settlement with England. In the midst of this turmoil, the Society of Cincinnati was created, thus setting the stage for a controversy that made its mark on the debates of the critical period.

Chapter three, *A Political Wolf in Sheep's Cloathing*, describes the specific accusations that made up the conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati. From charges of hereditary aristocracy, via French subversion, to establishing a secret government, the society's critics left no stone unturned in their fear of the Cincinnati. The chapter also explores the potentially explosive fears that the society might attempt to crown Washington king. Chapter four, *The Wicked and Traitorous Fabrication,* covers the influence of the Cincinnati conspiracy theory on the movement to reform the Articles of Confederation and explores the relationship of the controversy to the larger Antifederalist argument against the Constitution. Together, these two chapters provide a detailed content analysis of the conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati.

A Society of Friends, chapter five of this study, deals with the reactions of the Cincinnati to the charges leveled against them. This sections covers the attempts by members and sympathizers to defend the organization and the refute the conspiracy theory argument by argument. It also covers the society's attempt to remove the of-

fending features from their charter in the eventually failed reform of 1784. Since the Cincinnati *was* a political as well as a fraternal organization, chapter six, *Was it all True?* reconstructs the actual policies of the Cincinnati on a variety of controversial topics such as constitutional reform and public finances. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the links between the Cincinnati and the Federalist government established in 1789.

The social, political, and geographic distribution of the conspiracy theorists is the topic of chapter seven, *Guardians of the Republic.* This chapter also includes biographical sketches of three of the society's most outspoken critics: Gerry as the most prominent national politician among them, Aedanus Burke, an eccentric but well-established state judge who later became a controversial member of Congress, and Benjamin Gale, a Connecticut doctor whose domain was the local town meeting and the unsolicited written harangue. While hardly alone in their endorsement of the conspiracy theory, these three examples serve to illuminate the different backgrounds from which the opposition to the Cincinnati sprang.

Chapter eight, *Between two Revolutions*, explores the history of the society and the conspiracy theory against it in Europe, especially France. Primarily through the writings of the Comte de Mirabeau, anti-Cincinnati sentiment spread across the Atlantic. The French Revolution, too, generated massive resentment against hereditary aristocracy, to which the French chapter fell prey. Nevertheless, the status of the society and the impact of the conspiracy theory in France was sufficiently different from America to merit its own treatment.

Chapter nine, *Republican Fears and Confusions*, puts the conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati in context with issues that had been present in English and American political ideology and society for a long time. The success of the American Revolution gave new urgency to the debates about standing armies, power, and equality, and the post-revolutionary economic and political crises generated an atmosphere of distrust and confusion. Critics saw the society in violation of many tenets of revolutionary ideology, thus giving rise to the conspiracy theory, even as these same ideological beliefs became increasingly problematic. In conclusion, *Causes and Effects* offers a

multi-tiered explanation for the emergence of the accusations against the society, as well as its impact on American political culture.

Notes

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[16] Benjamin Franklin to Sarah Bache, 26 January 1784, *The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin; Including His Private as Well as His Official and Scientific Correspondence, and Numerous Letters and Documents Now for the First Time Printed, with Many Others Not Included in Any Former Collection, Also, the Unmutilated and Correct Version of His Autobiography*, ed. John Bigelow (New York: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1887), 10: 273.

[17] Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 16 April 1784, LDC 21: 521-24.

[18] Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 15 September 1785, Samuel Adams Papers, NN, DLC [photostat].

[19] Elbridge Gerry to John Adams, 8 November 1785, Elbridge Gerry Papers, DLC.

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[31] Wallace Evans Davies, "The Society of the Cincinnati in New England 1783-1800," *William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 5 (1948): 25.

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[37] Fiske, *The Critical Period of American History 1783-1789*, 116.

[38] Winslow Warren, *The Society of the Cincinnati* (Boston: Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati, 1929), 12.

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[55] Forrest McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985), 78-79.

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[61] typewritten note, vertical file, DSoC.

Chapter One

The Theory of Conspiracy

> *The paranoid disposition is mobilized into action chiefly by social conflicts that involve ultimate schemes of values and that bring fundamental fears and hatreds, rather than negotiable interests, into political action.*
>
> Richard Hofstadter[1]

Considering Conspiracy Theory

What is a conspiracy theory? The image of the sterotypical "conspiracy nut" comes to mind readily enough: a person who lives in relative social isolation, perhaps publishes a photocopied newsletter, and believes that all sorts of outlandish things from black helicopters to space aliens are out to get him or her. Obviously, such stereotypical conceptions cannot form the basis of academic inquiry. Unfortunately, more solidly crafted definitions are hard to come by. Even though historians, philosophers, cultural theorists, and political scientists have theorized about the phenomenon conspiracy theory, they have achieved little consensus. A variety of authors differ significantly about the shape and extent of conspiracy theories, as well as their relationship to clinical paranoia and criminal conspiracy. They differ even more about the meaning and implications of conspiracy theories, and there is little agreement on what level of analysis – philosophical, political, cultural, or social – such meaning might be found. It is therefore of little use to define the term "conspiracy theory" or its component words, without first presenting the differing viewpoints within the evolving and sometimes contested theoretical debate.

The term "conspiracy theory" was first used in the 1920s[2], but did not enter common usage until after World War 2, when philosopher Karl Popper used the phrase to describe what he felt was a particularly dangerous pitfall for the social sciences. Conspiracy theories came to the full attention of the American scholarly community in the late 1950s and early 1960s after the oppressive atmosphere of the McCarthy era had somewhat lifted and the Kennedy assassination jumpstarted an exponential growth of

conspiratorial explanations. Especially historians David Brion Davis and Richard Hofstadter helped shape a field of inquiry that was augmented by contributions from Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood. Several authors continued to comment on conspiracy theories in the tradition established by Hofstadter through the 1990s, and there were also significant contributions from Europe, especially Germany. Most recently, postmodern theorists have taken up the study of conspiracy theories to make a variety of points about the contingent and uncertain character of authority, knowledge, as well as political participation and cultural activity in the post-war United States.

In the course of this half-century of debate, philosophers, historians, cultural theorists, and political scientists have struggled with the questions of what conspiracy theories are, where they come from, how they evolve and multiply, and what functions they fulfill. Their answers have ranged from the condemnation of conspiracy theory as a pathological and dangerous fringe phenomenon to the post-modern assertion that conspiracy theories are "an everyday part of our political and cultural life, giving voice to an infinite regress of suspicion about identity, causality, and agency."[3]

The Conspiracy Theories of Ignorance and Society

In 1948, renowned anti-totalitarian philosopher Karl Popper attacked conspiracy theories as a dangerous and deluded concept. Popper defined conspiracy theory as the "erroneous view that whenever something evil happens, it must be due to the evil will of an evil power."[4] In some instances, so Popper, conspirators such as Nazi leaders actually implemented their malevolent plans on the course of history. Yet such cases were the exception, not the norm. On the whole, Popper argued, conspiracies were not a defining factor of social and historical reality. Consequently, the significance of conspiracy theories lay not in their actual power to explain the world, but in the intellectual shortcut they offered their believers. In Popper's opinion, conspiracy theories sprang up primarily because of certain social, political, and epistemological problems which also concerned social scientists. However, instead of the careful analysis provided by proper social science, conspiracy theories inevitably resulted in simplistic and possibly dangerous answers. Popper pointed out two classes of conspiracy theories:

those concerned with the explanation of social and political situations, and those concerned with the persistence of ignorance.[5]

The conspiracy theory of society, Popper argued, represented an atavistic reaction to social and political reality. Conspiracy theorists felt that the actions of institutions, states, and historical developments in general resulted from the conscious design of individuals or social collectives that acted with individual wills. In Homeric times, events in the world of man supposedly mirrored the intrigues on Olympus; in the Christian era, everything happened according to God's will. Popper argued that conspiracy theories followed the illogic that came "from abandoning God and then asking: 'who is in his place?'"[6] The conspiracy theory of society explained all events on the basis of *cui bono.* Conspiracy theorists assumed that whomever benefited from certain developments must also have brought them about. This way of thinking, according to Popper, completely missed the point of social science. In his opinion, the unintended and often unwanted consequences of actions explained much more than deliberate intentions, and were thus the proper subject of academic inquiry. Popper also saw a connection between totalitarianism and the conspiracy theory of society. Totalitarian regimes were often driven by conspiracy theory – the Nazis' rabid anti-Semitism being a prime example. Moreover, totalitarians often promised utopia and then resorted to conspiracy theories to explain the delay of heaven on Earth.

Popper also criticized what he called the conspiracy theory of ignorance, which arose from the persistence of falsehood and ignorance in the world. That persistence posed an epistemological problem. If man could know truth, why were lies and errors so frequent and harmful? The conspiracy theory of ignorance blamed evil conspiring forces. Early liberals attacked priests for keeping the people in the dark; similarly, Marxist theorists blamed the capitalist press for perverting truth and filling the minds of the working class with false ideology. Popper felt that the conspiracy theory of ignorance was the direct result of a falsely optimistic epistemology that could only lead to disappointment and the search for culprits who did not exist. The philosopher admonished that "the simple truth is that truth is hard to come by, and that once found, it may easily be lost again."[7] To Popper, a cautious epistemology was called for; man

could know truth, but it meant hard work. Conspiracy theories promised a shortcut at the truth, but in fact led their believers astray.

Popper's observations on conspiracy theories were the result of his philosophical convictions on the nature of the social sciences. Like much of his work, they were shaped by his strong anti-totalitarian stance and his commitment to Anglo-Saxon liberalism. Popper clearly condemned the conspiracy theories of society and ignorance as a hazard to an open society and useful social science. Curiously, though, Popper acknowledged that not all conspiratorial beliefs were necessarily harmful. He grudgingly acknowledged that the conspiray theory of ignorance had actually furthered the cause of liberalism. "The wicked and fraudulent priest who keeps the people in ignorance was a stock figure of the eighteenth century and," Popper admitted, "I am afraid, one of the inspirations of liberalism."[8] In subsequent decades, other theorists would pick up Popper's condemnation of conspiracy theory, but also his uncomfortable concession that there was perhaps more to that phenomenon than pathology.

Themes of Counter-Subversion

David Brion Davis' 1960 article, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion," was the earliest effort to analyze conspiracy theories in the specific context of American culture. Davis tackled the prevalence of conspiracy theory in three antebellum political movements: anti-Masonry, anti-Catholicism, and anti-Mormonism. At first glance, these movements had little in common and were often in opposition to each other. Nativist fears fueled the Anti-Catholicism of the 1830s, and anti-Mormonism stemmed from regional struggles for economic and political power while the anti-Masonry of the 1810s and 20s did not clearly run along any political, ethnic, or religious lines. Moreover, Freemasons were often anti-Catholic, while Mormonism carried many anti-Catholic and anti-Masonic elements, so the targets of one movement were sometimes adherents of the other. Finally, the three movements, while all featuring prominently in the Age of Jackson, were not necessarily contemporary, anti-Masonry having mostly faded by the time anti-Catholicism became a major issue.[9]

Nevertheless, Davis observed, these movements had in common their usage of conspiracy theory. The followers of counter-subversive movements, as Davis called them, saw their perceived enemies as a particularly insidious and immoral conspiracy against the very foundations of the young American republic. "As the image of an un-American conspiracy took form in the nativist press, in sensational exposés, in the countless fantasies of treason and mysterious criminality," Davis commented, "the lines separating Mason, Catholic, and Mormon became almost indistinguishable." In the accusations of the counter-subversive movements, Masons, Mormons, and Catholics routinely deceived the public. They openly engaged in philanthropy or piety, yet they were really plotting to subvert the American social order. Subtle, extremely well organized, and possessed of incredible powers of seduction and corruption, these groups allegedly ensnared unwitting Americans to do their bidding and betray their fellow man. Anti-subversives repeatedly focused on the perverted sexual mores, torture, utter depravity, and downright satanism supposedly found among Mormons, Catholics, and Masons. The anti-subversive movements of the antebellum era spread their conspiracy theories through a veritable industry of pamphlets, magazines and books with such titles as the *Anti-Masonic Review* and *The Cloven Foot: or Popery Aiming at Political Supremacy in the United States.*

Davis noted that many elements of American counter-subversive rhetoric were not new. Earlier European conspiracy theories had produced outcries against groups like the Jacobins, Rosicrucians, and Jesuits who allegedly schemed against king and country. Yet the antebellum conspiracy theories were uniquely American in the way they portrayed the enemy as the very antithesis of Jacksonian democracy. Whereas participation in normal American denominations and social groups was voluntary, Mormons, Catholics, and Masons allegedly used seduction and force. While normal political parties demanded only a limited allegiance from their members under the aegis of the Constitution, the "conspiracies" demanded absolute loyalty to the exclusion of all others. Finally, while normal American associations met openly and made public their beliefs, statutes, and rules, the subversive groups were shrouded in secrecy. The

anti-subversives feared that their enemies threatened the very fibre of American democracy and free enterprise.

Why did these rabid accusations against relatively minor groups and movements take place? For Davis, the real ethnic, religious, and social conflicts between the anti-subversives and their opponents could not explain the heated attacks. Instead, he identified the anti-subversive conspiracy theories as a reaction to the rapid social and economic change of the Jacksonian era, and attributed them to a rift within the ideology of laissez-faire individualism. The market revolution of the time promised material prosperity, while egalitarian politics celebrated the independent, self-sufficient individual. Yet, so Davis, many people yearned "for reassurance and security, for unity in some cause transcending individual self-interest." The religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening provided that reassurance, and so did the anti-subversive movements. The anti-subversive conspiracy theories allowed their believers a neat trick: without rejecting Jacksonian democracy and laissez-faire individualism, they could unite against an enemy that in their imaginations, at least, stood against the equality and liberty they celebrated and feared at the same time. Imagining an enemy conspiracy allowed antebellum anti-subversives to rally to a common cause. Thus, an anti-subversive activist could "style himself as a restorer of the past, as a defender of a stable order against disturbing changes, and at the same time proclaim his faith in future progress."

This unity and reassurance came at a cost. Obviously, the persecuted groups suffered from the marginalization and outright violence directed against them; anti-subversive conspiracy theories poisoned the political climate for immigrants and religious minorites. But conspiracy theory also perverted the ideals of the anti-subversive movements themselves. They assumed many of the characteristics ascribed to their enemies: they formed secret societies that demanded dire oaths and absolute loyalty. They insisted that dissent be stifled lest it subvert America. They published books and pamphlets that described in lurid detail the immorality they so abhorred. While anti-subversives attacked Masons, Catholics, and Mormons for immoraly subordinating the means to the ends, they did so themselves under the justification of fighting what they felt was a threat to America.

Davis' most significant contribution to the study of conspiracy theories was his emphasis on cultural specificity. The rhetoric of the anti-subversive movements might have mirrored earlier European templates, yet they only made sense in an American context. Jacksonian America produced its unique brand of conspiracy theory based on the specific tenets and problems of democratic ideology. Furthermore, no matter how distateful anti-subversive rhetoric and nativist violence was, Davis demonstrated that conspiracy theories need not arise out of petty fear and hatred. The anti-subversive movements acted out of a belief in Jacksonian democracy, while at the same time fearing its implications. Seeking relief from that ideological contradiction, they embraced the comforting simplicity of conspiracy theory.

The Paranoid Style

In the early 1960s, Hofstadter published his groundbreaking essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," which quickly became the most influential analysis of conspiracy theories in American political culture.[10] In this 1963 lecture, reprinted in 1965, Hofstadter analyzed a particular mode of political expression that he described as having "qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy." This paranoid style, Hofstadter asserted, was not only employed by his prime example, the Goldwater right, but had been a recurring and old phenomenon in American political history. In a wide chronological sweep, Hofstadter found common elements in movements as diverse as the 1790s Illuminati scare in New England, the anti-subversive movements of the Jacksonian era, parts of the Populist movement, McCarthyism, and the contemporary right. What he found was that, while the targets and topics of conspiracy rhetoric changed over the centuries, these "paranoid" outcries shared a number of characteristics that made them part of a distinct political tradition in the United States and elsewhere.

Hofstadter freely used the term "paranoid" to describe the mindset of conspiracy theorists, although he used the term in a metaphorical rather than a psychiatric sense. Unlike clinical paranoiacs, Hofstadter felt that adherents of the paranoid style did not primarily fear that dark forces were after them personally, although that might have

played a role. Instead, conspiracy theorists dreaded that secret manipulators were out to destroy "a nation, a culture, a way of life," a threat which did not only affect themselves, "but millions of others."[11] The "paranoia" Hofstadter looked for was political, not individual in nature, and public instead of private.

Similarly, according to Hofstadter, adherents of the paranoid style did not imagine an isolated group of plotters working towards a limited goal like personal wealth. Rather, they saw a wide conspiracy of nearly all-powerful, uninhibited, practically demonic villains at work, bent on nothing less than the subjugation of all mankind. The ultimate goal of the conspiracy bordered on the apocalyptic, and conspiracy theorists often resorted to biblical terms, or even explicitly linked the conspiracy to the devil himself. In fact, in the paranoid style, history itself seemed to be driven by the forces of conspiracy. "The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style," Hofstadter pointed out, "is not that its exponents see conspiracies here and there in history, but that they regard a 'vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events."

Hofstadter found common elements not only in the content and scope of conspiracy theories, but also in their presentation and logic. He observed that many propagators of the paranoid style strove hard to "prove" their revelations through neatly compiled evidence, often in imitation of academic discourse. To make his point, Hofstadter provided many examples, from the dire warnings of anti-Illuminati writers John Robison[12] and Abbé Barruel[13] via the anti-Catholic bestseller *Awful Disclosures*[14] all the way to the anti-Communist ravings of Robert H. Welch, all of which diplayed characteristics of this "higher paranoid scholarship." In most cases, the authors assembled more or less indisputable facts, until at one point a curious leap of imagination linked fact to fancy. Apart from that one step of bad logic or at least bad sense, the paranoid style was highly coherent – much more so than more sensible explanations of historical events seemed to be, making conspiracy theory more attractive.

Moreover, the paranoid style borrowed not only from academic writing, but also from the perceived enemy. In many cases, the authors of conspiracy theories claimed to have received exclusive information from a renegade ex-conspirator. Such tactics not only gave the paranoid style the privilege of insider knowledge, but also

provided proof that the good side could overcome the enemy's persuasion and brain-washing. Like Davis before him, Hofstadter pointed out that exponents of the paranoid style were often willing to copy the methods of their enemies, ranging from a revolutionary cell structure to the demands of absolute loyalty to the group and harsh punishment. In many ways, the self-proclaimed fighters against conspiracy behaved in a conspiratorial way themselves.

Hofstadter explained that the paranoid style, while present to some degree throughout American history, was "mobilized into action chiefly by social conflicts that involve ultimate schemes of values and that bring fundamental fears and hatreds, rather than negotiable interests, into political action."[15] In the United States, so Hofstadter, such conflicts arose primarily from ethnic and religious dividing lines, not class conflict. Moreover, in the United States, the paranoid style was a phenomenon of the political fringe; Hofstadter claimed that "in America it has been the style only of *minority* movements."[16] Finally, Hofstadter located the paranoid style primarily on the the political right, which displayed an escalation of conspiracy rhetoric in post-war America. While earlier proponents of conspiracy theories had tried to defend a culture and country that they felt was, however embattled, still their own, Hofstadter cited Daniel Bell in saying that "the modern right wing feels dispossessed: America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion."[17]

In principle, Hofstadter acknowledged that the paranoid style was content-neutral. In practice, he felt that it was pathological. "Of course, the term 'paranoid style' is pejorative, and it is meant to be; the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good."[18] Hoftstadter believed that conspiracy theories lent themselves to all sorts of radicals, especially right-wing extremists. Thus, Hofstadter identified the phenomenon as one of political pathology, as a threat to properly liberal politics based on consensus and compromise, and thus a problem that needed careful watching. Nor, so Hofstadter, was the paranoid style a specifically American problem. Despite his use of American examples, the historian claimed that European political culture was at least as susceptible to conspiracy theories, if not more so. To prove his point, Hofstadter

points to Nazi Germany as the prime example of the paranoid style moving from the fringe to the center of a political culture. If anything, the United States, with its liberal democracy, was exceptional in its ability to resist the onslaught of radical conspiracy theory-driven rhetoric and keep the paranoid style on the margins of political culture.

Hofstadter's paranoid style theory became the single most influential explanation for the persistence of conspiracy theories in modern political discourse. Unlike Popper, Hofstadter presented a concrete political pathology, not an abstract philosophical problem. And unlike Davis, he dared to describe a historically recurrent, universal phenomenon, not a chronologically limited controversy. Hofstadter offered a comprehensive anatomy of the paranoid style along with an explanation for its existence and an evaluation of its political impact, making his theory applicable to any conspiracy theory. Yet there were also problems with Hoftstafter's explanation. The consensus historian's celebration of American democracy's resistance to political paranoia became increasingly problematic as conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination mushroomed in the 1960s. And as other historians looked at periods Hofstadter had not covered in his article, his assertions of pathology and marginality seemed less persuasive. Soon the prevalence of conspiracy theories in the American and French Revolutions prompted an indirect challenge to Hofstadter's warnings against political paranoia.

The Ideological School

More or less contemporary with Hofstadter's work on the paranoid style, several scholars on the revolutionary and constitutional periods started to analyze the events of these eras not through a history of politics and interests, but of ideas. Taking its name from Bailyn's seminal book *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution,*[19] the ideological school found many of the ideas of the Revolution and the Constitution preconfigured in English country-party or radical Whig thought, as well as uniquely American elements. In their analyses of eighteenth-century revolutionary ideology, Bailyn and Wood took note of conspiracy theory as a popular and frequent mode of explaining adverse developments as the result of malevolent plots against liberty.

In his short "Note on Conspiracy,"[20] Bailyn looked closely at the political debates of the revolutionary era, and found a widespread belief that the British attempts at taxing the colonies were the result of an evil ministerial plot. Bailyn noted a "conviction on the part of the Revolutionary leaders that they were faced with a deliberate conspiracy to destroy the balance of the [British] constitution and eliminate freedom." This was no fringe phenomenon: a belief in conspiracy was "almost universally shared by sympathizers of the American cause."[21] Nor was the belief in conspiracy limited to the revolutionaries on the American side. Loyalist leaders such as Thomas Hutchinson believed that an evil cabal of colonial leaders was "implacably at work seeking to satisfy hidden amibitions and destroy the ties to England"[22] ever since the French and Indian war.

Bailyn believed that the belief in conspiracy had "roots elaborately embedded in Anglo-American culture." At the bottom of the revolutionary impulse, he found the widespread influence of English opposition ideology. Fear of corruption formed the basis of that ideology; suspicion and distrust were considered not only normal, but healthy and necessary stances in the political realm. Radical Whig ideology convinced Americans that ambition and power posed a threat to liberty throughout history, and that ambitious men would conspire against the people if given a chance. Only through constant vigilance could the destruction of liberty be averted. Such convictions were considerably older than the conflicts that became the American Revolution. Bailyn pointed out that "the configuration of attitudes and ideas that would constitute the Revolutionary ideology was present a half-century before there was an actual Revolution."[23] Accordingly, the belief in conspiracy was not an aberration, but a fundamental element of the ideological origins of the American Revolution.

Obviously, Bailyn's findings clashed somewhat with Hofstadter's. The American revolutionaries' misgivings differed in scope from the vast conspiracy theories Hofstadter had described, yet they shared many rhetorical characteristics with the paranoid style. However, the revolutionaries were definitely not marginal to American politics; the founding fathers were hardly crackpot radicals, nor was their belief in conspiracy necessarily pathological. It may not have been an accurate assessment of English policy,

yet few historians would be willing to claim the American Revolution was a mistake. Independence did not lead to a reign of terror or arbitrary rule; instead, it laid the groundwork for the liberal, democratic political system Hofstadter so admired. Apparently, the paranoid style theory did not cover all instances of conspiracy theory in American history.

Bailyn was unaware of Hofstadter's article at the time he wrote *Ideological Origins,* so Wood sought to bring their findings together in his essay "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and deceit in the Eighteenth century."[24] He did not deny that the American revolutionaries believed in plots and conspiracies. Instead, he asserted that "the one thing about conspirational interpretations of events that must impress all students of early modern Western history is their ubiquitousness: they can be found everywhere in the thought of people on both side of the Atlantic."[25] Since conspiracy theories were so extremely widespread among reasonable, even intellectual people throughout the Western world, they were hardly a psychological anomaly. To explain this phenomenon, Wood argued that the seemingly irrational belief in conspiracy arose from the very philosophical assumptions that formed the basis of Enlightenment thought and the age of reason.

Conspiracy theories, so Wood, were the result of a contradiction inherent in the eighteenth century. In this age, "unprecedented demographic and economic developments in early modern Europe were massively altering the nature of society and politics." Political responsibility became unclear as society grew increasingly complex. It became more and more difficult to link the cause and effect of political actions and their social consequences, let alone place individual responsibility. And this was the crucial problem, since "at this very moment when the world was outrunning man's capacity to explain it in personal terms, … the most enlightened of the age were priding themselves on their ability to do just that. The widespread resort to conspirational interpretations grew out of this contradiction."[26]

Enlightenment thought demanded that any effect could be traced back to its cause. Divine providence, fate, or coincidence could not serve as such: resorting to these explanations just meant a failure to discern the real causes. At the same time, the

moral philosophy of the age of reason demanded an identity between intent and outcome, leaving no room for unintended consequences, at least not in the long run. Enlightenment reasoning mandated that specific persons were behind historical and political events; man's will had replaced God's will as the ordering principle of history. Contingency, accident, aggregate social forces, or the "stream of history" were either unacceptable or unknown as patterns of explanation. Some thinkers like Bernard Mandeville or Adam Smith went beyond this paradigm, but most intellectuals could only conceive of a world in which personal responsibility lay at the heart of historical developments and contemporary events.[27] Thus when perceived outcomes clashed with the professed intentions of those held responsible, observers were prone to see deceit and conspiracy at work. Ill effects, in the moral universe of eighteenth century thought, were the result of ill intentions. Upheavals such as the revolutionary crises in America, in which all sides argued they were legitimately acting in good faith, resulted in charges of conspiratorial plotting on both sides.

As the discrepancy between individual human will and the vastness of social consequences increased, so too did the outlandishness of the resultant conspiracy theories, especially with the French Revolution. No simple court conspiracy or ministerial plot could explain the upheaval that shook all of Europe rattled America. Therefore, the French Revolution spawned the first truly grand conspiracy theories which explained the dramatic changes and horrific violence as the conscious plan a Masonic or Illuminati conspiracy. Reactionary authors such as Baruel and Robison no longer saw the French Revolution as the result of selfish plotting by a few evil men, but as the work of an elaborately organized secret society. Yet in the long run, conspiracy theory failed to adequately explain historical developments.

Conspiracy theory thus filled the gap between divine providence and modern social history. Wood saw this not as an aberration, but as logical step in a progressive development: "The belief in plots was not a symptom of disturbed minds but a rational attempt to explain human phenomena in terms of human intentions and to maintain moral coherence in the affairs of men. This mode of thinking was neither pathological nor uniquely American."[28] In the eighteenth century, conspiracy theory represented a

reasonable, if ultimately unsuccessful effort to interpret the past and the present. Drawing on Enlightenment thought, intellectuals of the Atlantic world strove to understand the world they saw around them in ways they expected to yield insight.

Eventually, so Wood, modern social science with its reliance on structural explanations and unintended consequences replaced conspiracy theory as the accepted mode of causal interpretation. What was in the eighteenth century a commonplace state of mind among intellectuals became a fringe phenomenon in the present day. "By our own time," Wood asserted, "dominated as it is by professional social science, conspirational interpretations have become so out of place that … they can be accounted for only as mental aberrations, as a paranoid style." Wood separated the eminently reasonable conspiracy theories of the Enlightenment elite from the pathological paranoid style of the twentieth century, thus leaving Hofstadter's theory essentially intact. It would be some years before other theorists would find saving graces even in modern conspiracy theories; meanwhile the paranoid style concept enjoyed continued popularity.

The Paranoid Style Revisited

In the late 1990s, political scientist Robert S. Robins and psychiatrist Jerrold M. Post published a collaborative effort entitled *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred.*[29] Like Hofstadter, they were interested in the origins and effects of apparently irrational political extremism, and like Hofstadter, they employed the term paranoia to describe the phenomenon. However, Robins and Post did not use the term paranoia metaphorically; instead, they linked political paranoia more directly to psychological illness. While Robins and Post acknowledged that it was not absolutely necessary to suffer from clinical paranoia in order to express political paranoia, they stressed that "to convey a paranoid message effectively is facilitated by a paranoid disposition."[30]

Robins and Post asserted that fear, distrust, and the need to penetrate deception were "hard-wired" into the human psyche. Most humans learned to control these behavior patterns and tempered them with trust and cooperation. Paranoids, on the other hand, were stuck with their primitive responses, and tended to externalize their own

guilt, failure, and grief by imagining a group or individual that was out to get them. Nevertheless, the authors cautioned, "no one is ever completely free from the paranoid dynamic. It is an inate human tendency, and under stress, otherwise psychologically healthy individuals…are susceptible to the paranoid appeal."[31] Political paranoia, so Post and Robins, followed the same logic. Just as a certain amount of suspicion was normal human behavior, so too was a certain amount of distrust politically necessary and healthy. However, when the individually paranoid became involved in politics, or political leaders turned paranoid, the results could be disastrous. For the politically paranoid, there were no political rivals, only enemies; compromise gave way to a mentality of "us or them."

Under normal circumstances, political paranoids stayed isolated, but under certain conditions, their disposition could become collective. As Post and Robins pointed out, "political paranoia is a perverse attempt to reconnect with others, to regain community."[32] Economic, social, political, or cultural crises opened the door to collective political paranoia, if enough people were sufficiently distressed. There also needed to be a tradition of conflict into which the paranoid group could tap, such as a strong legacy of anti-elitist sentiment. Finally, if these conditions created a politically paranoid "us," there also needed to be a "them," a victim group accused of conspiracy. Often, these were traditional scapegoat minorities such as European Jews, but in other cases the victims were less obvious, such as the Templars in 14th century France. When all these conditions came together, political paranoia could become a form of violent extremism, with disastrous results for the victim group.

Conspiracy theories served as the ideological fuel of political paranoia. They explained adversity, assigned blame, and offered a way to "fight back" against the alleged conspirators. The "best" conspiracy theories, Robins and Post explained, were elaborate and simple, rational and reductionist, convincing and self-deluding at the same time. Like Hoftstadter, the authors noted that conspiracy theories were typically based on highly selective facts, albeit interpreted in a paranoid way. Conspiracy theories protected their believers from doubt and made them virtually impervious to intellectual argument. In the worst cases, they served as justification for unspeakable atrocities.

Furthermore, conspiracy theories could become self-fulfilling prophecies. Politically paranoid groups, especially if violent, met with ridicule, distrust and hatred from others. The resultant adversity only served to reinforce the conviction that the "conspirators" had been out to get the paranoid group all along.

Like Hofstadter, Robins and Post felt that political paranoia was essentially a universal phenomenon, yet they also implied that it was most rampant outside of the United States, with Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia serving as prime examples. The authors provided many excellent examples of conspiracy theories and paranoid movements in America, such as the Christian Identity Movement, David Koresh's Branch Davidians, and the John Birch Society – all of them marginal groups. And, even more so than Hofstadter, Robins and Post focused on the issue of pathology. The authors more or less equaled political paranoia and conspiracy theories with hate crimes, war, and genocide, and they ignored examples where conspiracy theories proved mostly harmless. Where Hofstadter admitted a small possibility that the paranoid style could be used even for a good cause, Robins and Post asserted that conspiracy theories were a political disease which stems from psychological illness. Consequently, the authors admonished that to "be indifferent to early expressions of the paranoid mobilization of hatred is to be complicit with evil. Unnoted, the paranoid propensity can fester, and exploited, it can erupt into the psychopolitics of hatred."[33]

Publishing almost simultaneously with Robins and Post, Daniel Pipes shared their convictions about the pathology of conspiracy theories in *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where it Comes From*.[34] Pipes set out to provide a "unified interpretation of conspiracism," and while he did not acknowledge his Hofstadterian roots as clearly as Post and Robins, the subtitle of his book as well as some of his core theses clearly placed him in that tradition. Opening his his analysis with a clarification of terms, Pipes differentiated between conspiracies, conspiracy theories, and conspiracism. Conspiracy, Pipes defined as a "combination or confederacy between two or more persons formed for the purpose of committing, by their joint efforts, some unlawful or criminal act."[35] Conspiracy theories, in contrast, were the "fear of a non-existent conspiracy." Finally, Pipes argued that once the belief in one or more conspir-

acy theories became a way of interpreting all reality, it constituted conspiracism, roughly synonymous with the term "paranoid style."

The author identified two main currents of conspiracism: anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, and those about the machinations of secret societies. According to Pipes, the origins of anti-Semitism as the basis of conspiracy theories went back to time of the crusades, when European Jews were often persecuted as the enemy within. Anti-Semitism became a phenomenon that permeated much of Western culture, and eventually led to catastrophic outbursts of conspiracism. Most modern conspiracy theories, however, had their origins in the reactions to the French Revolution. Unable to pin the blame for that monumental upheaval on any one person or even a readily identifiabe group, and having no idea how to stem the tide, opponents of the radical changes in France started accusing secret societies. Directly after the revolution, reactionaries wrote treatises that held the Freemasons, or more prominently the outlawed Bavarian Illuminati responsible for malevolently disrupting the proper social and politcal order. The writings of John Robison and Abbé Barruel became the archetypes of conspiracy literature. Eventually, anti-Semitism and the fear of secret societies fused and spawned the idea of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy such as in the infamous "Protocols of the Elders of Zion."

Pipes claimed that, in the Western world, conspiracism escalated throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. He identified Leninism, as well as Nazism, as deeply conspiracist ideologies, resulting in the horrors of the Stalin and Hitler regimes. After 1945, conspiracism in Western Europe and especially the United States experienced a "migration to the periphery," and became the province of marginal groups instead of whole governments and nations. Pipes acknowledged that conspiracy theories continued to play a role in American politics, such as in the writings of Republican presidential contender Pat Robertson, yet he found American political culture relatively resistant to the lure of conspiracism. In fact, Pipes explicitly rejected claims of a dramatic rise in American conspiracy theories. Instead, he pointed to Russia and the Middle East as the contemporary hotbeds of conspiracism and the resultant disruptions. If left unchecked, Pipes admonished, conspiracism could lead destabilize entire

regions and lead to war, mass murder, and genocide. Like Post and Robins' study, Pipes' book was a discourse of warning against the political pathology of conspiracy theories.

The Psychopolitics of Hatred and *Conspiracy* represented an effort to elaborate on Hofstadter's theory and provide a more comprehensive analysis of the paranoid style. Unfortunately, their authors dropped many of Hofstadter's nuances along the way. By focusing almost exclusively on the most violent and distasteful conspiracy theories and their historical effects, Pipes, as well as Post and Robins, painted a picture of a terrifying political disease that threatened stability and lives everywhere – except the United States, where conspiracy theories remained a fringe phenomenon. With respect to such prime examples as the Nazi dictatorship or right-wing hate groups, the authors were undoubtedly right. Yet where Hofstadter had at least allowed for the theoretical possibility of less destructive uses of the paranoid style, and had admitted that the United States was at least in principle vulnerable to conspiracy-minded politics, Pipes, Robins, and Post painted a more reductionist picture. Their observations provided no explanation for such phenomena as the American revolutionaries' belief in conspiracy, nor the proliferation of conspiracy theories in post-World War II popular culture. Neither did their interpretations allow for any other analytical level than that of pathology. Fortunately, other theorists strove to provide explanations independent of, or even in opposition to the paranoid style paradigm. Not all of them hailed from the United States.

German Insights

According to German historian Dieter Groh, conspiracy theories were a transhistorical and widespread phenomenon arising from the question "Why do bad things happen to good people?"[36] Conspiracy theories sprang up when individuals or groups faced extremely adverse experiences that they felt were undeserved. Most people saw themselves as decent and good, as belonging to the right religion, a superior culture, a healthy nation. Therefore, when confronted with inexplicably disastrous events, they blamed not themselves but the secret machinations of another group. In conspiracy theories, Groh argued, the material world became less of an objective reality and more

of a construction of conspirators. Among "primitive" cultures this scapegoating mechanism typically produced the belief in witchcraft, while the sophisticated culture of the Western world produced more complicated conspiracy theories. Both could lead to persecution and violence with catastrophic consequences for the victims. Nevertheless, Groh cautioned, conspiracy theories were not simply irrational and pathological. Their seductive power to explain adversity could tempt anyone, even sophisticated intellectuals.

Groh argued that conspiracy theories shared certain defining characteristics. Typically, they described conspirators capable of realizing their intentions perfectly without chance of error or logistical problems – unless an enlightened group exposed their nefarious plot. Most conspiracy theories displayed a manichean worldview of good versus evil, yet they followed a clear-cut and sophisticated logic. Within their own chain of argument, conspiracy theories were far from irrational, but rather displayed remarkable consistency and persuasiveness. According to Groh, no conspiracy theory could be debunked just by pointing out faulty facts or inherent contradictions; any such flaws could simply be attributed to the conspirator's deception. In fact, so Groh, the only "proof" against conspiracy theories lay in the fact that mankind had survived so many alleged plots. Yet through careful historical analysis and a good measure of common sense, one could make sense of conspiracy theories and avoid their pitfalls.

Conspiracy theories, Groh pointed out, were historically variable and specific, which provided the key to their analysis. They had to fit their historical, national, cultural, and religious context like a key into a lock; otherwise, conspiracy theories could not take hold. The methods, villains, and motives of the alleged conspirators could not be arbitrary, or else a conspiracy theory would never gain the explanatory power that made it so attractive. Conspiracy theories must draw from reality, from traditions and interpretations that were already in place. Certainly, Groh admitted, conspiracy theories could be found almost anywhere, anytime. He provided examples that ranged from the medieval prosecution of witches, via a fabricated testament of Peter the Great outlining a massive plan to subdue Europe, to American fears of a world-wide communist

conspiracy. Nevertheless, Groh cautioned, it was not enough to accept conspiracy theories as a universal phenomenon or anthropological constant. While their explanatory and stress-relieving functions explained the existence of conspiracy theories in general, Groh argued that is was fundamentally more important to reconstruct their specific place within the historical context. More than just a simple scapegoating mechanism, conspiracy theories took on ever-new creative guises at their time and place in history. An analysis of cultural specificity, rather than a focus on pathology or universality, so Groh, promised the best results in coming to terms with conspiracy theory.

Cultural historian Berndt Ostendorf offered such an analysis of conspiracy theory in a specifically American cultural and political tradition.[37] He identified five "conspiracy fears" that ran through American political and cultural history and provided fertile soil for conspiracy theories. The first was a "fundamentalist" fear of losing the Christian character of the United States to secular, liberal, or hedonist influences. Secondly, Ostendorf saw a "patriotic" fear that the United States might lose its role as a moral, political, economic, and military world leader, or might even cease to exist as a sovereign nation. The third, "communitarian" fear dreaded the atomization of civil society through selfish individualism unbridled by the commitment to community. The fourth, "local populist" fear described the American penchant to distrust the concentration of power in the hands of the federal government, an economic elite, or international organizations. Finally, Ostendorf addressed a "racist-biological" fear that America was endangered by the radically different, such as racial minorities, foreigners, terrifying diseases such as AIDS or even space aliens. All these fears produced any number of conspiracy theories in the course of American history, and all stemmed from a specifically, if not uniquely American historical and cultural context.

On the whole, Ostendorf argued, in the United States conspiracy theories were most likely to spring from the fear that American exceptionalism, America's special mission and destiny in the world, was in some way endangered. Seen in this manner, conspiracy theories became a distorted mirror of the American dream, drawing on the same traditions that had inspired the United States to seek greatness. Whenever one or more of the five "conspiracy fears" reared their heads, conspiracy-minded Americans

responded with an effort to identify the secret manipulators leading America astray. The resultant conspiracy theories could well be pathological; indeed, Ostendorf displayed no sympathies for his main example, the writings of fundamentalist politician Pat Robertson. And, obviously, conspiracy theories were not limited to the United States. Yet the significant insights about conspiracy theories in America lay in their specific cultural background. Groh and Ostendorf argued more in the tradition set by Davis than in the framework of the paranoid style. Stressing cultural specificity over pathology, both German theorists contributed to a more subtle view of conspiracy theories in the United States and elsewhere.

Rejecting the Paranoid Style

Very recently, three authors from Great Britain and the United States went so far as to outright reject the paranoid style framework, and look for more complex, even cautiously positive developments behind the phenomenon of conspiracy theories. Intrigued by the surge of conspiracy narrative in post-World War II politics, culture, and fiction, these theorists went beyond Hoftstadter's paradigm of marginality and pathology.

In *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Mark Fenster described the paranoid style theory as an effort by mainstream liberals to discredit specific forms of dissident political discourse. By drawing an analogy between mental illness and political pathology, the paranoid style theory served mainly to create a political "Other" opposed to properly liberal and progressive politics. In the paranoid style framework, it became possible to assign any dissident political opinion to the fringe simply by denouncing it as a conspiracy theory. "By labeling as pathological any challenge or resistance to 'consensus'," Fenster warned, "the notion of the 'paranoid style' serves as an excuse neglecting, equating, and even repressing political resistance of all sorts."[38] Far from endorsing the racism and bigotry inherent in many conspiracy theories, Fenster was nevertheless unwilling to reject them simply for calling into question

the existence of a benign, democratic, and pluralist political culture in the United States.

After all, Fenster argued, just because conspiracy theories about international bankers and government agencies were factually wrong and often tainted with racism, such groups and institutions could still hold an inordinate, sometimes oppressive amount of power. To Fenster, conspiracy theories were not the result of delusion, but of misinterpretation. They stemmed from an erroneous theory of power that assumed hidden, secret forces deliberately planning nefarious deeds, where in reality the structural inequities of capitalism, democracy, and American society were at work. Seen this way, conspiracy theories became an ideological misrepresentation of real problems. Consequently, Fenster placed conspiracy theories not on the fringes of American political culture, but saw them as a relatively frequent component of the populist tradition in the United States, an "evocation of an unwitting and unwilling populace in thrall to the secretive machinations of power."[39] The real impetus of conspiracy theories, according to Fenster, did not lie in "fundamental fears and hatreds" as Hofstadter would have it, but in a utopian impulse that longed for "the coming end of a moment cursed by secret power and a…new beginning where secrecy vanishes and power is transparent and utilized by good people for the good of all."[40]

Generally, Fenster attributed the rise of conspiracy theories in contemporary America to a decay of civil society in recent decades. Citizens experienced decreasing opportunities to influence the state through unions, parties, or local government; individuals were in effect reduced to the role of consumer. In this commodified and mediatized version of American politics, exposing scandals seemed to be the only way of effecting change, however ephemeral. Conspiracy, so Fenster, was the ultimate form of scandal, and while actually bringing the alleged conspirators to justice was at best a remote hope, for alienated individuals and groups fearing loss of employment, identity, and control over their lives, conspiracy theory became "profoundly satisfying politics."[41] However, Fenster cautioned, conspiracy theories were largely ineffective as form of political criticism because they were based on an ideological construction of power relations. Conspiracy theories might arise from a utopian populist hope, but they

did not represent a workable strategy to achieve that goal. Instead, conspiracy theorists in many cases become proponents of racism, scapegoating, and fascism. Thus, while identifying a strain of idealism at the bottom of many conspiracy theories, Fenster had no illusions about their being a catalyst for positive change. Still, Fenster's observations were a far cry from the paranoid style theory's focus on marginality and pathology.

British theorist Peter Knight shared many of Fenster's apprehensions about the paranoid style theory in *Conspiracy Culture – American Paranoia from the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files*.[42] Knight acknowledged that rabidly hate-filled conspiracy theories persisted on the fringes of the American political mainstream, and that these could indeed be dangerous. Yet he rejected the concepts of pathology and paranoia and even turned the table on reductionist analysts like Pipes. According to Knight, consistently likening conspiracy theories to plagues or epidemics was almost a conspiracy theory unto itself. Knight attacked Pipes' use of the term "conspiracism" as "a picture of conspiracy theory as an ominous sounding ideology, something akin to Communism, and which likewise demands an ever-vigilant crusade against its creeping threat."[43] Knight respected Hofstadter's work to the point of agreeing that the paranoid style might be applicable to conspiracy theories of the past, yet he had little patience with those who described all conspiracy theories merely as political aberrations to be contained at all costs.

The author contended that the paranoid style as a mode of explanation was passé in post-Kennedy assassination America, because conspiracy theories had not only proliferated since the 1960s, but had also changed in scope, character, and cultural significance. In Knight's opinion, conspiracy theories were not typically single-issue demonologies anymore. Rather, a new form of conspiracy culture had emerged, more widespread, more flexible, and less alarming than the "paranoid" outcries of the past. Knight attributed these changes to a number of developments.

First, secrecy permeated post-World War II American politics on a vast new scale, a result of the national security culture that emerged during the Cold War. At times, this secrecy veiled illegitimate activities that amounted to real-life conspiracies; the FBI's domestic espionage program COINTELPRO or the Iran-Contra affair were

prominent examples. Given such cover-ups, so Knight, "it is increasingly hard to be certain of the difference between the plausibe and the paranoid."[44] Consequently, an increasing number of Americans came to interpret controversial events as if there actually were a conspiracy, for all they are ever likely to know.

Secondly, the developments of globalization and multiculturalism gave rise to an increasing number of conspiracy theories. Whereas earlier conspiracy believers feared that the American way of life was in danger, Knight argued, now there were those who perceived globalized capitalism, consumerism, and corporate culture as a threat and developed conspiracy theories as an oppositional point of view. Moreover, post-war American society was increasingly "fragmented into minorities each of which feels itself to be besieged…"[45] In such an environment, conspiracy theories thrived. Especially on the right, opposition to multiculturalism led to an increasing criticism of federal power as illegitimate and conspiratorial in nature.

Finally, Knight found a hermeneutical crisis stymieing those who wished to understand what was happening in the world around them. On the one hand, government secrecy seemed to be everywhere, supporting suspicions that ordinary Americans never received full disclosure on anything. On the other hand, information became available in such abundance that closure was nowhere to be found. Knight pointed to the vast number of contradictory "expert" opinions in the Kennedy assassination to make his point. Lacking standards for deciding which experts to believe and faced with the fact that one could always find another expert, many who wished to know what happened in Dallas turned to conspiracy theories for explanation. Public distrust against official sources of information, such as the report of the Warren commission, further accelerated this growth of conspiracy narratives surrounding the assassination and other issues in post-war America.

And, according to Knight, conspiracy theories had not only become more commonplace and understandable in the United States, they had also ceased to be entirely political. Knight described a cultural turn with regard to conspiracy theories, analyzing the myriad conspiracy narratives in literature, film, and television since the 1960s. He found that contemporary adherents of conspiracy theories were not so much true be-

lievers in one particular idea. Rather, they had become consumers, mixing and matching their "paranoia" to taste, taking on "a very knowing acceptance of suspicion as a default mode – including even a cynical and self-reflexive skepticism about that suspicion itself."[46] This new conspiracy culture did not stem from fear and hatred, but rather from a crisis of knowledge, identity, and agency inherent in a post-Enlightenment world.

In *Empire of Conspiracy,* Timothy Melley joined Fenster and Knight in observing that conspiracy theories had moved from the fringe to the center in post-WWII America, especially in the realm of culture. Comparing disparate narratives of subversion from different ends of the political spectrum, Melley found a widespread fear that individuals were being manipulated without realizing it. As a result, Melley developed a concept called "agency panic" that placed concerns about individual autonomy at the core of conspiracy theories.[47] Melley defined agency panic as the "intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy, the conviction that one's actions are being crontrolled by someone else or that one has been 'constructed' by powerful, external agents." This anxiety arose out of processes that became increasingly accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century: corporate capitalism, globalization, and nationalism. Both the capitalist economy and the modern bureaucratic state tended to disfranchise the individual and treat human beings as part of a collective system instead of the "rational, motivated agent with a protected interior core of beliefs, desires, and memories" that was the liberal concept of the individual. These threatening changes to individuality were, of course, structural issues of social control, but in the discourse of agency panic, they became the result of malevolent intention.

Conspiracy theories, which Melley defined as "the apprehension of conspiracy by those not involved in it," struggled to preserve human individuality in two ways. On the one hand they provided a master narrative of causality, comforting believers by providing a frightening but clear explanation for complex problems and events. On the other hand, the resulting paranoia (and unlike Knight and Fenster, Melley did not hesitate to use that word) celebrated the individual by imagining it to be constantly assaulted.[48] Melley found that the issue of embattled individuality was a constant topic in

conspiracy-minded literature and film, including the works of Stone, Thomas Pynchon, and Don DeLillo. Thus, like Fenster, Melley described a utopian impulse at the core of conspiracy theories. However absurd or misguided, conspiracy theories arose out of a desire to preserve the very basis of liberalism, the autonomous individidual. Melley very much doubted that they could succeed in constructively bolstering a concept of individuality that dated back to the Enlightenment. A committed post-modernist, he felt that newer, more complex yet less fragile ways of self-construction would be more helpful. Yet Melley acknowledged that abandoning liberal individualism was a very hard thing to do, thus explaining the surge in agency panic and conspiracy theories in the second half of the twentieth century.

Controversies and Definition

Thus, over the course of recent decades, the study of conspiracy theory – of which the above summaries were only a representative sample – has come full circle. While Hofstadter, building on earlier work by Popper and Davis, developed a workable theory on the prevalence of conspiracy theories in the United States and elsewhere, subsequent authors found the weaknesses of that concept and offered solutions of their own. On both ends of its chronological spectrum, Hofstadter's framework of a marginal, pathological paranoid style seemed to falter. The fears of conspiracy in the era of the American Revolution and the veritable explosion of conspiracy narratives in the United States since the 1960s did not comfortably fit Hofstadter's theory. Too widespread and not harmful enough were the conspiracy theories of both eras to conform to the paranoid style theory. A number of controversies emerged in the theory of conspiracy, leaving open questions as to the significance and evaluation of the phenomenon conspiracy theory.

The first and possibly most momentous of these controversies was the question of pathology. Hoftstadter asserted that, for the most part, conspiracy theories were dangerous and deluded, a distorted style of expression stemming from distorted political judgment, and thus a threat to democracy and liberalism. Subsequent proponents of the paranoid style theory, such as Pipes, Post, and Robins, described conspiracy theo-

ries as a veritable cancer of the body politic that almost inevitably led to the most horrific forms of persecution and murder imaginable. On the other hand, Wood asserted that at least in the age of Enlightenment, believers in conspiracy theory were neither crazy nor their ideas necessarily harmful, as they drew on widely accepted philosophical convictions. Fenster, Melley, and Knight also rejected the concept of pathology. The former two asserted that conspiracy theories carried a utopian impulse, while Knight felt they were an understandable responses to the hermeneutic crisis of the late twentieth century. Given historical examples of violence and persecution, neither author celebrated conspiracy theories as an inherently positive phenomenon, but they were unwilling to condemn the phenomenon as automatically pathological and destructive.

The second controversy concerned the issue of marginality. Hofstadter and other paranoid style theorists claimed that, at least in the United States, conspiracy theories were the province of the political fringe, an expression of radicalism bordering on the mental instability. Bailyn's discovery of a widespread belief in conspiracy among the American revolutionaries dented that assumption, and Wood pointed out that practically the entire intellectual community of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world routinely looked for secret plots and machinations. Fenster, Knight and Melley called upon the near-ubiquitousness of conspiracy theories in late twentieth century culture to disprove the claim that attitudes of radical suspicion were necessarily marginal in America.

A third controversy surrounded the question of universality versus cultural specificity. Hofstadter claimed that while the United States was particularly resistant to conspiracy theories, the phenomenon was nethertheless universal in scope and transhistorical in extent. Wood agreed in this regard, finding conspiracy theories throughout the Western world. Indeed, no theorist ever claimed that conspiracy theories were unique to American culture; examples such as the Nazis' anti-Semitic accusations or the conspiracy-minded reactions to the French Revolution precluded any such reaction. Yet a number of authors insisted that to assert the universal existence of conspiracy theories was to miss the point. Groh stressed cultural specificity as the key to understanding the phenomenon, and both Davis and Ostendorf pointed out how spe-

cifically American ideologies and fears determined the shape of conspiracy theories in the United States.

Yet whatever their theoretical disagreements on the nature of conspiracy theories, the various authors were writing about a common phenomenon. While none of them offered a universally accepted definition, their insights allow a somewhat more precise description of just what conspiracy theories are. A relatively open definition of conspiracy theory might read thus:

> *Conspiracy theories are political or cultural narratives that describe a group or an institution as secretly plotting to assume or exercise illegitimate power over a larger group of people, using covert methods and pursuing goals that are presented as detrimental to the victim group.*
>
> *Typically, but not necessarily, the alleged conspirators operate behind a cover of legitimacy or benevolence, they target a nation, a state, a culture, a religion or even the entire world as their victims; their goals range from personal gain to controlling the course of history, and their methods might include everything from the dismantling of individual liberties to the assassination of dissidents, and from the assumption of political or economic power all the way to mind-control and genocide.*

This definition leaves open the questions of pathology, marginality, and cultural specificity; it applies equally to deadly serious accusations of political subversion and to the playful paranoia of late twentieth century popular culture. However, that very openness of definition necessitates a nuanced analytical framework to make sense of any given conspiracy theory.

Levels of Analysis

Drawing from the theories summarized above, a multi-tiered approach to analyzing conspiracy theories seems most promising. Despite their disagreements, theorists from Popper to Melley all offer valuable insights. Which ones apply to any given conspiracy theory is a matter of case-by-case analysis. A number of questions need to be

answered in regard to any conspiracy theory, and thus represent an appropriate analytical framework for the controversy surrounding the Society of the Cincinnati, as well.

First of all, the analysis of any given conspiracy theory requires an in-depth *description* of its contents, historical genesis, impact, scope, and extent. This level of analysis includes the identity of the alleged conspirators, their nefarious plans, methods, goals, and alleged victims. At the same time, we need to know who propagated the conspiracy theory, by what means, and to what effect. More often than not, conspiracy theories are controversies that shape the political climate of their time, so their role in the political arena requires attention. At this level of analysis, a look at the potential veracity of the conspiracy theory is also needed. Not all conspiracy narratives are necessarily nonsensical; deceit and intrigue are not unknown in the political world. As Groh cautioned, it may well be impossible to completely debunk a conspiracy theory, yet that should not deter attempts to ascertain the truth. As for the controversies mentioned above, the question of marginality should become possible to answer at this point. The descriptive level is not only the most basic, but also the most important analytical tier, and will receive the most attention in this study.

The second level of analysis is that of *cultural context*. It arises directly from the controversy of cultural specificity versus unversality described earlier. Davis delivered a brilliant analysis of the antebellum counter-subversive theories by placing them in context with the tenets and ideologies of the Jacksonian era. Groh and Ostendorf similarly pointed out the importance of the specific historical and cultural background of conspiracy theories. It seems clear that while conspiracy theories exist nearly universally and transhistorically, it is only in their specific cultural context that they take on significant meaning. Thus any ideological preconceptions, historical traditions, and cultural assumption that contributed to the rise of a conspiracy theory are of premier interest. In the case of the present study, the question is just how specifically American the conspiracy theory surrounding the Society of the Cincinnati was.

Directly intertwined with the contextual level of analysis is that of *causation*. The proponents of the paranoid style argued that conspiracy theories stem from politi-

cal, economic, social or cultural crises that gave rise to a heated rhetoric of alarm and suspicion. On the other hand, Fenster and Melley identified a genuine, if misguided, utopian impulse at the bottom of conspiracy theories. Wood, Groh, and Knight focused most heavily on the interpretative functions of conspiracy theories as a means of causal explanation. These might range from the stress-relief associated with scapegoating to sophisticated attempts at explaining current and historical events through personalized instead of structural approaches. Finally, Davis pointed to the inherent contradictions of Jacksonian democratic and individualist ideology in the genesis of counter-subversive conspiracy theories. There is no reason to exclude any of these approaches from a multi-tiered analysis; it might well be that all of them played a role in the Society of the Cincinnati controversy.

Finally, there is the level of *evaluation*. The paranoid style theory stressed the pathological character of conspiracy theories, whereas other theorists have downplayed or at least qualified that aspect. It seems that the question of pathology can only be answered on a case by case basis. The destructive potential of conspiracy theories can hardly be denied; one need only look at the impact of anti-Communist hysteria in the United States or the prevalence of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories among contemporary right-wing hate groups. Yet not all conspiracy theories necessarily lead to persecution, bloodshed, and disaster. Arguably, however, any conspiracy theory contributes to the political culture of the society it arises in. Determining such long-term effects is as much a part of this analytical tier as the question of pathology. In the case of a conspiracy theory significantly removed from the present day – such as the Cincinnati controversy – it is also interesting to find out if any aspects of it persisted beyond the historical circumstances that created it.

Obviously, this multi-tiered model provides not an inflexible checklist to be followed blindly, but rather an analytic array or agenda. Any analysis of a conspiracy theory must be carefully embedded in the relevant historical context, or it will not make much sense. After all, the rise of conspiracy theories is often linked to specific events. In the case of the controversy surrounding the Society of the Cincinnati, that specific

event was the arguably most momentous one in American history – the American Revolution. As will become evident, the genesis of this particular conspiracy theory was directly linked to military, political, and ideological developments that arose out of the struggle of the North America colonies to break free of English taxation and political domination, and become free and independent states. These states then had to come to terms with their political independence and the economic woes, diplomatic crises, and social upheavals generated or highlighted by the revolution. The heated accusations against the Cincinnati were part and parcel of this post-revolutionary struggle to determine the meaning of America.

Notes

[1] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 39.

[2] Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture - American Paranoia from the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files* (London: Routledge, 2000), 16.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Karl Raimund Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations; the Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 8.

[5] Ibid., 342.

[6] Ibid., 123.

[7] Ibid., 8.

[8] Ibid., 7f.

[9] David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47 (September 1960): 205-33. See also his collection of conspiracy theory-related documents: David Brion Davis, *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present, Cornell Paperbacks* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1971), and his work on anti-slavery conspiracy theory in the antebellum era: David Brion Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1970).

[10] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*.

[11] Ibid., 4.

[12] John Robison, *Proofs of a Conspiracy against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies* (Philadelphia: T. Dodson, 1798).

[13] Abbé Barruel, *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, (London: T. Burton, 1798).

[14] Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk, as Exhibited in a Narrative of Her Sufferings During a Residence of Five Years as a Novice, and Two Years as a Black Nun, in the Hotel Dieu Nunnery at Montreal* (Paisley: A. Gardner, 1836).

[15] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, 39.

[16] Ibid., 7.

[17] Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right. The New American Right Expanded and Updated* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), 1-38.

[18] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, 5.

[19] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967).

[20] Ibid., 144-59.

[21] Ibid., 145.

[22] Ibid., 152.

[23] Ibid., 144.

[24] Gordon Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 39 (1982): 401-41.

[25] Ibid.: 407.

[26] Ibid.: 411.

[27] Bernard Mandeville, *Free Thoughts on Religion, the Church, and National Happiness* (London: T. Jauncy and J. Roberts,1720); Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees; or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (London: J. Tonson, 1724); Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Dublin: Printed for Messrs. Whitestone Chamberlaine W. Watson etc., 1776).

[28] Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style," 429.

[29] Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Post, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

[30] Ibid., 25.

[31] Ibid., 89.

[32] Ibid., 40.

[33] Ibid., 303.

[34] Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

[35] Ibid., 20.

[36] Dieter Groh, "Die Verschwörungstheoretische Versuchung Oder Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?," *Anthropologische Dimensionen Der Geschichte*, ed. Dieter Groh (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1992), 267-304.

[37] Berndt Ostendorf, "Conspiracy Nation. Verschwörungstheorien Und Evangelikaler Fundamentalismus," *Politisierte Religion*, ed. Heiner Bielefeldt and Wilhelm Heitmeyer (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1998), 157-187.

[38] Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 21.

[39] Ibid., 63.

[40] Ibid., 225.

[41] Ibid., 72.

[42] Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*.

[43] Ibid., 7.

[44] Ibid., 25.

[45] Ibid., 39.

[46] Ibid., 55.

[47] Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Post-war America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000).

[48] Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, vii, 10, 14.

Chapter Two

The Price of Peace: The End of the Continental Army and the Creation of the Society of the Cincinnati

When these very swords, the instruments and companions of your glory, shall be taken from your sides, and no remaining mark of military distinction left, but your wants, infirmities, and scars! can you then consent to be the only sufferers by this revolution, and retiring from the field, grow old in poverty, wretchedness, and contempt?

The Newburgh Addresses[1]

The American Revolution started as a conflict over the legitimacy of British taxation, then gradually evolved into a debate over fundamental political principles of representation and sovereignty. American defiance of British imperial authority soon generated armed conflict, and the thirteen erstwhile colonies had to defend their ambitions for liberty and independence on the battlefield. However, throughout the course of the American Revolution, the relationship between its political and military goals and protagonists was highly problematic. More than once, the effort for independence seemed on the verge of failure. Military setbacks stemmed from a variety of reasons. Chief among these was that for most of the war the revolutionary armies did not have the manpower and material resources to succeed. As problems over provisions and pay mounted, both enlisted men and officers increasingly blamed Congress and the state legislatures.

These conflicts led to mutinies, desertions, and resignations at all levels of the armed forces. To combat such erosion, Congress resorted not only to punishments and patriotic appeals, but also to promises of pensions for the officers. Yet as the Revolutionary War neared its end, the dismal financial situation of all levels of government made it highly unlikely that any such promises would be kept. As a result, the last months of the existence of the Continental Army turned into a troublesome time, rife with rumours of a threatening coup. Congress and General Washington managed to defuse the sticky situation, and the Continental army dissolved soon after the arrival of

peace. However, the officers sought a way to preserve the memory of their common achievement, and to pursue their common interests in the post-war era. They found it in the creation of a new sort of association, a veterans organization: The Society of the Cincinnati.

Problems of Supply and Pay

The outbreak of the Revolutionary War predated the Declaration of the Independence by more than a year, with the battles of Lexington and Concord and the subsequent military engagements surrounding Boston. In June 1775, the Continental Congress decided to assume authority over the war effort and raise a Continental Army. As history eventually proved, the representative of the American states made a wise choice in giving command of these forces to George Washington of Virginia. However, as the war proceeded, congressional ability to organize, supply, and pay the army often proved severely lacking, mostly due to inexperience and the fact that Congress, like the army, was a new institution with many unresolved problems. The result, as historian E. Wayne Carp described it, "was an unsystematic, ill-managed administrative system that divided responsibility for maintaining the army among congressional committees, state authorities, military commanders, staff officers, and civilians."[2] When economic disruption, adverse weather, or shee bad luck exacerbated this less than perfect system, the results for the Continental Army were often disastrous.

All too often, soldiers faced starvation and exposure during the war. The deprivations at the 1777-78 winter encampment at Valley Forge were a perfect example. Congress failed to appoint a quartermaster general between October and March, leading to disorganization. It had also slashed the wages of teamsters in an effort to cut costs; as a result, transportation by wagon was scarce. A frozen Schuylkill river inhibited transportation by boat. Thus, even though the harvest had been plentiful, troops went hungry. Even worse, they went cold; all manner of clothes from shoes to blankets were in extremely short supply. Nor was Valley Forge the only time of want. In 1780, as Horatio Gates marched the Southern army towards Camden, soldiers had to subsist on unripe preaches and green corn – and were routed once they engaged the British

forces. Given the frequent want of basic needs, it was remarkable that the Continental Army peformed as well as it did in most of its engagements, and disastrous defeats such as Camden were the exception, not the norm.[3]

Pay was another constant irritant between soldiers and the various levels of government. While some states paid specie bounties upon enlistment to encourage volunteers, that was often the only hard money soldiers ever saw. Current pay was more typically in state or Continental paper money, which quickly depreciated. By late 1780 the Continental was worth roughly one percent of its face value, and Virginia's paper money had fallen to one thousandth of its face values by the end of 1781.[4] Adjustments in the pay tables could not keep up with these rates of depreciation. Married soldiers' families who relied on this pay suffered as a consequence. State governments passed laws to relieve them, but their efforts often proved inadequate.[5] In other cases, troops were paid with promissory notes – effectively government IOUs – or, all too often, not at all.

No single person or instution was clearly to blame. Congressional committees were certainly part of the problem, but so were the states legislatures who shared the responsibility to pay and equip the army. Furthermore, for most of the war, the United States had no settled political system. Congress had passed the Articles of Confederation in 1777, but the states did not unanimously ratify them until 1781. Taxpayers proved unwilling or unable to provide sufficient funds, and foreign credit became increasingly difficult to secure. There were cases of corruption, inefficiency and profiteering among civilians and the military alike. Nor did the military display great solidarity amongst itself. Continentals looked down upon the militia, officers bickered about rank, and all too often commanders intercepted shipments intended for other units and took what their troops needed, thus increasing their fellows' hardship. Inflation and economic hardship were natural results of the war, and they affected everybody. As the conflict ground on, civilians often felt that they had already done enough for the revolutionary cause.

To their great credit, American soldiers, politicans, and civilians succeeded despite the circumstances. Grim as the situation was at times, the detrimental factors of

confusion, depression, and dishonesty were within the limits of what had to be expected in as chaotic a situation as the American Revolution. Eventually, both the military and political efforts of the revolutionaries proved spectacularly successful. The Continental Army became a professional and victorious force, and Congress kept the states together, secured the French alliance, and eventually negotiated a peace treaty with England.

Unfortunately, the sometimes dismal situation led to considerable ill will between the military and civilian levels of command. The political culture of colonial America prompted politicians to distrust professional, standing armies as a matter of doctrine.[6] As the Continental Army turned to confiscating goods out of necessity, resentment in the civilian population mounted; the passage of the army all too often meant property damage and disturbances of the peace.[7] On the other side, military men often felt left alone and misunderstood by the public. Especially officers felt that they had preserved the spirit of the revolution, whereas civilians had turned lukewarm in their commitment. As for the supply situation, the army's reaction was best summarized by Major J. Burnett's comment on the congressional decision to switch from a centralized to a state supply system. In a letter to Jeremiah Wadsworth, Burnett wrote: "Congress have left it in the power of the States to starve the Army at pleasure."[8]

Then and now, denying large groups of armed men adequate access to food, clothing, and pay was not a good idea. For enlisted men, there existed many ways of protesting their situation. One was grumbling: at Valley Forge, soldiers exclaimed "No bread, no soldier" to passersby.[9] Among those who had enlisted for a limited time only, many bade the army a not-so-fond farewell when their time was up. Still others did not wait for their terms to expire and left the army on their own initiative. Desertion took a massive toll on the Continentals; at Valley Forge alone, 2,000 soldiers absented themselves without permission. Overall, desertion rates among American forces ran as high as 20 or even 25 percent during the course of the war.[10]

The worst problem, however, was the threat of mutiny. The years 1780 and 1781 saw several such uprisings. One of the largest occurred in the Pennsylvania line in early 1781. Veteran soldiers protested against confusion regarding their enlistment

terms, the fact that new recruits received higher bounties for shorter service than them, and the outrage of having not been paid for the last year. The revolters threatened to march on Philadelphia and force Congress to make amends. Despite their grievances, the protestors were loyal to the revolutionary cause and hanged two British agents who had urged them to defect. When representatives of Congress and Pennsylvania met the mutineers demands, they disbanded peacefully; many even re-enlisted. Other uprisings did not end as happily. When 200 New Jersey soldiers mutinied only shortly after the Pennsylvania affair, Washington dispatched Robert Howe and 600 troops from West Point. Even though the protestors had remained relatively peaceful, Howe forced a number of New Jersey mutineers to execute two of their own ringleaders. Several other mutinies also resulted in executions, but in more than one case, officers managed to defuse the situation without bloodshed.[11]

Pensions, Commutation, and Congressional Finances

Congress could rely on the officers of the Continental Army to combat mutinies with discipline, punishment, and most of all persuasion. But the officers, too, had their grievances. Company grade commanders shared some of their men's deprivations; higher ranks did not typically go cold and hungry.[12] Nevertheless, the officers shared the dangers of the war: in the American Revolution, even generals might catch a bullet. And they also shared the troops concerns over pay. Paper money depreciation hurt officers just like enlisted men, as did Congress' and the states' frequent inability to pay at all. Officers, who were typically men of property, especially among the higher ranks, all too often lived on their own money, adding financial sacrifice to their investment of time and risk. At the end of the war, Timothy Pickering was even arrested for debts he had incurred issuing personal notes for supplies while serving as Quartermaster General.[13] Seeing themselves as the social equals of the revolutionary political elite, officers felt the sting of frustration very sharply, even though they did not suffer on the same level as the enlisted men. It was probably with some hyperbole, but nevertheless legitimate concern that General Arthur St. Clair wrote Washington in 1782: "I am in

debt, and my credit exhausted, and were it not for the rations I receive, my family would actually starve."[14]

Officers had no need to desert or mutiny to express their frustration. They were not bound to specified tours of duty and could simply resign their commissions.[15] This they did in alarmingly high numbers, especially during the dismal days of Valley Forge. Washington, seeing his officer corps dwindle, addressed his concern to Congress, and urged the federal government to adopt "some better provision for binding the officers by the tie of interest to the service."[16] Washington and others favored a pension of half-pay for life for officers, a system traditionally employed in the British army. A promise of peacetime payments might provide the motivation that the present situation certainly did not.

There were two problems with half-pay. First of all, anything that made the Continental army similar to the British one came under immediate suspicion. A number of Congressmen opposed pensions because they would saddle the United States with even more debt, and smacked of special privilege and corruption.[17] Secondly, there was the fact that Congress had no money now, and little prospect of having it in peacetime. The Articles of Confederation did not give Congress the power to tax, nor to lay duties on American trade.

Prompted by such considerations, Congress did nothing at first. When resignations continued to mount, the federal legislature decided to grant half-pay for seven years after the end of the war, with a maximum of half a colonel's pay. Unsurprisingly, this did not satisfy the officers. In 1779, Congress did vote half-pay for life, but almost immediately rescinded its vote and recommended that the states make provisions instead. Only Pennsylvania did so.[18] Resignations continued, and Washington began to caution Congress of even more dangerous problems: "Officers, unable any longer to support themselves in the army, are resigning continually, or doing what is worse, spreading discontent, and possibly the seeds of sedition."[19]

In October 1780, Congress finally voted half-pay for life, but only after the Continental generals sent Major General Alexander McDougall as a representative to petition Congress with implicit threats of mass resignations if they were not heeded.[20]

Washington supported the McDougall petition and pointed out that officers from the Pennsylvania line – who had been promised half-pay – resigned much less often. Benedict Arnold's treason might also have helped to convince Congress that officer morale was low.[21]

As the war continued and eventual victory became more likely, pensions remained a highly critical issue. Many officers worried whether they would receive their due after the war was over. Congress, after all, had no independent income and the requisition system worked badly if at all. Historian Richard Kohn pointed out that "most officers were apprehensive about returning to civilian life. Many had been impoverished by the war while friends at home had grown fat on wartime prosperity. For all the long absence meant breaking back into a society that had adjusted to their absence, and in traditionally antimilitary New England, a society that would accord none of the advantages or plaudits returning veterans normally expect."[22] Consequently, many officers began to ally themselves with the congressional nationalists who argued for more central power and especially an independent income for Congress. Effectively, Continental officers had become a sub-group of the public creditors who wanted Congress to live up to its financial commitments once the war was over.

In early 1781, Congress made an effort to secure the capability to honor its financial commitments. It asked the several states to consent to an amendment to the Articles of Confederation, giving it power to levy a 5 percent impost on imports to the United States. A nationalist faction in Congress championed this quest for an independent congressional income. Robert Morris, the financial superintendent, Alexander Hamilton, and Gouverneur Morris vehemently supported the impost amendment. Initially, prospects for adoption of the impost seemd good; the financial and military situation mandated that *something* be done. Eight states ratified the measure in 1781 without vocal opposition. However, by 1782 the impost ran into problems. In Massachusetts, critics argued that any expansion of congressional power would start off a chain reaction of further centralization. Nevertheless, the state ratified the amendment. Ironically, the American victory at Yorktown seemed to lessen the need for a major overhaul of the financial system, and the measure stalled. Eventually, the Rhode Island

legislature refused to ratify, and Virginia rescinded its earlier vote in favor. The impost of 1781 was dead, much to the chagrin of congressional nationalists and many officers.[23]

After 1781, as it became apparent that funding for lifelong half-pay was unlikely, a new option became more and more popular among officers: commutation. Under this scheme, officers would not receive half-pay for life, but a lump sum to be paid when the army was disbanded and officers returned to civilian life. This system would cost Congress less money in the long run and suited the officers' immediate economic needs better than a lifetime of small payments. One early suggestion to adopt such a plan took place in Massachusetts in the fall of 1781. The call for commutation continued through the early 1780s, until it *de facto* replaced half-pay as the prefered mode of payment. However, as 1782 drew to a close, and peace became ever more likely, even commutation seemed out of reach.[24]

The Newburgh Crisis

In late 1782, the Continental army, encamped at Newburgh, New York, faced a dilemma. Peace was in all likelihood fast approaching and would mean the disbanding of the army. While peace was welcome, the question of financing half-pay was still unresolved, and large parts of the army feared that once the Continental Army disbanded, they would be left out in the cold. It seemed that with the impost of 1781 the hope of the army to get paid had died. In late December 1782, McDougall was once again sent with a petition to Congress. In this document, drafted by Henry Knox, the officers asked for the commutation of lifelong half-pay into one immediate lump sum. The document was respectfully phrased, but did not mince words, either. Clearly disgusted with congressional lack of success in securing funds, the petition stated that further stalling "may have fatal effects." [25]

McDougall's timing was critical. He arrived only a few weeks after Virginia had rescinded its vote on the impost. Congressional nationalists, especially Robert Morris and Hamilton, were desperate for new political pressure to finally secure an independent income for Congress. Earlier that year, Robert Morris had already ceased payment

on the interest on the national debt, partly because of financial constraints and partly because he hoped that national creditors would pressure their state governments to grant Congress the power to tax. However, such pressure had not materialized. Now, Robert Morris, Hamilton, and some of their nationalist allies saw pressure from the officer corps – a special group of public creditors – as a means of finally getting Congress and the states to agree to national taxation.[26]

Almost immediately upon the general's arrival, Robert Morris met with McDougall to discuss strategy. Essentially, Morris wanted McDougall to emphasize the dangers of sedition in the army if its demands were not met; the nationalists would use this pressure to secure permanent national funding which in turn would be used to pay for commutation. McDougall, himself a former member of Congress and an experienced lobbyist, saw the benefits of this strategy and wrote Knox that he hoped to unite "the influence of Congress with that of the Army and the public Creditors to obtain permanent funds for the United states," since this would "promise [the] most ultimate Security to the Army." Effectively, McDougall allied the interests of the officer corps with a faction of the congressional nationalists led by Robert Morris, Hamilton and Gouverneur Morris.[27]

In early January, a congressional grand committee received McDougall and his aides. While Robert Morris made clear that he could not even meet current outstanding pay much less commutation until funds were secured, one of McDougall's companions warned that Congress should beware of "at least a mutiny" if the delegation were to return to Newburgh empty-handed. The deliberations convinced the Congressional committee that the situation at Newburgh had turned critical. Hamilton and the Morrises got busy maneuvering commutation and the rest of the army's petition before Congress. Robert Morris even threatened to resign if "permanent provision for the public debts of every kind" was not ensured by the end of May. Very soon, Congress agreed to give Robert Morris free reign to settle the question of current pay and overdue salaries, a significant victory for McDougall and the nationalists.[28]

However, in one area where it counted, the Morrises and Hamilton found themselves stymied. In late January and early February 1783, Congress repeatedly rejected

commutation. The refusal came primarily from Connecticut and Rhode Island, whose delegates had specific instructions to reject half-pay in any form, and they were joined by the New Jersey delegates who feared the unpopularity of pensions. Thus, the nationalists faced a problem: without a congressional endorsement of commutation, pressure on the states to grant Congress an independent income would lessen. Even worse, word of a peace treaty with England could arrive any day, defusing the crisis and ending the nationalist hope of increasing federal power. Time was running short.[29]

Another problem was the reluctance of Henry Knox to threaten mutiny in order to turn up the political heat. After the second defeat of commutation on 4 February, McDougall wrote Knox under the guise of "Brutus" and urged that the army should declare its intention not to disband until all financial issues, including commutation, were settled. Knox, while thoroughly frustrated with Congress, did not have the stomach for such open defiance of civil authority. A threat not to disband was hardly a violent uprising against Congress, but it certainly implied that the army might take truly desperate measures if pushed too far. While Knox did fear that the situation might turn ugly, he was not willing to incite his fellow officers to openly defy Congress.[30]

At this point, the historical record became somewhat unclear, leading to an array of differing opinions among scholars. In a 1970 article, Kohn claimed that after all else failed, the radical nationalists Robert Moris, Hamilton, and Gouverneur Morris decided to play a highly dangerous card by appealing to a dissident faction of the Newburgh officer corps to essentially threaten a *coup d'etat*. Kohn identified this dissident faction as "a group of young officers, a small extremist wing of the corps, which was angrier, more dogmatic and hotheaded" surrounding, and led by, General Horatio Gates, an old political opponent of Washington's. Other historians, like Paul David Nelson and C. Edward Skeen were skeptical of this view, denying that the nationalists actually instigated the plot or that a coup was seriously advocated.[31]

Even Kohn admitted that a coup was neither realistic nor likely, nor wanted by the Morrises and Hamilton. Kohn did, however, argue that these nationalists were desperate enough to play with fire: "they would incite a mutiny in the Army – spark the explosion – then make certain it was immediately snuffed out. It was a treacherous

double game fraught with uncertainty. But to the nationalists, the whole future of the country was at stake. The only alternative to the disintegration of the confederacy was the impost, or some other measure which could effectively shore up central government."[32] The documentary record left much room for interpretation, and the truth of the matter will likely remain hidden in a host of conflicting emotions and personal motivations.

What *did* happen is that on 10 March 1783, two potentially subversive documents began circulating in the Newburgh encampment. These Newburgh Addresses, as they came to be called, were written by Major John Armstrong, a young officer, and most likely with the endorsement of Gates. In general, the addresses urged a much more vehement stand against Congress. The army should assume "a bolder tone – decent, but lively, spirited and determined, and suspect the man who would advise to more moderation and longer forbearance." If Congress did not meet the army's demands, "the army has its alternative," which would consist in refusing to disband and build camp in some unsettled part of the country where it would remain a threat to Congress. On the whole, the addresses were not too radical a document. They clearly did include the threat of mutiny, perhaps even a coup, but like McDougall's petition, they once again called for congressional measures to resolve the situation. However, the adresses also called for an unofficial meeting to be held on 11 March, where the issues would be discussed: a potentially very subversive gathering. Finally, the addresses were penned anonymously, which made them all the more suspect. At any rate, interest in the addresses was high and many soldiers and officers discussed their merits.[33]

At this point, Washington (presumably the man the addresses accused of urging moderation and longer forbearance) intervened. Possibly, he was alerted to the brewing trouble by his former *aide-de-camp* Hamilton as part of a nationalist strategy of first fomenting mutiny and then suppressing it, but most likely the general needed no help to realize what was going on. Washington sent an order to Newburgh forbidding the 11 March meeting, condemning it as "irregular" and "disorderly." Instead, he called a meeting for 15 March, where the senior officer present, presumably Gates, would

preside. Washington's orders were heeded; the 11 March meeting did not take place. Surely many officers felt a four-day postponement could not hurt, and the official gathering might take up the same topics as the unofficial one, especially with Gates presiding. However, when the 15 March meeting commenced, Washington himself walked in. He proceeded to attack and condemn the Newburgh Addresses in a prepared speech, instead urging continued moderation and loyalty to Congress. Washington promised to use all his influence with Congress to see that the army received its due, and he warned vehemently of "attempts to open the flood-gates of civil discord" that would "deluge our rising empire in blood."[34]

After finishing his speech, Washington once again displayed his talent for emotional leadership that inspired so much loyalty in his subordinates. Reading to the assembly a letter from a member of Congress, Washington paused, took out a set of spectacles and said: "Gentlemen, you must pardon me. I have grown gray in your service and now find myself going blind." This gesture won over the bulk of the Newburgh officers to Washington's course of moderation and submission to civil authority. Kohn commented that the "tension, the imposing physcial presence of the commander-in-chief, the speech, and finally an act that emotionally embodied the Army's whole experience, combined all at once and shattered the officers' equanimity. Spontaneously they recoiled. Some openly wept." Whether a coup attempt might realistically have come out of the Newburgh troubles or not, after Washington's appeal any such plans evaporated. Knox took over, and the meeting was soon adjourned.[35]

Whether or not the Morrises and Hamilton had engineered the turmoil in Newburgh, news of the event certainly played into their hands. Just a few days earlier, Congress had relegated the issue of military discontent to a committee consisting mostly of opponents of commutation. Now, with the news of a near-mutiny spreading in Philadelphia, the congressional mood shifted. Eliphalet Dyer, a Connecticut anti-pensions stalwart, came around to very reluctantly endorsing commutation, as did two of the staunchest opponents of the nationalists, Arthur Lee and John Francis Mercer. On 22 March, just one week after the dramatic events at Newburgh, Congress voted in favor of commutation, promising five year's pay to all those previously entitled to half-

pay for life. And, even more important to the nationalists, Congress voted for a new impost amendment on 18 April, practically at the same time that news of a peace treaty with Great Britain arrived. The war was over and the nationalists had gone a good way towards achieving their goal of a more vigorous central government. The army had been promised commutation and disbanded in the following months. However, the question of how much power and money Congress should have continued to dominate the rest of the decade, and the officers of the Continental army remained remain an important part of the controversies surrounding that question.[36]

Founding the Society of the Cincinnati

The Newburgh crisis was resolved, but the problems of the Continental Army remained. Commutation offered better prospects than half-pay for life, but pending the endorsement of the new impost by all thirteen states, the new pensions were just as unfunded as the old ones, and not even back pay was entirely settled. Any day now, Congress would order the dissolution or permanent furlough of the army, the majority of which Maj. Gen. Friedrich von Steuben commented, did not have "subsistence for a day." Once disbanded, it would be impossible for the officers to present a united front to pursue their political and financial interests – unless, of course, they found some alternative way to organize. In the last months of the Newburgh encampment, they created this alternative in the Society of the Cincinnati.[37]

The idea for forming some sort of Revolutionary Order had been around for some time. A curious idea circulated in American newspapers since March 1783: the concept for an "Order of Freedom" to be instituted on 4 July 1783. This concept envisioned St. Louis as the patron of the order, the president of Congress as chief, Washington as grand master, Benjamin Franklin as cancellor and John Witherspoon as prelate along with the state governors as knight companions. "Sic semper tyrannis" was to be the official motto, and the plan outlined detailed the imagery for a medal: "on the front of which will be represented virtue, the genius of the United States, dressed like Amazon, resting on a spear with one hand, and holding a sword with the other, and treading on tyranny, represented by a man prostrate, a crown fallen from his head, a broken

chain in his left hand, and a scourge in his right." This plan clearly paralleled European knightly orders (albeit with a strongly anti-monarchical sentiment), but its authorship remained unclear and there was no serious discussion of its merits, let alone its implementation. The entire idea proved chimerical, and was probably never seriously advocated by anyone; it was only significant for the timing of its publication, which more or less coincided with the planning stages for the Society of the Cincinnati. However, there was no direct connection between this envisioned "Order" and the society.[38]

In subsequent months and years, critics of the society would often charge Steuben with hatching the plan for the Cincinnati. Given Steuben's status as a German nobleman, his membership in Baden's Order of Fidelity and frequent wearing of their star, and his brief tenure as the Cincinnati's first acting president, the German adventurer certainly made a fine suspect. However, while Steuben was instrumental in forming the Cincinnati, the society was not his brainchild. Some years later, Jefferson recalled John Adams telling him of a conversation with Henry Knox in 1776 in which the erstwhile Boston bookseller "said he should wish for some ribbon to wear in his hat, or in his buttonhole to be transmitted to his descendants as a badge & a proof that he had fought in the defence of their liberties." Furthermore, Adams told Jefferson, Knox "spoke of it in such precise terms as shewed he had revolved it in his mind before." Both Jefferson and Adams were critics of the Cincinnati, so Jefferson's assertion that Knox had envisioned the society in the early days of revolutionary war must be taken with a grain of salt. However, Jefferson was dead right in identifying Knox as the man who thought up the Cincinnati, because by April 1783 the artillery general was busy organizing the officers of the Continental Army.[39]

On 15 April 1783, Knox finished a draft for an organization of Continental officers, a fraternal society somewhat reminiscent of the Freemasons, with hereditary membership, regular meetings, a medal, and a charitable fund. Although the society Knox envisioned resembled European knightly orders to a certain degree, the general did not mention various levels of knights and a grand master, but members of equal rank under the leadership of a president general. And, as befitting a largely protestant nation, Knox did not choose a patron saint, but a hero of republican Rome as the name-

sake of his society: Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus, the very archetype of the selfless patriot who served his country in war, only to return to his farm upon victory. Knox's original draft for the society was largely unpolitical, but the purpose of such an organization was clear: it would preserve the Continental officers as a group, thus allowing them to make their voices and interests heard. And even if the federal government should continue to neglect the officers, the charitable fund would allow them to spare their least fortunate members the suffering of starvation, if not the indignities of poverty.[40]

Knox's timing was impeccable. On 16 April, news of a formal peace arrived in Newburgh, and the preparations for the dissolution of the Continental Army began. The Knox draft circulated among the officers and met with widespread interest; on 10 May there was a meeting at the "Temple," the meeting hall of the encampment and the very place where Washington had denounced the Newburgh Adresses a few weeks earlier. Steuben presided as the senior officer present, and the gathered officers discussed Knox's proposals. They appointed Knox, his aide-de-camp Samuel Shaw, Brig. Gen. Jedediah Huntington, and Steuben as a committee to revise the draft into a formal resolution. Three days later, the officers convened again, this time at Steuben's headquarters at Fishkill-on-Hudson. There, on 13 May 1783, they adopted the institution prepared by the committee, thus founding the Society of the Cincinnati. Copies were sent to the state lines and the Southern army, in order to reach as many potential members as possible. For the time being, Steuben served as the de facto president of the society, but it was clear that the officers wanted George Washington to lend his prestige to their endeavour.[41]

These early stages of organization occurred just as the Continental Army was melting away. On 2 June 1783, Congress ordered indefinite furloughs for the troops stationed at Newburgh, and by the 5th, soldiers started returning home. Most officers, however, remained for a while longer, making the membership drive that much easier. Although the organizational meetings had been staffed by representatives of the various regiments, membership in the Cincinnati was an individual choice: the society was a voluntary organization. Knox, Steuben, and William Heath successfully persuaded

Washington to grace the membership roll with his signature at the top; other prominent officers followed suit. On 19 June, a relatively small number of Cincinnati organizers met to elect officers pro tempore. Knox assumed the role of secretary, McDougall that of treasurer, and Washington was elected president-general in absentia. The commander-in-chief went along with the organization, but he was not really personally involved until fall and did not attend a Cincinnati meeting until May 1784, when the general society held its first regular meeting.

Meanwhile the organization of the state societies commenced: while three such chapters were already formed, it took until November to complete the process in all thirteen former colonies. On the whole, the society managed to attract about half of all eligible officers, 2,403 out of 5,795. Percentages were highest in Delaware, where two thirds joined, and lowest in New Hampshire at only fifteen percent. Although not all these members signed up at Newburgh, the Society of the Cincinnati nevertheless was quite literally the result of the latter days of the Continental Army. When Washington resigned his commission on 23 December 1783 and effectively brought the history of the victorious revolutionary army to a close, the Society of the Cincinnati was well in place to preserve the friendships grown from a shared wartime experience – and to pursue the interests of the men who had led the Continental Army to victory.[42]

What then, did this new-fangled society entail? First and foremost, the Society of the Cincinnati was a fraternal association, formed to commemorate the Revolution, and "perpetuate, therefore, as well the remembrance of this vast event, as the mutial friendships which have been formed under the pressure of common danger." It was also to be a charitable brotherhood, instituted in order to extend the "most substantial acts of beneficence, according to the ability of the society, towards those officers and their families, who unfortunately may be under the necessity of receiving it." Nowhere did the institution[43] declare that the society was to be a political pressure group; indeed, political references were very scarce. There was a commitment to "preserve inviolate those exalted rights and liberties of human nature, for which" the members had "fought and bled," but that was a vague statement at best.[44]

Only in one instance did the Cincinnati's institution address a potentially controversial political issue. It declared "an unalterable determination to promote and cherish between the respective states, that union and national honor so essentially necessary to their happiness, and the future diginity of the American empire." Here, at least, was a relatively clear commitment to federal authority, an implicit endorsement of such measures as the impost of 1783. Small wonder: it was Congress that owed the officers money, and without some federal authority to tax, they were unlikely to ever see results. Besides, serving in the Continental army had given the Cincinnati a perspective that went beyond state boundaries. Still, the passage hardly constituted bold partisanship.

Membership was open to "all the Officers of the American army," who had served to the end of the war, or had resigned honorably after three years of service. The society also invited those officers who had been "deranged," meaning turned supernumerary by the various reforms of the army structure during the war years. To honor those who had died in service, the society allowed their "eldest male branches" as full members. And, in order to make sure that the society would not simply end with the war generation, membership was hereditary unto all Cincinnati's "eldest male posterity, and, in failure thereof, the collateral branches who may be judged worthy of becoming its supporters and Members." This rule of primogeniture was intended to establish one of the society's mottos: "esto perpetua." It would also become the centerpiece of the widespread accusations of subversion and conspiracy subsequently directed against the Cincinnati.

Another form of membership was available to those the society considered worthy: "men in the respective States eminent for their abilities and patriotism, whose views may be directed to the same laudable objects with those of the Cincinnati." These honorary memberships were restricted in two ways: they would not be hereditary, and the number of honorary members was never to exceed one quarter of the regular members.

In terms of organization, there was to be a general society, state societies, district societies, and a French society. The general society, which was established at

Newburgh, was to have a president (or president-general), a vice-president, secretary, assistant secretary, treasurer, and assistant treasurer. Delegations from the various state societies would gather at least once every three years in May to form a general meeting, elect officers, consider "the principles of the Institution," and adopt "the best measures to promote them." The institution only gave the general society limited powers. It could accept donations, and administer those members who were foreigners not belonging to any state society (such as German officers). The general society would serve as a central registry of membership once the state societies communicated their rosters. Finally, the general society was authorized to concert measures "which may conduce to the general intendment of the Society." As with many features of the institution, this stipulation was very vague and would come to invite malevolent interpretation.

The thirteen state societies were to consist of all members residing in a state, current rather than original residence being the deciding factor. They were largely autonomous, authorized to "regulate everything respecting itself and the Societies of its districts consistent with the general maxims of the Cincinnati, judge of the qualifications of the members who may be proposed, and expel any member" who violated the rules of honor, the community, or the society. State societies had the same set of officers as the general one, they were to communicate among one another by means of circular letters, and hold annual meetings on the fourth of July. The district societies, on the other hand, were no more than administrative sections of the state societies. In fact, very few district meetings were ever held, as the state societies soon became the center of Cincinnati activity.

The plans for a French society stemmed from the Cincinnati's desire to preserve "the friendships which have been formed, and happily subsisted, between the officers of the allied forces in the prosecution of the war." There were no details on the organization of this society in the institution, but the document did stipulate that the French minister plenipotenitary, the Chevalier de la Luzerne, along with the topmost naval commanders, the French commander-in-chief Count Rochambeau, and the generals and colonels of his army would be considered members of the Cincinnati. The membership of these exalted Frenchmen and the general popularity of the society among

French officers would later make the dissolution of the Cincinnati all but impossible. The French society would also become a political problem in its home country.[45]

Every member signing up for the society had to submit one month's pay for the charitable fund, ranging from $20 for an ensign to $166 for a major general.[46] However, the society did not require its members to pay this amount in cash; doing so would have severely limited the number of officers willing to join. Instead, the institution included a pre-written instruction to the paymaster general. Any prospecitve member just had to fill in the blanks to deduct one month's pay from his account to the society. This meant that the charitable fund of the Cincinnati consisted not of specie, but of promissory notes – specifically the commutation certificates recently granted by Congress. Thus, the fund was effectively worthless until Congress could fund its bonds, for example by means of the impost of 1783. Other than this complication, the fund was straightforward in organization and purposes. The state societies would administer it and decide on its usage, and the principal sum would remain untouched, with only the interest going towards charity.

The institution also envisioned a visible trapping, an "Order, by which its members shall be known and distinguished, which shall be a medal of gold, of a proper size to receive the emblems, and suspended by a deep blue ribband two inches wide, edged with white, descriptive of the union of France and America." The institution described this emblem in great detail as a depiction of Cincinnatus receiving military powers from the senate in front of his farm, and on the reverse his triumphant return to Rome. "Omnia Relinquit Servare Rempublicam" the medal read, "Esto Perpetua. Societas Cincinnatorum Instituta A.D. 1783" on the other side. However, by the meeting of 19 June, Pierre L'Enfant had suggested a somewhat different idea, a golden eagle holding the design mentioned above. This effectively transformed the "Order" from a commemorative keepsake into a decoration to be worn. The meeting of 19 June approved, and sent L'Enfant to Paris to commission master craftsmen to produce the new eagle badge.[47]

Changing the medal into a badge was probably a mistake; other than that, Knox and his fellows had avoided most of the trappings of European knightly orders. There

were no ranks among the society's members, only regularly and frequently elected officers to supervise its administration. The society had chosen its patron for his fame as a warrior *and* as a republican citizen; the key quality of Cincinnatus was his return to the plow. There were no oaths to swear, no rituals to perform, and no permanent halls to assemble in. The only privilege of a Cincinnatus was access to a charitable fund raised by his fellows should he or his family require assistance, and he better not need it anytime soon, because the fund was worthless as of yet. American Cincinnati bowed to no king, although they toasted Louis XVII with gusto as a friend of their cause and country. In fact, the organization closely resembled the Articles of Confederation, the republican constitution of the United States. But the badge smacked of European grandeur, and the rule of heredity would come to haunt the society for years, making them the most reviled association in America during the critical period.

Many of the institution's more controversial aspects stemmed from the fact that the society was formed in haste. The arrival of peace melted the Continental Army away as the organizers of the Cincinnati were meeting. The reason Congress ordered this rapid disbandment was the highly volatile relationship between the military and political agents of the newly successful American Revolution. In many ways, the Society of the Cincinnati were a constructive alternative to the disgruntlement of the Newburgh Adresses, a way to preserve the officers' voice without the implicit threat of armed rebellion. However, a fresh crisis developed just as the Cincinnati were organizing, which demonstrated how very problematic the question of military power and loyalty remained in the fledgling American Republic.

The Philadelphia Mutiny

Despite peace with Britain and the end of the Newburgh crisis, Congress still faced an unsolvable problem in regard to the army. There was not enough money to pay arrearages, and it was even unclear just how much was owed to individual soldiers. Differences in rank, time served, payments made, rations and clothing issued, and state lines made for a nearly intractable jungle of financial obligation. Financier Robert Morris was convinced that correctly assessing much less fully settling the military accounts

would take years – an opinion fully borne out by eventual developments. Meanwhile, the now largely unnecessary army continued to consume money for food and board. Disbanding the army immediately and settling accounts later was sound fiscal policy. However, the fears that Congress might try to do just that had sparked the Newburgh crisis in March. Therefore, as an alternative to ordering the army to disband, Congress decided to furlough the troops to their homes indefinitely. Thus, the soldiers would be separated, harmless, and could feed themselves without the politically disastrous move of disbanding a disgruntled and unpaid army.[48]

Soldiers, whether enlisted or commissioned, were not fools, and easily recognized the furlough as little more than a euphemisim for disbanding. At Newburgh, the furlough did not generate a crisis. Officers protested the orders and found an open ear in Washington, who altered the instructions so that the furlough would be voluntary instead of mandatory. Satisfied that they were not forced to disband without a settlement, soldiers soon voluntarily began to leave for home. As mentioned earlier, the officers used the months of early summer to organize the Cincinnati. But Newburgh was not the only encampment of Continental troops. In Philadelphia, seat of Congress and the Treasury, troops reacted with less restraint to the prospect of returning home without money.

Rumours of a dismissal without settlement of accounts had been rife in Philadelphia, where veterans of the Pennsylvania line were stationed. Most of these men had not received any cash pay since 1782 and were already considerably disgruntled.[49] On 7 June 1783, the *Independent Gazeteer* ran a piece denouncing the indefinite furlough and wryly suggested that the federal government should also disband, allowing the people to use the money to settle the military accounts instead of paying salaries.[50] Then, on 12 June, troops of the Maryland line, recently fourloughed from Newburgh, arrived in Philadelphia and spent the night in the barracks. From these troops, the Pennsylvanians learned that the furlough was a reality, and also that, unlike them, the Marylanders had received one months pay in cash. The next morning, General St. Clair announced the congressional resolution to fourlough the Pennsylvania veterans, but he

did not mention Washington's amendment making the furlough voluntary.[51] At this point, discontent started to coalesce into mutiny.

In Philadelphia, a group of sergeants sent a protest to Congress, refusing the furloughs and demanding a settlement. Elsewhere in Pennsylvania, news of the dismissal spread to outlying garrisons. A group from Lancaster marched towards Philadelphia to join the mutiny. The crisis continued to mount as rumours spread that the mutineeres planned to rob the treasury or the bank. Congress formed a committee, including Hamilton, to discuss measures against the mutiny with the Pennsylvania state government headed by John Dickinson. At this point, differing assessments of the situation led to a conflict between the federal government and the state of Pennsylvania. Hamilton and Congress repeatedly demanded that the governor call out the militia to secure the capital; Dickinson, however, followed a policy of de-escalation and refused. He also may have doubted whether a call for militia would be heeded, as the mutineers enjoyed considerable public support.[52]

On 20 June, the troops from Lancaster arrived in Philadelphia and entered the barracks. Congress made some moves to mollify them; Robert Morris offered them one month's pay in cash, but only upon their return to Lancaster. Hamilton, William Jackson, and Gouverneur Morris visited the troops in the barracks to cool tempers, but their success was at best mixed. And to make matters worse, there was apparently an order to withhold all pay from troops who refused the furlough.[53] The next morning, the mutineers, led by sergeants, marched on the Pennsylvania state house.

Standard historical accounts have routinely stated that armed troops surrounded Congress and demanded a redress for their grievances[54] – a very grim situation, tantamount to a coup attempt, if it were true. Indeed, several hundred soldiers did surround the state house on the morning of 21 June, but they were not interested in Congress. Frustrated with the federal legislature's obvious inability and unwillingness to pay up, the mutineers had decided to take their demands to the Pennslyvania state council and governor Dickinson instead. Congress had no regular session scheduled that day, and although a number of Congressmen did deliberate in the state house while the protest was going on outside, they actually arrived *after* the troops and never achieved a quo-

rum while the soldiers remained. Furthermore, while surrounding of the state house was certainly a threat – the soldiers were armed and had bayonets attached – it was never a hostage situation of any kind. People could enter and leave the state house, although Elias Boudinot, the president of Congress, was briefly physically restrained. The soldiers demanded that they be allowed to appoint officers to negotiate with the Pennsylvania government. Governor Dickinson, after consulting with Boudinot, agreed to hear the soldiers' demands, and the mutineers returned to the barracks to decide on representatives.[55]

The mutiny prompted another conflict between Congress and the state government, because Dickinson continued to refuse calling out the militia, despite increasingly heated demands by Boudinot, Hamilton, and Robert Morris. Dickinson was actually a supporter of stronger federal authority, not a stickler for states' rights, but he was convicted that calling out the militia would be ineffectual or even counterproductive. Thus denied the state's cooperation, Congress called on Washington to send reliable troops and decided to leave Philadelphia for Princeton, New Jersey. This departure was planned as a temporary measure, but it eventually lasted for seven years. Congress first migrated through the middle states until it settled in New York, and did not to return to Philadelphia until 1790. Ironically, Dickinson did eventually call for 500 militia, but as he feared, the turnout was less than complete.[56]

Meanwhile, the mutiny became less critical and eventually collapsed. Rumours of incipient violence were rampant for several days, but nothing happened. The soldiers selected representatives and delivered a list of grievances to the Pennsylvania executive council, demanding among other things payment in cash or robust certificates. However, the council refused to consider the demands until the mutineers submitted to congressional authority. Soon thereafter, word arrived that General Howe was on his way with an overwhelming force, and the mutiny collapsed. Two ringleaders fled to Europe, and the rebellious units surrendered. Once Howe arrived, he conducted an investigation of the mutiny. Several of its leaders were acquitted, some sentenced to whipping and two to death, but they received pardons just before the execution. The Philadelphia mutiny cost no lives and caused no property damage.[57]

Unlike the Newburgh crisis, the Philadelphia mutiny was primarily the affair of enlisted men and non-commissioned officers. The two leaders who fled to Europe, Lt. John Sullivan and Cpt. Henry Carbery, were officers, although the latter was retired. A number of mutineers had been involved in the Pennsylvania mutiny of two years earlier, an indication that their grievances were old and their frustration great. Several commentators claimed that the mutiny was primarily the work of green troops who had not even fought in the war, but that was mostly an attempt to preserve the dignity of Congress who had failed to honor its obligations to the troops. There were a number of green recruits in the Lancaster mutineers, but the sergeants who had led the troops surrounding the state house were battle-hardened veterans who had served for the entire war. Given the contribution such men had made to the cause of American independence, their decision to resort to military disobedience was particularly shocking.[58]

Even though Newburgh had involved officers and Philadelphia the rank and file, there might have been a connection between the two incident of military unrest. Historian Ken Bowling claimed that the advocates of enlarged centralized power in Congress, among them Robert Morris, had taken steps to provoke the mutiny, possibly in order to rally public support for an embattled Congress. Morris was also a suspect for engineering the Newburgh crisis. However, if he was involved with the Pennsylvania mutiny, his efforts backfired as the affair became a major embarassment to Congress. Mary Gallagher disagreed with Bowling's thesis, but pointed to another Newburgh figure as the Philadelphia mutiny's mastermind: John Armstrong, the author of the Newburgh Addresses. According to Gallagher, Armstong might well have incited Sullivan and Carbery, as well as provided the mutineers with privileged information. Armstrong had recently left the army and now served as secretary to the Pennsylvania executive council, so he was certainly in the middle of things. However, Gallagher admitted there was no conclusive evidence for Armstrong's involement. At any rate, if the Philadelphia affair was a second attempt to achieve what had failed at Newburgh, it was no more successful than the first try.

What the Philadelphia mutiny indoubtedly did demonstrate, however, was the appallingly ruptured relationship between the revolution's military and political protagonists. As peace finally returned to America, large parts of the military were highly disillusioned with their treatment at the hands of the civilian leadership, whereas in political circles there was a widespread fear of military power, intrigue, and disobedience. Those with both military and political experience often worked for reconciliation, but they did not have an easy time of it. To make matters worse, Congress was losing the ability to bridge the gap. Without independent income and little actual authority, the federal legislature simply could not meet its obligations to its military and civilian creditors and was rapidly losing face. Historians have sometimes interpreted the Philadelphia mutiny as the humiliation of Congress at the hands of the state government of Pennsylvania. John Dickinson's commitment to a viable federal government contradicted that view, yet the affair really did humiliate Congress. As Bowling put it, "Continental soldiers under the command and control of Congress ignored the federal government and sought instead to settle their accounts with the State of Pennsylvania."[59] A government not even worth threatening was a government in crisis.

In this environment of military-political ill will, fiscal impotence and public dividedness, the Society of the Cincinnati represented an alternative to military disobedience. A veterans organization was an orderly way of representing the interests of the Continental officers, and also a means to preserve fraternal bonds and charitable solidarity. Given its structure encompassing all the states and commitment to republican union, the Cincinnati might have helped to heal the rift between the political and military communities. However, because of the officers' clumsiness in choosing the aspects and trappings of their organization, and because of a climate of suspicion and general crisis, it did not happen that way. Within a few months of its founding, the Society of the Cincinnati became the target of accusations that were more reminiscent of the revolutionary opposition to British oppression than the erstwhile united spirit of American patriots.

Notes

[1] Worthington C. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* (Washington: U.S. Govt. print off., 1904), 24: 295-98.

[2] E. Wayne Carp, *To Starve the Army at Pleasure: Continental Army Administration and American Political Culture, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 19.

[3] Ibid., 44-45; Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 190-93; Harry M. Ward, *The American Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 136.

[4] Carp, *To Starve the Army at Pleasure*, 69; Eric P. Newman, *The Early Paper Money of America* (Racine, Wis.: Whitman Pub. Co., 1967), 359-60.

[5] Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 296.

[6] Carp, *To Starve the Army at Pleasure*, 10-11. Also, chapter 9 of this study discusses the fear of standing armies in more detail.

[7] Ibid., 77-98.

[8] Major J. Burnett to Jeremiah Wadsworth, 18 March 1780, quoted in Carp, *To Starve the Army at Pleasure*, 1.

[9] Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 191.

[10] Ward, *The American Revolution*, 238-40; James D. Scudieri, "The Continentals: A Comparative Analysis of a Late Eighteenth-Century Standing Army, 1775-83" (PhD dissertation, CUNY, 1993), 150-151.

[11] Ward, *The American Revolution*, 224-26; Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 295-308.

[12] Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 191.

[13] Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783-1802* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1975), 11.

[14] Arthur St. Clair to George Washington, 26 November 1782, *The St. Clair Papers: The Life and Public Services of Arthur St. Clair, Soldier of the Revolutionary War, President of the Continental Congress, and Governor of the North-Western Territory; with His Correspondence and Other Papers*, ed. William Henry Smith (Cincinnati: R. Clarke, 1882), 172.

[15] Ward, *The American Revolution*, 238.

[16] George Washington to Henry Laurens, December 23, 1777, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799,* eds. John C. Fitzpatrick and David M. Matteson (Washington: U.S. Govt. print. off., 1931), 10: 192-98; Minor Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983), 2.

[17] William Henry Glasson and David Kinley, *Federal Military Pensions in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press American Branch, 1918), 28-29.

[18] Richard Frank jr. Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati" (PhD dissertation, University of Georgia, 1969), 17-18.

[19] George Washington to Committee of Congress, January 20, 1779, *The Writings of George Washington*, 25: 96-99.

[20] Roger James Champagne, *Alexander Mcdougall and the American Revolution in New York* (Schenectady, N.Y.: Union College Press, 1975), 159-160.

[21] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 5.

[22] Richard H. Kohn, "The inside History of the Newburgh Conspiracy: America and the Coup D'etat," *William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 27 (1970): 189-190.

[23] Jackson Turner Main, *The Antifederalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781-1788* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 73-74.

[24] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 6.

[25] E. James Ferguson, *The Power of the Purse; a History of American Public Finance, 1776-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 146-53; Paul David Nelson, "Horatio Gates at Newburgh, 1783: A Misunderstood Role. With a Rebuttal by Richard H. Kohn," *Wiliam and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 29 (1972): 143; "The Address and Petition of the Officers of the Army of the United States," December 1782, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 24: 291-93.

[26] Robert A. Becker, "Currency, Taxation, and Finance, 1775-1787," *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the American Revolution,* eds. Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Reference, 1991), 370.

[27] Alexander Mc Dougall to Henry Knox, 9 January, 1783, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress,* ed. Edmund C. Burnett (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1921-1938), 7: 14; C. Edward Skeen, "The Newburgh Conspiracy Reconsidered. With a Rebuttal by Richard H. Kohn.," *Wiliam and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 31 (1974): 274.

[28] Kohn, "Inside History of the Newburgh Conspiracy," 194; Gaillard Hunt, ed. *The Writings of James Madison, Comprising His Public Papers and His Private Correspondence, Including Numerous Letters and Documents Now for the First Time Printed* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1900), 1: 308; Robert Morris to the president of Congress, 24 January 1783, *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States,* eds. Francis Wharton and John B. Moore (Washington,: Govt. print. off., 1889), 6: 228-29.

[29] Kohn, "Inside History of the Newburgh Conspiracy," 195.

[30] Skeen, "The Newburgh Conspiracy Reconsidered," 275.

[31] Kohn, "Inside History of the Newburgh Conspiracy," 187-220; Nelson, "Horatio Gates at Newburgh," 143-58; Skeen, "The Newburgh Conspiracy Reconsidered," 273-98.

[32] Kohn, "Inside History of the Newburgh Conspiracy," 201-02.

[33] Don Higginbotham, "The War for Independence, after Saratoga," *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*, 316; Nelson, "Horatio Gates at Newburgh," 145; Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 24: 291-93, 306-11; Skeen, "The Newburgh Conspiracy Reconsidered," 278.

[34] Kohn, "Inside History of the Newburgh Conspiracy," 202; Fitzpatrick and Matteson, eds., *The Writings of George Washington*, 26: 208; Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence; Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (New York,: Macmillan, 1971), 201; Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 24: 306-10.

[35] Samuel Shaw and Josiah Quincy, *The Journals of Major Samuel Shaw: The First American Consul at Canton: With a Life of the Author* (Boston: Wm. Crosby and H.P. Nichols, 1847), 102-07; Kohn, "Inside History of the Newburgh Conspiracy," 210.

[36] Kohn, "Inside History of the Newburgh Conspiracy," 212-213.

[37] Friedrich von Steuben to Henry Knox, 25 February 1783, *The Papers of General Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben,* eds. Edith von Zemensky and Robert J. Schulmann (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus Internation Publications, 1982). Microfilm. The founding of the Society of the Cincinnati is well researched and documented. Winslow Warren, *The Society of the Cincinnati* (Boston: Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati, 1929); Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati," 54-85; Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 15-44 all offer detailed accounts. This section intends merely to summarize the high points and analyze the institution of the society to illustrate its subsequent vulnerability to criticism.

[38] *Hartford Connecticut Journal*, 5 June 1783; the article purports to be reprint from recent Philadelphia papers, which I have been unable to identify. Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati," 58. states that the proposal was published in Philadelphia on 25 March 1783. It is even possible that the idea originated in Germany: Minor Myers located an early report on the purported order in the *Gazette des Deux Ponts*, 12 March 1783, published in Zweibrücken. The marquis and comte the Deux Ponts' service in America might explain the curious anecdote. At any rate, the "Order of Freedom" remains little more than a curious tidbit of trivia, with no consequences for the United States or even the Society of the Cincinnati. Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 21-22.

[39] Thomas Jefferson's Diary, 16 March 1788, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson,* eds. Julian P. Boyd and L. H. Butterfield (Princeton,: Princeton University Press, 1950), 13: 11.

[40] Knox' original draft of the institution is reproduced in Francis S. Drake, *Memorials of the Society of the Cincinnati of Massachusetts* (Boston: Society of the Cincinnati of Massachusetts, 1873), 6-7.

[41] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 23-25.

[42] Ibid., 123.

[43] The word "institution" refers to the written constitution or charter of the society.

[44] The Institution of the Society of the Cincinnati is reprinted in Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 258-65.

[45] for the importance of the French membership to the preservation of the Cincinnati, see chapter 5; for the fate of the French society, see chapter 8.

[46] Harris Elric Sproat and William Macpherson Hornor, *A Synopsis of the Records of the State Society of the Cincinnati of Pennsylvania. Including a List of Its Origninal Members and Their Successors; Brought Down to July 4, 1909* (Philadelphia: Press of Allen Lane & Scott, 1909), 20.

[47] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 33-34.

[48] two in-depth accounts of the Philadelphia mutiny and its political background are Kenneth R. Bowling, "New Light on the Philadelphia Mutiny," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 101 (1977): 419-50 and Mary A. Gallagher, "Reinterpreting the 'Very Trifling Mutiny' at Philadelphia in June 1783," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 119 (1995): 3-35; see also Ward, *The American Revolution*, 224-226; Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 35-37; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 50.

[49] Bowling, "New Light on the Philadelphia Mutiny," 425.

[50] *Philadelphia Independent Gazeteer*, 7 June 1783; Gallagher, "Reinterpreting the 'Very Trifling Mutiny' at Philadelphia in June 1783," 16.

[51] This qualification did not become official Congressional policy until 19 June.

[52] Bowling, "New Light on the Philadelphia Mutiny," 427-28.

[53] The timing, impact, and authorship of this order is the basis of some debate. Bowling, "New Light on the Philadelphia Mutiny," 428-29 ties it to his interpretation that Gouverneur Morris may have been instrumental in provoking the mutiny; Gallagher, "Reinterpreting the 'Very Trifling Mutiny' at Philadelphia in June 1783," 21, 32-33 disputes this notion and points out that there were also orders making the fourloughs voluntary. At any rate, one can assume that camp rumour distorted the situation and that the troops certainly interpreted the order as a provocation.

[54] see for example Ward, *The American Revolution*, 226.

[55] Bowling, "New Light on the Philadelphia Mutiny," 430-34.

[56] Ibid.: 436-40.

[57] Gallagher, "Reinterpreting the 'Very Trifling Mutiny' at Philadelphia in June 1783," 26-27.

[58] Ibid.: 29-30.

[59] Bowling, "New Light on the Philadelphia Mutiny," 450.

Chapter Three

A Political Wolf in Sheep's Clothing:

The Conspiracy Theory against the Society of the Cincinnati

> *Our Friends find a Change necessary in the Constitution, & as I endeavoured formerly to shew have created this political Wolf & presented it in Sheeps Cloathing & to recommend the harmless Creature they have christned it with the venerable Name of Cincinnatus.*
>
> *Elbridge Gerry[1]*

A Chronology of Fear

When they founded the Society of the Cincinnati in the early summer of 1783, the Continental officers did not anticipate the storm of outrage it would generate. In the first few months of its existence, knowledge about, let alone criticism of the Cincinnati was not widespread. There were, however, a few critical voices within the officer corps. Two Massachusetts generals, William Heath and Timothy Pickering, had misgivings about the institution.[2] Heath, despite having been one of the organizers, was skeptical of the institutional framework and its resemblance to a knightly order, fearing that such an organization would be unpopular. Henry Knox commented on Heath's misgivings: "With a sagacity peculiar to himself, he thinks through the mist he sees spirits and hobgoblins of hideous forms and no popularity."[3] Heath joined the Cincinnati, but later claimed it was only to avoid the impression that some sort of dishonor had prevented him from doing so. In subsequent years, his relationship with the society was rocky; in the 1790s, he had his name deleted from the membership roster.

Similarly, Pickering later recalled that he felt ill at ease that "a small number of officers, who, compared with the great body of their republican fellow citizens were but a drop in a bucket, should arrogate to themselves the sublime duty of preserving the rights and liberties of human nature." Nevertheless, like Heath, Pickering signed up in order to avoid the "reproach of singularity."[4] However, before long the "spirits and hobgoblins" of Heath's imagination reared their heads in the form of heated attacks

against the newly formed Society of the Cincinnati. Over the course of the 1780s and into the next decade, the Cincinnati became the target of a conspiracy theory accusing them of subversion and treason against the young American republic.

It was not until September 1783 that a wider public became aware of the existence of the Cincinnati, and the first instances of criticism took place. The town meeting of Killingworth, Connecticut, was probably the first public forum to express its irritation at the formation of the society, especially at the purpose of its charitable fund, its connection to the unpopular commutation policy, and the officers' "skill in the arts of intreague."[5] Almost at the same time, General Arthur St. Clair reported to Steuben that he had deliberately delayed organizing a state society in Pennsylvania. St. Clair feared that the legislature would frown upon "any thing that looks like distinguishing the military Profession" and reject legislation designed to benefit the returning veterans.[6]

The harshest condemnation during this earliest period of criticism came from a dubious source: Michaelis, a British officer and spy. Michaelis attended the 1783 Princeton commencement in disguise. He observed that the Cincinnati, who in his opinion formed a "pactum confederationis," were sitting together "en corps." The Briton expected that Washington, with the aid of the Cincinnati, would eventually overthrow an unpopular Congress. He also claimed to have overheard a conversation in a Princeton tavern that by the next summer, Congress would have no need for a place to sit.[7]

Despite such disparate grumbling, the Cincinnati might have escaped major public scrutiny if not for Aedanus Burke of South Carolina. Burke, an Irish immigrant with a reputation for eccentricity and a history of opposing the vengeful anti-loyalist policies of the South Carolinian elite, learned of the society's existence in early October.[8] By the end of the month, Burke published under the pseudonym "Cassius" a sixteen page pamphlet entitled *Considerations on the Society or Order of Cincinnati; lately instituted by the Major-Generals, Brigadier-Generals, and other Officers of the American Army. Proving that it creates a race of hereditary Patricians or Nobility. Interspersed with remarks on its consequences to the Freedom and Happiness of the Republic. Addressed to the People of South Carolina, and their Representatives.*[9] The

lengthy title summed up Burke's accusations fairly well. The South Carolinian interpreted the Cincinnati as nothing less than an attempt to establish a hereditary aristocracy in newly republican America. The pamphlet's biblical motto "Blow ye the trumpet in Zion," was intended as a clarion call to oppose what Burke saw as sinister threat to the American polity.

The pamphlet's readership and influence soon exceeded the boundaries of South Carolina. Reprints in Philadelphia, Hartford, and elsewhere, both in pamphlet form and in newspapers[10], made the text available throughout the United States, and it received widespread attention in the press and private correspondence. In many ways, Burke's *Considerations* was the seminal text that transformed vague criticism of the society into a fully fledged conspiracy theory and served as the basis for ever more agitated attacks against the Cincinnati.

Citizens concerned by Burke's conclusions started to write their political leaders, summarizing and repeating the South Carolinian judge's arguments, as letters to Francis Dana and Samuel Adams attested.[11] The extra-legal and highly controversial Middletown convention in Connecticut, which had been primarily concerned with commutation up to this point, publicly recommended *Considerations* to its supporters.[12] Not everybody was sure what to make of the outcries and alarms. French-born US citizen Peter Stephen Duponceau commented wryly in a letter to New York politician Robert R. Livingston: "Some people say that the Cincinnati must become extremely dangerous or extremely ridiculous".[13]

Late November 1783 saw the first of many letters on the topic by Elbridge Gerry, who more than any other man, would establish the opposition against the Cincinnati as a serious topic among America's political elite. The long-serving Congressman from Massachusetts, who later became delegate to the federal convention, governor of Massachusetts, envoy to France, and vice-president of the United States, wrote to his even more famous friend John Adams on the danger he felt the Cincinnati posed. Gerry asked, "how rediculous to exchange a british Adminstration, for one that would be equally tyrannical, perhaps much more so?"[14] Another Massachusetts delegate to Congress, Samuel Osgood, wrote John Adams voicing identical concerns.[15]

In the early months of 1784, one prominent American politician after the other attacked the Cincinnati in public and private. Arthur Lee wrote to John Adams that the Cincinnati "gives alarm to the People, & this seems to increase."[16] Benjamin Franklin sent a lengthy letter to his daughter Sarah Bache, criticizing the "hereditary knights" of America.[17] John Jay wrote of his distrust to Gouverneur Morris and Gerry[18], and the Marquis de Lafayette reported to George Washington that practically all the American diplomats in Europe were "violent against" the Cincinnati.[19] John Adams, so often the recipient of warnings against the machinations of the Cincinnati, fully endorsed that criticism, calling the organization "the first step taken to deface the beauty of our temple of liberty."[20] Abigail Adams noted the hostile public opinion against the Cincinnati in a letter to her husband: "The Cincinnati makes a Bustle, and will I think be crushed in its Birth."[21] Throughout the mid-1780s Gerry, Samuel Adams, John Adams, Stephen Higginson, and James Warren engaged in a lively correspondence on the topic of the Cincinnati, condemning the organization and worrying about its effects on the American republic.

In the public sphere, too, attacks on the society were a common topic in early 1784. The Boston *Independent Chronicle*, for example, reprinted Burke's *Considerations* in their entirety, followed by the institution of the society and various anti-Cincinnati articles. The most important of these was the anonymized reprint of a letter from Gerry to Samuel Adams, which accused the Cincinnati of establishing a parallel power structure independent of, and soon to be dominant over the legitimate political system of state legislatures and Congress.[22] Anonymous criticism ran rampant. The Hartford *Connecticut Courant*, for example, ran an ongoing argument between "A.Z.", a defender of the Cincinnati, and "Z.A.," an accuser.[23]

Official voices condemned the Cincinnati, as well. In February 1784, the Massachusetts state legislature dealt the Cincinnati the sharpest blow to date. The General Court launched an inquiry by a joint committee of both houses to consider measures against any plans to "promote undue distinction among the citizens of this free state and tending to establish an hereditary nobility" – a clear reference to the Cincinnati and Burke's arguments against the society.[24] On 25 March 1784, the *Independent*

Chronicle published the committee's report, a scathing condemnation of the society, which a number of newspapers throughout the United States soon reprinted. Only a few weeks earlier, Governor Benjamin Guerard of South Carolina had addressed the state legislature, accusing the Cincinnati of assuming "a power coeval with that of legislation," which, if unchecked, would endanger the success of the revolution. While the South Carolina state legislature did not take action against the Cincinnati, Guerard's speech demonstrated that the uproar was not limited to New England.[25]

As the first general meeting of the society, scheduled for May 1784, drew near, president-general Washington realized the explosive potential of the widespread and diverse attacks. Ever mindful of his public reputation and an avid reader of newspapers, Washington felt torn between the friendship he felt towards his officers and the obvious unpopularity of the Cincinnati. He consulted Jefferson, whose political insights he valued, but who, next to John Adams and Gerry, would become the most prominent and persistent critic of the society. Jefferson's letter to Washington of 16 April 1784 made it clear that the only way to make the Cincinnati palatable to Congress and the public was to abolish it. Jefferson claimed to only report the opinions of others, but it was obvious that he, too felt the society was unconstitutional, subversive of republican equality and liberty, and politically dangerous. Jefferson strongly urged the former commander-in-chief to "stand on ground separated from it."[26]

As a result, Washington proposed massive changes in the institution in order to make the society more acceptable. Among these changes were an end to heredity, a revision of the institution to eliminate all references to politics, the admission of no more honorary members, the placement of the charitable fund under the authority of the state legislatures, and no more meetings of the general society. All these reforms directly corresponded to the various attacks on the society in the months before, and Washington threatened implicitly that he would resign if the changes were not adopted. The general society adopted a revised instruction incorporating Washington's reforms, which was then communicated to the state societies by circular letter. More importantly, the revised institution was also reprinted in a number of newspapers,

along with a letter from George Washington explaining the changes and arguing that there was no more cause for alarm.[27]

Eventually, these reforms would come to naught. Several state societies failed to adopt the reform of 1784, and the general society acknowledged in 1800 that the original institution was still in effect. These shortcomings were lost on most observers, and the reforms were partially successful in quieting at least some of the public criticism. Subsequently, newspapers carried anti-Cincinnati articles far less frequently than before. Knox reported to Washington that the opposition to the Cincinnati was "dead;" Thomas Stone of Maryland also concluded that the amended institution had removed all objections against the society.[28] However, the opposition to the Cincinnati did continue; in fact, some of the most heated accusations occurred after the publication of the revised institution.

In June 1784, the Philadelphia *Freeman's Journal* printed a correspondent's opinion that the changes were by no means sufficient and the newspaper should "*sound an alarm* to the remotest part of the United States."[29] At the Yale commencement in September, the topic still seemed contentious enough for three graduates to give a "forensic disputation" on the question: "Is the Society of the Cincinnati dangerous to the liberties of the United States?"[30] The *Boston Gazette* reported in September that "The Order of the *Cincinnati* in America is *unpopular* thro' all the colonies: the people say it is a degree of *Nobility*; and while they hold out the *plough* as an emblem of *Cincinnatus*, they means to bring the lower order of the state to *yoke*."[31] Clearly, not all fear of the Cincinnati's allegedly insidious machinations had ended with the publication of the revised institution.

During the following year, distrust of the Cincinnati surfaced periodically in political debate, private correspondence, and published texts. In September 1785, Massachusetts' congressional delegates Gerry, Samuel Holten, and Rufus King wrote to Governor James Bowdoin. Fearing a Cincinnati plot, the three refused to present a resolution by the Massachusetts legislature to Congress calling for a convention to revise the Articles of Confederation.[32] Throughout 1785, Gerry led a vigorous correspondence with both Samuel and John Adams, which explored in detail the many dangers these

statesmen felt the Cincinnati posed.[33] At one point, John Adams felt so frustrated and disgusted with what he feared was the imminent transformation of America from republicanism to aristocracy at the hands of the society that he announced he would leave public life and "retire to Pens Hill. The world forgetting by the world forgot."[34] Adams' frustration was so great that Mercy Otis Warren felt it necessary to assure him that his patriotism easily outshone that of the "Noble Order of the Cincinnati."[35]

The year 1785 also saw the publication in the United States of a pamphlet issued by the French Count de Mirabeau, entitled *Considerations on the Order of Cincinnatus*.[36] The similarity to Burke's title was no coincidence. The year before, Franklin had given a copy of the South Carolinian's pamphlet to Mirabeau, who substantially edited and altered it, as well as translated it into French. In turn, it was translated into German and English and finally returned to the United States by way of printings in London and Philadelphia. Mirabeau's version, too, saw the Cincinnati as an attempt to transform the American republic into a hereditary aristocracy. The Frenchman expanded on Burke's work, and added some arguments from Franklin's letter and the Massachusetts legislature resolution, thus building a kind of dossier against the society.

The accusations against the Cincinnati did not cease in 1786. When Jean Nicholas de Meusnier asked Jefferson to comment on an article on the society for the *Encyclopédie Methodique*, the Virginian complied with a lengthy set of observations that described the formation of the society, the impact of Burke's observations, and the reforms of 1784. Jefferson then continued to argue that the Cincinnati still posed a threat to the political stability of the United States. Among other things, he argued that the annual meetings would be grounds for intrigue, "for when men meet together, they will make business if they have none."[37] He was also afraid that the charitable fund would create a class of pensioners instead of virtuous citizen-farmers. Jefferson concluded that the Cincinnati should immediately melt down their badges, distribute their funds, and cease all meetings. Jefferson was not alone in his trepidations that year. Stephen Mix Mitchell of Connecticut reported that "the Society of the Cincinnati is very generally unpopular & tho't to be a dangerous body."[38] King wrote to his political

friend Gerry that the prominent role of the Cincinnati at the decennial celebration of independence in New York amounted to a "degradation of Government."[39]

The year 1787 saw a number of anti-Cincinnati letters and publications, most of them concerned with the society's alleged influence over the new Constitution. In February, Benjamin Gale of Killingworth, Connecticut, complained bitterly that the call for a more vigorous federal government was the result of Cincinnati machinations.[40] The Connecticut Journal reprinted a very critical history of the Cincinnati from the New British Annual Register in April – hardly coincidental timing, since the federal convention in Philadelphia was to commence the next month.[41] Intellectuals such as John Quincy Adams and Mercy Otis Warren expressed various misgivings about the Cincinnati in their correspondence while the Philadelphia Convention was sitting.[42] In the convention itself, Gerry briefly spoke out against the society.[43]

During the ratification debates of late 1787 and 1788, the Cincinnati remained a controversial topic. The *Boston Gazette*, for example, published a series of articles over no less than six weeks in which an anonymous author repeated nearly every accusation and argument against the Cincinnati and added a few of his own, including a comparison between the society and the ancient priesthood of the druids. Other than Burke's *Considerations*, this early example of sensationalist investigative reporting was the lengthiest and most heated publication of anti-Cincinnati material, in some ways the climax of the conspiracy theory. It was also its swansong.[44]

After ratification and Washington's inauguration in 1789, the attacks on the society slowly began to fade. Some critics like Gale continued to ramble against the Cincinnati, and short critical newspaper mentions surfaced here and there. Nevertheless, as a result of the waning direct attacks on the Cincinnati, the 1790 triennial meeting of the general society concluded with "inexpressible pleasure to find that the unreasonable and illogical clamor, which at one moment had been excited against our Institution has totally subsided."[45] The meeting's conclusion was substantially correct, as few new accusations occurred afterwards. When St. Clair renamed the main settlement of the Ohio territory "Cincinnati," there were apparently no complaints. Just a few years

earlier, critics like Samuel Adams might have seen this act as a confirmation of their darkest fears.[46]

By the 1790s, the criticism against the Cincinnati became material for entertainment rather than cause for political controversy. In *Modern Chivalry*, Hugh Brackenridge published a humorous story featuring a Cincinnati captain who ran into all sorts of misunderstandings about his society.[47] Republican politicians and pundits sometimes portrayed the Cincinnati as part of the Federalists party and recalled the earlier ire against the society's allegedly aristocratic tendencies, but by this time any attacks against the veteran officers were clearly a subordinate issue. The urgent fears that the conspiracy theory had generated between 1784 and 1788 never resurfaced, and the controversy ceased to be a significant factor of political life in America.

What was it that the Cincinnati's critics feared so much about an organization of veteran officers? The conspiracy theory was made up of several aspects that critics stressed or de-emphasized in their writings. Some felt the society was a tool of French intrigue, while others argued the Cincinnati wished to establish themselves as the nobility of America. Over the course of the 1780s, the society's opponents accused the Cincinnati of everything from bad judgment to outright treason, or even expected them to establish a monarchy in the United States. Some critics came up with original ideas, whereas others merely compiled and elaborated on existing accusations. Nor were the various aspects of the conspiracy theory mutually exclusive; the anti-Cincinnati writers mixed and matched their concerns freely. Yet whatever their specific trepidations, a large number of political observers agreed that the Society of the Cincinnati posed a deadly threat to the fragile republican order of the United States.

A French Blessing

One aspect of the conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati stipulated that the society was the dupe of a power far more experienced at intrigue than any American organization: the French court. In the early years of the controversy, a number of New Englanders felt that the Society of the Cincinnati, with its resemblance to a knightly

order and direct ties to French officers, was an alien body in the republican polity of America and served the interests of Versailles. Interestingly, this idea began largely independent of Burke's *Considerations*. While Burke at one point denounced the Cincinnati as a "poisonous *exotic* plant taking root throughout the land,"[48] he did not specifically point to France as the perpetrator, nor did he focus on accusations of foreign influence in a significant way.

Starting in the fall of 1783, concerned political leaders began writing to John Adams, who had been a central figure in dealing with the French during the peace negotiations, and had struggled not to let the United States become too dependent on its monarchist allies. Adams' correspondents voiced their concern about what they felt was a French plot. In a November 1783 letter to Adams, Gerry clearly meant the French when he argued that the Cincinnati were "supposed to have had its Birth in a foreign climate." Gerry warned that "this project may answer the End of Courts that aim at making Us subservient to their political purposes, but can never be consistent with the Dignity or Happiness of the united States."[49] Only a few weeks later, Samuel Osgood reported that "the Idea did not originate this Side of the Atlantic."[50] Another revolutionary stalwart, Arthur Lee, was less circumspect about assigning blame. In January 1784, he wrote to Adams about the Cincinnati: "To one of your discernment it is unnecessary to say what may probably be the consequences of such an Association. It is conjectured that the french are at the bottom of it."[51]

Apparently convinced by his correspondents, Adams in early 1784 wrote a letter endorsing their accusations, which became public knowledge.[52] In response, the Marquis de Lafayette, the personification of the French-American alliance, urged Adams to reconsider his critical opinions when he wrote that "it is written from Amsterdam, that Mr. John Adams is very violent against the Society of the Cincinnati, and calls it a *French blessing*."[53] Adams replied that he was not a violent man and thus not violently opposed to anything, but confirmed that he had "not seen with pleasure, approbation, or indifference, the introduction into America of so great an innovation as an order of chivalry."[54] Reacting to Adams' criticism, Knox wrote to Steuben that the society had "occasioned great jealousies among the good people of New England, who say it is an

altogether outlandish creature, formed by foreign influence. It is still heightened by a letter from one of our ministers, who intimates that is was formed in Europe to overthrow our happy Constitution."[55] George Washington received a letter from Knox which voiced the same concerns.[56]

The society proved quite vulnerable to accusations of foreign subversion, because of its French members. French Cincinnati, as officers of Louis XVI, were practically by definition members of a hereditary nobility. Despite the general popularity of such heroes as Lafayette, many Americans felt uncomfortable with that fact. Therefore, when the King of France allowed the Cincinnati to wear their eagle badges at his court – a rare privilege for foreign decorations – Jay complained to Gerry that his Majesty had done so without asking the consent of Congress. To Jay, the French endorsement of the society was meddling in American affairs.[57] Similarly, when the Boston *Independent Chronicle* reported on a proposed grant of 60,000 livres by French officers to the American Society of the Cincinnati, it naturally raised the level of suspicion about foreign influence in the United States.[58]

France was an ally, so why the sudden burst of anti-French suspicion in connection to the Cincinnati? Gerry pointed at the insurmountable differences between the American and French systems of government. "It is well known that Despotic Governments, & every Subject thereof," he wrote, "have a natural Hatred to republican Governments & all who support them. This indeed may subside, in Cases of an accidental union of Interests, whilst the Exertions of both are necessary for obtaining their common Object; but when this is attained; the inherent natural Aversion will again operate & ought to be guarded against."[59] Likewise, the Massachusetts legislature felt that the French Cincinnati were "the subjects of, and strongly attached to a government essentially different in principle as well as form, from the republican constitutions in the United States."[60] Samuel Adams was offended by the prospect of Frenchmen meddling in American affairs, and described the Cincinnati as "a Junction of Subjects of different Nations (&those Nations widely different in their principles of Government.)" Doubting that the Cincinnati had a right to organize without legislative

approval in the first place, he was certain that they had no right to "call in foreign Aid for these Purposes."[61]

In a lengthy and elaborate indictment, Stephen Higginson argued that France wished to establish economic and political dominance over the United States. For this purpose, the French were sowing the seeds of discord throughout America, such as "the great fermentation excited by the commutation of the Officers," as well as "the institution of the Cincinnati."[62] France's interest in all this, Higginson argued, was to subvert the republican government of the United States and cause another revolution; "the Government will then become despotic and wholly dependent on that Court."[63] Effectively, Higginson feared, France wished to become America's new colonial master, and for that purpose plotted to transform American politics into something more compatible with the *ancien regime.* To him, the Society of the Cincinnati were the spearhead of that effort.

Higginson's correspondent Gerry described just how the Cincinnati would serve French interests. France's problem, Gerry wrote, was that the annually elected Congress made it difficult to secure any sort of lasting influence, because its membership changed too often. "To remedy this Inconvenience, our *Friends* find a Change necessary in the Constitution, & as I endeavoured formerly to shew have created this political Wolf & presented it in Sheeps Cloathing, & to recommend the harmless Creature they have christned it with the venerable Name of Cincinnatus."[64] Unlike congressional terms, membership in the Cincinnati was permanent and hereditary; the society thus made an ideal bridgehead for French bribes: "May not Money be well applied in securing the Influence first of the military Congress [the general society], & afterwards of the leading Members in the military Conventions [the state societies], to produce a Change, an overthrow of our Constitution?" Undoubtedly, the prestige and reputation of the Cincinnati would give any such attempts the appearance of patriotism; but behind it would be "all the Scribblers and Tools of a foreign Court."[65]

The fears of French subversion were only an early stage of the conspiracy theory. After 1784, concerns about the machinations of foreign courts made way for more domestic suspicion. Gerry, for example, reported to John Adams: "The tales which you

have heard of Gallicans and Antigallicans, British and Antibritish, are without founda-
tion. Congress cannot be more free from foreign an domestic influence than they now
are…" Even so, Gerry cautioned that "the Cincinnati indeed may be considered as an
exception."[66] For the most part, the society's critics came to the conclusion that French
influence on the Cincinnati was the least of their worries, as the officers' organization
sported features that seemed even more ominous.

Patricians of America

The most central, widespread, and damaging accusation against the Society of
the Cincinnati was the charge that they planned to establish a hereditary nobility, or
had already done so. To this denunciation the Cincinnati were particularly vulnerable,
due to the rule of heredity and their overall resemblance to European knightly orders
such as the Order of St. Louis or the Order of the Garter. Indeed, while the Cincinnati
had chosen to refer to themselves as a society, their detractors typically insisted on call-
ing them an order. This linguistic distinction became a very consistent symptom in the
debates about the Cincinnati, and was adhered to almost without exception. Accusers
also typically referred to the president-general of the society as the grand master, an-
other reference to the aristocratic orders of Europe. All the Cincinnati's detractors
agreed that the introduction of a hereditary nobility would inevitably destroy republi-
canism in America, and constituted a reversal or at least perversion of the American
Revolution.

The principal protagonist of the nobility accusations was Aedanus Burke of
South Carolina, one of the Cincinnati's earliest and most vehement critics. His *Consid-
erations on the Society of Order of Cincinnati* was the lengthiest, most widely distrib-
uted, and most sophisticated representation of the conspiracy theory; it was an early
example of a genre of political literature that would continue with the works of John
Robison and Abbé Barruel and persist into the present day. Burke was nothing if not
meticulous. Quoting the Cincinnati institution at length, he proceeded to offer a close,
malevolent reading of practically every aspect of the society's organization, at times
interspersed with historical parallels, legal scholarship, and observations on the politi-

cal situation in the United States and South Carolina. Drawing on the imagery of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Burke called on the people of the United States to expose the secret treachery of the Cincinnati, as the angel Ithuriel had exposed the devil by touching him with his spear. "However plausible the external appearance, under which it [the society] now sits transformed," Burke argued that exposure "would oblige it, as the fallen angel in paradise, to start up in its own true hideous shape and likeness."[67]

According to Burke, the Cincinnati appeared to be nothing more than a harmless fraternal and charitable association. However, he pointed out three features that lurked beneath the cover of innocence and proved that "this creating of a nobility, and breaking through our constitution, just as we were setting out in the world, is … turning the blessings of Providence into a curse upon us."[68] These features were heredity, distinction, and privilege, wrapped in a bundle of secrecy.

Ithuriel's spear did not have to stab deeply to expose the blatant dissonance in the society's rules. The institution stipulated that membership would be bequeathed from father to son, or failing direct descendants, to the nearest male progeny. Burke, of course, did not accept this feature as the harmless desire not to let the legacy of revolutionary achievement die. To him, the rule of hereditary meant nothing less than "a title of peerage to them and their heirs male, remainder to their heirs general,"[69] in the legal parlance of the day. Secondary rules only stressed the importance of the hereditary feature, such as the stipulation that honorary members could not exceed one quarter of the hereditary ones. Heredity was particularly vicious, Burke cautioned, because while the original Cincinnati were undoubtedly men of worth, their descendants could not draw on the experiences and hardships of war to form their character. Raised on an aristocratic legacy, the Cincinnati of the future would quickly assume the arrogance of European peers.

Heredity alone, of course, did not a nobility make; after all, yeoman farmers bequeathed their property to their children, although usually not in a manner of strict primogeniture. The Cincinnati, Burke argued, also sought to establish themselves as a separate caste from the common people – a far worse crime. The Eagle badge, far from being a harmless bauble, stood as the most prominent symbol of that distinction, a con-

stant reminder of the Cincinnati's superiority. Even the Cincinnati's commitment to "preserve inviolate the exalted rights of human nature" was a form of distinction to Burke. He replied: "Are then, most illustrious Cincinnati, two sorts of rights belonging to human nature? Is there one kind, subordinate, and on a level with the humble condition of Plebeians? and others *more exalted*, which the citizens are incapable of preserving inviolate without the *incessant watching* of a dignified order of patricians? They must mean this or nothing." Burke concluded that the Cincinnati had raised "a *distinction*, which looks down, as from an high mountain, on all beneath them."[70] In the long run, arrogance would even deter the Cincinnati from intermarrying with the common rabble.

Distinction and heredity constituted the form of aristocratic nobility; privilege would become its nefarious substance. Burke boldly asserted that the "Cincinnati at any rate would soon *have and hold* an exclusive right to office, honors and authorities, civil and military," just as in the arbitrariest of European monarchies. Any acquisitions of wealth and power the Cincinnati could secure for themselves would also become hereditary. To make matters worse, the Cincinnati would continually scheme to preserve and add to their influence, and they would recruit the most powerful families into their ranks, making good governance impossible. Adding up the principles of heredity, distinction, and privilege, Burke concluded: "these, I say, are peers of the realm, *pares regni*, and nothing more or less…it is a deep laid contrivance to beget, and perpetuate family grandeur in an aristocratic Nobility."[71]

To make matters worse, Burke wrote, the Cincinnati went about the establishment of their nobility in secrecy, hiding behind a smokescreen of harmless charitable and fraternal interests. Because the Articles of Confederation, along with many state constitutions, forbade the establishment of titles of nobility by Congress or the legislatures, the Cincinnati had resorted to self-creation. "Had this order been created by Congress or our own legislature," Burke commented sarcastically, "even in violation of the confederation and our laws, I should not think it a matter of such moment; dukes, earls, or peers of the Cincinnati, sanctified by an act of Assembly or of Congress, would be understood by all of us."[72] But the voluntary association of the Cincinnati could op-

erate covertly, accustom the people to its presence, all the while amassing power and privileges behind the scenes with an ambition that knew no bounds.

Deception lay at the heart of the Cincinnati effort, Burke argued. "They have violated all; yet in the same breath, by way of a mask thrown ever [sic] their doings, they spread before us fine words." But republican vigilance would yet prevail; "the disguise is too thin: for in the name of Heaven, can any man in his senses believe that the remaining rights of the people which are yet left untouched, will not be invaded and violated, by men, who disdaining the condition of private citizens, as below them, left it, and mounted up to the elevated and exclusive dignity of hereditary title?"[73] The spear of Ithuriel had pointed out the devil of nobility in the disguise of a fraternal society; now the people needed to take action to preserve their liberty.

Burke's *Considerations* set the parameters for a storm of accusation, outrage, and ridicule that charged the Cincinnati with establishing a hereditary nobility. The wittiest pen to take on the Cincinnati's pretensions belonged to Benjamin Franklin, who had read *Considerations* with great interest, even sending a copy to the Comte de Mirabeau. Franklin did not have much of a problem with the Eagle emblem of the Cincinnati that so outraged Burke. He noted that the bird looked much more like a turkey than an eagle, and followed up this observation with his famous bon-mot that the turkey would have made a much better American heraldic animal in the first place because it was courageous and distinctly American where the eagle was cowardly and in the employ of too many European houses.

Franklin had no such patience with the hereditary aspect of the Cincinnati, but where Burke had responded with dire warnings, the great Philadelphian resorted to sarcasm. Using a mathematical table, Franklin demonstrated how quickly the blood of the heroes of the American Revolution would become diluted, and that in nine generations, "the number of rogues, and fools, and scoundrels, and prostitutes" among their ancestors would give future Cincinnati little reason to boast of their noble blood. Instead, Franklin suggested with a literary wink, the current Cincinnati should draw their example from the Chinese mandarins and bestow their honor upon their parents and ancestors, who could claim some responsibility for begetting heroic officers. De-

scending honors, by contrast, were not only absurd but harmful. Franklin knew only too well the pride of European nobles, and furthermore claimed that primogeniture had led to the depopulation and decultivation of the once great Spanish nation.[74]

Others took up the accusations much in the form that Burke established, often quoting *Considerations* at length. Samuel Adams received an anonymous letter from "A Minister of the Gospel," warning him of the Cincinnati sins of heredity, distinction, privilege, and secrecy, and warmly recommending Burke's pamphlet. "Minister" claimed to speak for a circle of concerned clerics and warned Adams that any silence on his part might be considered proof of collaboration with the self-created nobility.[75] This somewhat dubious author (anonymity was a common method in newspapers, but not letter-writing) need not have worried about Adams' commitment to the opposition against the Cincinnati. Adams did not come out against the society in public, but he carried on a voluminous correspondence with Gerry, John Adams, James Warren and others, always condemning what he felt was "as rapid a Stride towards an hereditary Military Nobility as was ever made in so short a Time."[76]

The American outcry over the creation of a hereditary aristocracy made a splash in diplomatic circles as well. In February 1784, the French minister plenipotentiary, the Chevalier de la Luzerne (himself an honorary member of the society mentioned in the institution) reported his bewilderment over American accusations that the Cincinnati were "a body of nobles, the existence of which endangers the liberty of America," to his superior in Paris, the Count de Vergennes. Two months later, Luzerne noted that the accusations continued unabated.[77] From Paris, Lafayette, who had his own doubts about the wisdom of heredity, expressed to Washington his concern that "most of the Americans here are violent against our Association. Wadsworth must be excepted, and Doctor Franklin said little. But Jay, Adams, and all the others, warmly blame the Army."[78] As it turned out, Lafayette's assessment was too conservative, since Franklin took aim at the society as well.

These Frenchmen knew what they were writing about. Newspapers frequently quoted from *Considerations* or otherwise attacked the Cincinnati as a hereditary nobility. Perhaps the most succinct summary of Burke's accusations came from the opposi-

tional Middletown Convention, which had organized the protests against the impost and commutation in Connecticut. The Cincinnati, the Convention proclaimed, were "distinguished from the rest of the citizens, wearing the badges of peerage, and to be paid from the purse of the people." Unless Americans were willing to lose their conventions and town meetings and to exchange republicanism for aristocracy, they had better do something about this "new and strange order of men."[79]

While most of the critics attacked the Cincinnati of the here and now, others feared the generations to come. Burke had been somewhat ambiguous on the topic, praising the Continental Army officers for their honor and competence in some places, lambasting them for malevolence and lack of judgment in others. Franklin had focused on the future but ridiculed the present. Some critics went out of their way to make clear they had all due respect for the current Cincinnati but rejected the dangerous future heredity would bring. The Cambridge town meeting instructed its delegates to the Massachusetts legislature to insist on the dissolution of the society and commented regretfully: "Sincerely as we regard those individuals who compose this body, and who have rendered essential services to the State by their exertions on the field, we can by no means consent to reward them with hereditary honors."[80] The *American Mercury* too conceded the officers honor but wished to let it die with those who earned it.[81] Even a very outspoken critic like Governor Guerard of South Carolina was primarily worried about the collateral descendants of the current Cincinnati, because "such members might turn out to be the most unworthy characters, more deserving of halters than honors."[82]

The attempted abolition of heredity in the society's 1784 reform did not entirely stop the allegations that the Cincinnati planned to establish a nobility. Just after the reform had been publicized, a correspondent of the *Freeman's Journal* suggested that the abolition of heredity was "of little or no moment."[83] Sons would still inherit their father's insignia and wear them as proudly as their ancestor, thus establishing a hereditary peerage as effectively as if the reform had never happened. Samuel Adams acknowledged that the Cincinnati had sacrificed their "bright Gem," heredity, to popular opinion. At the same time he cautioned that the society could simply bestow member-

ship by special grant to the eldest male heir of deceased members. Over time, such a practice would become the norm, until it established a *de facto* heredity. In fact, Adams mused, vanity would likely prompt the Cincinnati to extend membership not to the direct line only, but to include the collateral descendants as well, "provided they can prove themselves descended from and of the true blood of their first illustrious self-enobled Ancestor."[84]

For once the accusers were on the mark. While most critics did not notice the reform of 1784 was never fully implemented, some had keener powers of observation. John Quincy Adams caught the Cincinnati in the act of perpetuating heredity when they announced that the late Nathanael Greene's son, George Washington Greene, would receive membership in the society upon his eighteenth birthday. He concluded that "by admitting the sons of the most distinguished characters, they obtain their end, as completely as if it were professedly hereditary."[85] Only in 1788 did a newspaper publicly reveal the failure of the reform. In the first of a series of anti-Cincinnati articles, the *Boston Gazette* pointed out that one or more state societies had failed to ratify the changes; the text probably referred to New York. Outraged, the author warned his readership: "Be not *deceived*, my fellow citizens, the object of the *Order* is still to ingraft a *Nobility* in the *Constitution* of our country."[86]

Some critics feared not only an abstract notion of nobility but also the introduction of feudalism in the United States. Samuel Adams was wary of the mischief the Cincinnati could wreak in the lands that some states had granted the officers of the Continental Army. In a letter to Gerry, he demanded: "May not numbers of them join in taking up large tracts together and send for herds of men from Germany to settle them? … May not these tenants be made to hold their lands according to the ancient proper feudal tenor, military service & fealty to their landlords?" Lecturing Gerry on the origins of feudalism in Europe, Adams saw a clear parallel to the United States. In a short time, landownership and the loyalty of Germans inexperienced in republicanism would establish the Cincinnati not only as peers, but as proper feudal lords. This would undermine the structure of yeoman landholdings and introduce the concept of true peasantry to America.[87]

Similar fears prompted Jefferson to include a section in the original draft for the land ordinance of 1785 that prohibited the bearers of hereditary titles from residing in the Ohio territory. Jefferson cited this exclusion to Washington as proof that Congress disapproved of the Cincinnati, not mentioning the fact that he himself had written it. While the eventual version of the land ordinance did not contain this prohibition, the episode demonstrated the uneasiness Jefferson and others felt at the thought of large landholdings in Cincinnati hands.[88] Samuel Adams, for his part, heartily agreed with the prohibition of hereditary orders from the Western territories.[89] Independent of congressional measures, councilor William Williams of Connecticut feared that the Cincinnati were trying to gain control of Connecticut's Western Reserve on the southern shore of Lake Erie. His opposition to what he felt were the society's land-grabbing ambitions eventually led him to blows with Samuel Holden Parsons, the president of the Connecticut Cincinnati.[90]

According to the accusers, dire consequences would result from the establishment of a hereditary, privileged nobility in newly republican America. The most straightforward prediction was that republicanism would be replaced by a corrupt "tyrannical aristocracy," or that the Cincinnati would "reduce these free democratical states to a vassalage the most intolerable."[91] American observers abhorred the impact of nobility in Europe and predicted similar results for the United States. John Adams feared that the introduction of nobility would substitute "Honour for Virtue in the Infancy of a Republic," a sure recipe for disaster because hereditary inequality had "exterminated Virtue and Liberty and substituted Ambition and Slavery in all ages and countries." Without virtue, a republic could not exist.[92] Jefferson claimed that his experiences as ambassador had made him especially wary of hereditary nobility. "To know the mass of evil which flows from this fatal source, a person must be in France," he cautioned, where the yoke of nobility choked the population despite the richness and beauty of the land. Unless dissolved, the Cincinnati nobles would become a sociopolitical parasite, "a lazy lounger, valuing himself on his family, too proud to work, & drawing out a miserable existence by eating on that surplus of other men's labour which is the sacred fund of the helpless poor."[93]

Others feared that civil war would erupt as a consequence of the Cincinnati's pretensions since the American populace would not be subjugated easily. Burke explicitly warned of such consequences in *Considerations*, and others followed suit. Governor Guerard of South Carolina predicted that the Cincinnati nobility would "most certainly be generative of suspicion, jealousy, division, and domestic discord – if not ultimately open a vein, and deluge us in blood."[94] Unsurprisingly, the critics had little sympathy for an organization the *Boston Gazette* warned would "literally become the *patricians* of *America*."[95]

King George IV

It was only a small logical step from denouncing the Cincinnati for establishing a privileged, hereditary nobility, to charging them with the creation of a monarchy as well. Indeed, some anti-Cincinnati writers took that step. Burke warned that the schemes of the society would eventually "terminate in monarchical tyranny."[96] Arthur Lee shared his apprehensions in a letter to John Adams.[97] Mercy Otis Warren repeatedly accused the Cincinnati of being "ready to bow to the sceptre of a king; provided, they may be the lordlings who in splendid idleness may riot on the hard earnings of the peasant and the mechanic."[98]

However, charges of monarchic ambition were not as frequent as one might suppose, at least not in the early 1780s. For most critics, a monarchy seemed an escalation of aristocracy and the highest possible form of treason against the republican ideals of the American Revolution. The structure of the Society of the Cincinnati was most reminiscent of European knightly orders, which ultimately served kings but had their own organizational existence. Perhaps that was the reason not all that many critics directly connected the Cincinnati to the establishment of a monarchy.

There was another reason. The only thinkable candidate for king of the United States – and certainly for one installed by the Society of the Cincinnati – was Washington, who as the Continental Army's commander had led the troops to victory. Therein lay the rub: in the 1780s, one simply *did not* criticize Washington, the only man universally admired from New England to Georgia, the only founding father to achieve

secular sainthood during his lifetime. Furthermore, Washington was a masterful manager of his own reputation. He had very effectively publicized his decision to return to private life at Mount Vernon, a move that had earned him the title of the American Cincinnatus. Nevertheless, the most beloved man in America was also the president-general of its most hated organization, and with this fact the critics had to come to terms.

Some reacted by explicitly or implicitly excepting Washington from their accusations; during the early phase of the Cincinnati's existence, this stance was aided by some confusion whether Washington really was the chief of the society or not. The earliest public criticism against the Cincinnati, expressed by the Killingworth town meeting in September 1783, simply reminded the society's members that the historical Cincinnatus had quietly returned to civilian life. The same held true for "his Excellency their patriotic General, who may justly be reputed under God, the *saviour* and *deliverer* of his country." The latter-day Cincinnati, the citizens of Killingworth admonished, would do well to follow his example.[99] When John Adams, who would later serve as Washington's vice-president, heard a rumor that Congress had offered Washington an opportunity to become dictator, he responded that such a calamity could never happen "unless my countrymen run generally mad."[100] Even the author of the *Boston Gazette's* anti-Cincinnati series admitted that while amiable and virtuous Washington was alive, America was safe from the dangers of having the same man as president of the United States and president-general of the Cincinnati. But once the great man was gone, "how long before this *twofold President* will possess the powers of a *Roman Emperor?*"[101]

Other authors were more ambivalent about Washington's involvement in the society. In *Considerations*, Burke claimed that Washington had remained silent and neutral on the business of the Cincinnati, other than becoming an "honorary member" of the society. Burke was probably not quite aware that Washington had accepted the post of president-general. The South Carolinian was far more interested in bashing Steuben, whom he believed to be the society's leader, and who as a European nobleman made a much better target. But the comment at least expressed some subtle disap-

pointment that Washington had not taken the lead against the Cincinnati as he had done against the crisis at Newburgh.[102] Samuel Adams felt about Washington that it was "a very great Misfortune to these States that he is a Member." Washington deserved high esteem and trust, and thus any organization he was attached to would gain influence and luster. Yet Adams cautioned that hero-worship ill served the American people in this case: "We ought not however to think any Man incapable of Error."[103]

A few cautious iconoclasts, however, did blame Washington in conjunction with the Cincinnati controversy. The *Connecticut Journal* reported that "his conduct in this is perhaps the only blot that can be fixed upon the character of this venerable hero. It is impossible, however, wholly to exculpate him." Either Washington had been bamboozled by the Cincinnati, in which case he came out as gullible, or he had agreed to the society's machinations. In that case, "his ideas of liberty must have been less pure and elevated than they have been represented to be," i.e. Washington was a liar.[104] Similarly, the Antifederalist "A Republican" conceded that a cabal of ambitious Cincinnati had more or less forced the post of president-general upon Washington. At the same time, the author cautioned, the fact that Washington let them do this did not speak well for his republican principles.[105]

Gerry went a step further when he doubted Washington's commitment to republican government in a letter to Higginson. Perhaps the general had not intended to become party to the subversion of the American republic, Gerry argued, but once the Cincinnati's plans were set in motion, Washington himself was powerless to stop them. And then, even the virtue of the great Virginian would not suffice, for "when a Crown is in View, who will answer for the patriotism of any Man? Who will be responsible for it?" To believe that even Washington could resist the lure of royalty was the hallmark of a fool. "If *any person* is so unwise as to offer himself a pledge, for the self denial of another to a Throne, or of a great Number of enterprizing Men to peerdoms, under such powerful Temptations," Gerry warned, "*that person* may be generous in his Disposition, but I will venture to pronounce him in point of Sagacity, as being unfit, & unqualified for a Statesman."[106]

Only Gale dared an even blunter of assessment of Washington's commitment to republican rule. In 1789, only a few months after Washington's inauguration as first president of the United States, Gale wrote to Francis Dana that the American Cincinnatus planned to "govern these states…and form them into one absolute or limited monarchy with the assistance of the Cincinnati of France and America."[107] Such extreme accusations against Washington would not be heard again until Thomas Paine returned from France in the 1790s with a personal axe to grind. Most Americans, even those who believed that the Cincinnati were a nefarious plot against republicanism, found the concept of Washington harboring royal ambitions unthinkable. They were right, as the Virginian displayed a lifelong commitment to republican rule. He conclusively proved this in 1796 by not seeking a third term as president, setting a precedent that lasted until the days of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. However, even the hint of accusation in the 1780s prompted the general into a flurry of anxious efforts to control the damage to his reputation, and inspired him to urge the Cincinnati to reform in 1784.

The Shadow Government

The strongest charge against the Cincinnati was the idea that the society in fact constituted an insidious parallel structure to the legitimate government of the United States. As with the nobility accusations, this was an area where the Cincinnati were particularly vulnerable. After all, they *were* the only organization in the United States that mirrored the political structure of state legislatures and Congress so minutely with their division into regional meetings, state societies, a general society, and executive officers on both levels. Burke, who was otherwise more concerned with his charges of hereditary aristocracy, intuitively called the first meeting of the general society, to be held in the spring of 1784, "a general convention or congress of the order." Burke's language deliberately mirrored political terminology.[108] If one assumed that the Cincinnati had a subversive political agenda, it was only logical to denounce the society for setting up a secret parallel governing body for the United States – a shadow government.

The most damaging accusations of this kind came from the most official and prestigious body ever to openly denounce the Cincinnati: the Massachusetts state legis-

lature. The report of the investigative joint committee of both houses, which included such prestigious members as King, condemned the society for establishing that most horrible of political sins, an *imperium in imperio,* a state within the state. Published in many newspapers in late March 1784, shortly before the first meeting of the general society, the committee members flatly accused the Cincinnati of usurping powers that only an elected legislature body might legitimately exert.

Taking their cue from the Cincinnati institution's commitment to consider "at each meeting, the principles of the Institution," and to adopt "the best measures to promote them," the Commonwealth legislators concluded that the society's organization "savors of a disposition to become independent of lawful and constitutional authority." By meeting on district, state, and federal levels and engaging in regular correspondence for the exchange of information, the Cincinnati would obtain an "undue influence…destructive of the liberties of the States; and the existence of their free constitutions." The committee argued that the society's structure would provide a powerful tool for subversion. Furthermore, the military character of the society, whose members were used to immediate obedience in the field and had been separated from civil society over the course of eight years, further heightened the danger. The committee concluded that the "Society, called the CINCINNATI, is unjustifiable, and if not properly discountenanced, may be dangerous to the peace, liberty and safety of the United States, and this Commonwealth in particular." They urgently recommended that the next session of the legislature take measures against the society.[109]

If the committee's reservations remained abstract, Gerry had a more specific idea of how the Cincinnati would come to dominate the political system of the United States. Gerry was not a member of the Massachusetts committee, but his influence was probably present through King, his political ally at the time. In early March, Gerry cautioned Higginson against the machinations of the Cincinnati. At their first general meeting ("in Gods Name, may it be the last!"), the society's leaders would deliberate and decide on the future shape of the federal government, along with any other policies they wished for. They would then communicate their decisions to the state societies, whose members, from the habits of military obedience, would "readily pledge

themselves to carry the Decisions of their Congress into Effect." Gerry supposed that even innocent rank and file members of the Cincinnati would agree to do their part in the hope of finally obtaining their back pay and commutation bonus.[110]

Once the fiat of the Cincinnati leadership had reached the local level, Cincinnati members would then use their personal influence with representatives and senators "to promote the Measure whether to increase the power of Congress, or for other objects in the Legislatures of the several States." If unsuccessful, the former officers would exert their pull with the soldiers of the Continental Army, along with friends and acquaintances, to gain a majority to pass binding instructions upon any recalcitrant representatives and also to succeed them at the next election. Once a critical mass of ten percent Cincinnati members held seats in the legislatures, their unity in the face of the eternal squabbling of other politicians would easily carry any measure the society felt necessary. Gerry reasoned that the actual percentage of Cincinnati in the state legislatures would soon be much higher, and consequently the number of Cincinnati in Congress would rise well beyond the five that Gerry argued where already there. "Whatever is proposed in the Cincinnati Congress, under such Circumstances," Gerry cautioned, "will be immediately adopted by the republican Congress & ratified by the Legislatures; & then you may bid adieu, a lasting & final adieu to republican principles."[111]

Gerry's misgivings did not long remain a private matter between him and Higginson, who apparently passed the letter around; it eventually ended up in the papers of Samuel Adams. It was probably Adams who leaked the letter to the Boston *Independent Chronicle*, which published it anonymously as "A letter from a gentleman in a distant state" in April 1784. A little disgruntled at having his letter published without permission, Gerry grumbled in a letter to Adams in May. However, he still stood behind his words, and admitted that "I shall be content, if any good can result from the publication."[112] The episode illustrated how permeable the boundaries were between private and public communication in spreading the conspiracy theory.

Samuel Adams' need to spread the word of the society's alleged desire to erect a secret government did not stop with the publication of Gerry's letter. Nearly at the

same time, he wrote to John Adams in England. Sam enclosed the committee report along with his own summary of the society's alleged machinations. He concluded his letter with a dire warning: "Will they not, being an Order of *Military Men*, too soon proceed to *enforce* their Resolutions, not only to the lessening of the Dignity of the States in the Eye of Europe, but putting en End to their free Existence!"[113]

Even the well-publicized reform of the Cincinnati institution in 1784 did not allay the critics' fears that the society was worming its way into a position of political supremacy. In September 1785 Gerry, bitterly disappointed that the Cincinnati had not been dissolved, felt that the reform was merely a smokescreen. A lull in the public opposition, he argued, would give the society some breathing space, so that they could establish "their Influence as to control our republican Governments & then they may reassume their first Shape & bid Defiance to Opposition." Gerry still had hopes that the Massachusetts legislature, which had exclaimed so boldly against the Cincinnati in 1784, would "sound a foederal alarm."[114] Neither Congress nor the General Court, however, publicly condemned the society after their apparent reform.

Two years later, Gale claimed proof of the society's nefarious ambitions straight from the horse's mouth. In a letter to Ezra Stiles, Gale wrote of a small company where he and others were discussing the general problems and defects of government and how the situation might further deteriorate. In that company, Gale claimed, a member of the society had been present, and when asked his opinion, the former officer "replied with vengeance in his looks, and said when that time came, he expected to have a hand in government himself."[115] As late as May 1787, around the beginning of the Federal Convention, James Warren was still worried about Cincinnati influence on republican institutions. "The Barefaced and Arrogant System of the Cincinnati Association," he wrote to John Adams, "is rapidly progressing." Chiding the people for insufficient vigilance, Warren felt outrage at the election of Cincinnati members "into the Legislatures, and the first Civil and Military Offices."[116]

In 1788, the *Boston Gazette* was even more accusatory. One article once again pointed out how the structure of the Cincinnati resembled that of the United States, taking on "all the formal parade and arrangement of a *separate government.*" Devoting

entire front pages, the *Gazette* reprinted the Massachusetts committee report. It also warned that the reform of 1784 had not stopped the Cincinnati's ambitions: "The day may be nearer at hand than people generally imagine, when this *fatal Order* shall have an ascendancy, either by the influence or numbers, in the legislatures of the States, and of Congress, or as *great officers* of State."[117]

Not only the structure of the Cincinnati worried the critics. Some felt that peripheral aspects of the society's organization might prove equally dangerous to liberty and might help the Cincinnati establish their rule. Jefferson, for example, saw the existence of honorary memberships as a stepping stone on the society's ascent to power. "A well directed distribution of them," he warned Washington in April 1784, "might draw into the order all the men of talents, of office and wealth; and in this case would probably procure an ingraftment into the government."[118] Jefferson's analysis probably prompted Washington to insist on the elimination of honorary memberships at the first meeting of the general society.

Even the ostensibly most harmless feature of the society – the charitable fund – attracted the attention of those who feared the Cincinnati might obtain undue political influence. Relief payments to the unfortunate, much like in modern charitable foundations, were to draw on the accumulated interest only. In a particularly unfair reading of the Cincinnati's institution, critics honed in on this "most known and infallible source of power in the creation of a fund, always to be increasing, and never to be alienated."[119] One observer, who otherwise followed Burke's arguments closely, felt that the South Carolinian had overlooked the danger arising from the magnitude of the fund.[120] These accusations completely ignored that most of the Cincinnati funds consisted of commutation certificates – which were as of yet practically worthless.

Even when the reform of 1784 instructed state societies to place their funds under the authority of the legislatures the accusations did not cease. Samuel Adams deduced that having the state legislatures control the charitable funds actually increased the danger. He asked, "will it not be the interest of the Cincinnati to preserve & maintain a predominant influence in the legislatures with the view of retaining or recovering the free disposal of their own unlimited funds."[121] Adams also felt that the Cincin-

nati funds, once tied to state politics under the supervision of the legislature, would turn into a slush fund, used for bribery and corruption. Samuel Osgood even suspected the Cincinnati of having their eyes on the United States treasury department.[122] It took a good deal of conspiracy-minded imagination to envision the Cincinnati as a political and fiscal octopus grabbing at every shred of power they could, but the society's critics had no shortage of fear and alarm at their disposal.

Thieves of Memory

Some opponents of the society argued that the veteran officers claimed more than their fair share of credit for the success of the American Revolution, thus usurping the memory of America's liberation. Indeed, the remembrance of the revolutionary achievement was a central feature of the Cincinnati institution, which aimed "to perpetuate…as well the remembrance of this vast event, as the mutual friendships which have been formed under the pressure of common danger, and, in many instances, cemented by the blood of the parties…"[123] Furthermore, many of the trappings and rules of the society aimed at securing the remembrance of the achievements of the Continentals: the badge, heredity, the Fourth of July meetings of the state societies, the membership patents, and the motto "esto perpetua" all pointed in this direction. Clearly, the Cincinnati claimed a special role in the public memory for themselves and their military success. While nobody denied the outstanding achievements of the Continental Army, there were a number of critics who charged that the Cincinnati illegitimately monopolized this remembrance, effectively becoming thieves of memory.

In *Considerations*, Burke – while praising the military achievements and honorable conduct of the Continental officers during the Revolution – attacked the supposedly harmless efforts of the Cincinnati to commemorate the war. The South Carolinian admonished that public memory was a job for historians, not military men. "Will not the historian," Burke asked, "more effectually transmit to posterity, the memory of the revolution, and the illustrious actions atchieved in bringing it about?"[124] An organization like the Cincinnati could pervert public gratitude into hero worship. After a few generations the memory of the revolutionary achievements would be so blown out of

proportion that the Cincinnati's descendants "might consider themselves as deriving their lineage from heaven." "Some sycophant poet," Burke argued, would surely "prostitute the talents which God gave him, for the vile purpose of dubbing with divinity, as Virgil did Augustus, a tyrant who had swallowed up the liberties of his country."[125] Only the freely given gratitude of society was legitimate; efforts to organize and perpetuate public memory were sinister and subversive.

Gerry openly doubted the legitimacy of any exclusive military claim for prominence. "It is very extraordinary," he wrote in a 1784 letter to Higginson, "that the military Gentlemen should be so vain as to suppose they have all the Merit of effecting the revolution. Very few of them were concerned in the early opposition to the Measures of the british Ministry, & the Opposers thereof risked more, or at least, as much, as any Citizens of America, whether civil or military."[126] As a signer of the Declaration of Independence, Gerry likely recalled the feeling that prompted Franklin to say "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately." Gerry felt that while he and other political leaders would likely have faced execution for treason had the Revolution failed, the military leaders had been offered pardons. Moreover, the Continental Army had not been alone in the field. "Have the Militia no part of the Honor of this Revolution?" Gerry asked. "I will venture to say, that without them We should have been inevitably, a conquered people, & that they would have defended this Country if the Army had been unfortunately cut off."[127] To Gerry, the Cincinnati were cheating the political leadership as well as the militia out of their share of credit of effecting the revolution.

Others criticized the Cincinnati for stealing the limelight, as well. Governor Guerard of South Carolina admonished the society that "wise and great men always patiently and diffidently wait for the sound of the trumpet of fame and the eulogium of the historic page," lest they endanger the legacy of the Revolution. "A contrary conduct in this instance, will furnish pretext to say that, vanity and a thirst after dignities, gewgaws and bawbles were the objects of the late contention, and not merely *liberty, freedom and patriotism*."[128] James Warren felt that the officers merited some financial consideration, but then "should be content in other respects to be on a footing with their

fellow Citizens."[129] In the *Independent Chronicle*, "People" acknowledged that the officers deserved honor, but felt that they did not possess it alone and could not transmit it to their heirs.[130] In Connecticut, the Middletown Convention accused the Cincinnati of "assuming to be the only saviors of the republic."[131] Similar remarks were widespread, mostly acknowledging the fine deeds of the Continental officers but complaining loudly against a monopoly on honor and achievement.

At the decennial of the Declaration of Independence in 1786, the controversy flared up yet again. The New York society, which under Steuben's leadership had developed a penchant for pageantry, conducted its annual meeting in truly grand style. At the same time and place, Nathaniel Gorham, the president of Congress, held an official levee in celebration of the decennial.[132] However, the congressional feast could not match the pageantry of the Cincinnati. King, a congressional delegate at the time, reported his vivid anger about this situation to Gerry on the very same day. "The Cincinnati are in the highest prosperity," King wrote. "They celebrate the Day with a splendor, exceeding anything within the practice of Government, - of course draw the Huzzas and admiration of the multitude. The Chapter of these Knights appointed a deputation of four members to present the anniversary congratulations to the President & members of Congress – they attended the Levée and I was witness to the degradation of Government…"[133]

While the 4 July meeting of the New York society in 1786 generated controversy because of its ostentatiousness, the meeting of 1789 almost resulted in a duel between Hamilton and Burke. In 1789, Hamilton – a prominent member of the New York Cincinnati – delivered a eulogy on Nathanael Greene (who had died three years earlier), at the annual meeting of the state society. As might be expected, the speech described Greene's military prowess in glowing tones befitting Greene's achievement. However, during his speech Hamilton made one very provocative remark. He praised Greene's success on the plains of Springfield despite the fact that at that point, Greene had been "a general without an army – aided or rather embarrassed by small fugitive bodies of volunteer militia, the mimicry of soldiership!"[134]

Burke interpreted Hamilton's words as a denigration of all militia. In March 1790, Burke used the floor of the House of Representatives to attack Hamilton vehemently for the mimicry comment. Angrily, Burke pointed out that in the revolution, state militia "turned the wind and tide of fortune against the British troops. … Their graves are to be seen scattered over our glades and woodlands, they are now no more; but in their name…I now declare that the assertion was false! and that the gentleman who expressed it *********************." At this point, several Congressmen apparently called Burke to order for his invective.[135]

Immediately following Burke's accusatory speech, Hamilton complained to Burke that "you made use of some very harsh expressions in relation to me." The New Yorker asserted that his comment had not intended to insult the state militias, but related merely to a specific battle in New Jersey, in which Greene had to make do with what Hamilton called "small fugitive bodies of Volunteer militia." Hamilton demanded of Burke to decide "what conduct in consequence of the explanation will be proper on your part," opening the possibility of an apology or a duel.[136] In his reply, Burke denied Hamilton's defense, arguing that others who had heard the speech had drawn the same conclusion as he. Burke recounted various heroic deeds of the South Carolina militia and commented at length on the pain he felt when he heard them denounced as the "mimicry of soldiery." As for his invective against Hamiliton, Burke noted: "if yesterday I retorted on you rather harshly your own recollection will whisper to you, and your own friends will tell you, if I mistake not, that you brought it on yourself."[137]

Since neither Burke nor Hamilton were strangers to the *code duello,* the affair might well have led to bloodshed had not an ad-hoc committee of Congressmen, including Gerry and King, intervened. They suggested that Hamilton precisely restate his disavowal, and that Burke should then retract his earlier statements. The two politicians eventually agreed to do so, and the affair was settled.[138] Burke's influence and reputation in Congress, however, were irrevocably damaged; while he had possessed the potential of being a South Carolinian congressional leader before this hissing contest, Burke ceased to be a major presence in the House afterward.[139] Hamilton contin-

ued to become a major shaping force in American politics until his often acerbic tongue eventually prompted his fateful duel with Aaron Burr.[140]

Like the accusations of nobility and subversion, the conflict over public memory was part of the controversy about the Cincinnati. At a point when American national identity was young and fragile, the remembrance of the revolution was powerfully symbolic.[141] Since the stakes were high, the conflict about who could exert a defining power over public memory was crucial. Critics like Burke and Gerry charged that Cincinnati like Hamilton were illegitimately claiming a monopoly over the meaning of the American nation. In forming a society, the officers of the Continental Army had created a powerful tool that allowed them to focus the memory of the revolution primarily on its military achievements. Naturally, those whose "claim to fame" was tied to politics or the militia tended to disagree. Thus, what could have become the glue of nationhood became a source of conflict. The memory of the American Revolution was contested ground as the Cincinnati's critics saw the society as a mechanism of illegitimate aggrandizement.

Was it a Conspiracy Theory?

Not all the accusations against the Cincinnati amounted to a coherent conspiracy theory. Franklin's comments, for example, were more sarcastic than dead serious, although the Philadelphian felt strongly about the dangers of hereditary nobility. Likewise, not every critical utterance against the society's haughty ways meant to imply that the Cincinnati were a secret cabal planning to establish political dominance over the United States. Many critics simply feared an institution that reminded them too much of European orders of chivalry; these vague notions of discomfort did not paint a picture of a destroyed republic. Others thought that the Cincinnati would only become destructive over the course of generations, when descendants less worthy than the original officers would claim privileges they did not deserve, based on a legacy of honor they did not merit. Such pessimism played an important role in the outcry against the Cincinnati, but it only attacked the heroes of the American Revolution for bad judgment, not evil intentions.

Taken together, however, many of the major treatises against the society, such as Burke's *Considerations* and the Massachusetts committee report, along with a host of highly alarmed private correspondence, constituted a conspiracy theory. According to this Jeremiad against the dark machinations of a secretive group, the Cincinnati intended nothing less than the total subversion of the American republic. Whether the French court was behind the Cincinnati or not, the conspiracy theory described the society as a small but prestigious group planning to assume power over the fledgling United States of America. To its critics, the Cincinnati posed behind a smokescreen of harmlessness and benevolence, with their talk of fraternal organization and charitable activities. But the society's real goal, the accusations ran, was to establish itself as the ruling class of America, with all the trappings and privileges of a hereditary nobility, possibly with a crowned head at the top.

In order to achieve these ends, the critics argued, the Cincinnati attempted to subvert the political system of the United States by building a centralized command structure and amassing influence over the state legislatures and Congress. The charitable fund was really a source for bribes, and the fraternal meetings of the society hid a decision-making process removed from any form of political representation. To bolster their efforts, the Cincinnati cast themselves as the only true champions of the American Revolution, turning their military achievement into a cover of false legitimacy and depriving other revolutionaries of their fair share of honor. In the end, the Cincinnati would achieve the total subjugation of the American people and establish themselves as patricians over the great mass of plebeians. Civil war or perpetual enslavement would be the inevitable result; in any case, the American republic would be destroyed.

While the critics did not necessarily agree on the details of the Cincinnati's machinations, they all figured that immediate action was required to stop the society. A strong element of revelation ran through the anti-Cincinnati diatribes. Once treachery was exposed, the argument ran, a still virtuous American public could stem the tide. Some of the accusers hoped that moderate elements in the Cincinnati itself could stop the dangerous tendencies of the society; and for quite a few, the attempted reforms of 1784 seemed to fulfill that hope. However, the more tenacious critics dismissed the

reforms or even noticed that they were not ratified by all the state societies, further fueling their fears. In the framework of the conspiracy theory, America's liberty perpetually stood on the edge of a knife. Unless stopped quickly and decisively, the Cincinnati would establish their control over the United States. These heated accusations played a not insignificant role in the politics of the 1780s, and they certainly merited the description "conspiracy theory."

While the loudest outcry against the Society of the Cincinnati surfaced during late 1783 and the first half of 1784, its echoes resounded through the American political landscape throughout the 1780s. As the American republic ran into economic, social, and most of all political problems during this critical period, a movement to bring about constitutional change came into being and quickly accelerated. As it turned out, however, the conspiracy theory about the Society of the Cincinnati cast its shadow on this most crucial of debates in the early American republic, as critics feared that the "political Wolf in sheep's Cloathing" was involved in the effort to give Congress additional powers.

Notes

[1] Elbridge Gerry to Stephen Higginson, 13 May 1784, LDC 21: 609-11.

[2] Wallace Evans Davies, "The Society of the Cincinnati in New England 1783-1800," *William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 5 (1948): 9; Minor Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983), 27-28.

[3] Henry Knox to Benjamin Lincoln, 21 May 1783, *Memorials of the Society of the Cincinnati of Massachusetts,* ed. Francis S. Drake (Boston: Society of the Cincinnati of Massachusetts, 1873), 16.

[4] Timothy Pickering, "Notes on Judge Johnson's Life of General Greene," 1 February 1823, Timothy Pickering Papers, MHi [microfilm].

[5] *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 2 September 1783.

[6] Arthur St. Clair to Friedrich von Steuben, 3 September 1783, Archives, DSoc.

[7] Varnum Lansing Collins, *President Witherspoon: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1925), 133-34; Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 48.

[8] *Charleston Gazette of the State of South Carolina*, 1 October 1783; Edgar Erskine Hume, *Early Opposition to the Cincinnati* (Providence: Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation, 1936), 5.

[9] Aedanus Burke, *Considerations on the Society or Order of Cincinnati; Lately Instituted by the Major-Generals, Brigadier-Generals, and Other Officers of the American Army. Proving That It Creates a Race of Hereditary Patricians or Nobility. Interspersed with Remarks on Its Consequences to the Freedom and Happiness of the Republic. Addressed to the People of South Carolina, and Their Representatives.* (Charleston: Timothy, 1783).

[10] The *Boston Independent Chronicle*, for example, reprinted *Considerations* in full, devoting the entire front page and half of the second page, on 29 January and 5 February 1784.

[11] William Ellery to Francis Dana, 3 December 1783, LDC 21: 173-81; "A Minister of the Gospel" to Samuel Adams, 22 December 1783, Samuel Adams Papers, NN.

[12] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 50; see also *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 6 January 1784.

[13] Peter Stephen Duponceau to Robert R. Livingston, 5 November 1783, Robert R. Livingston Papers, DLC.

[14] Elbridge Gerry to John Adams, 23 November 1783, LDC 21: 157-62.

[15] Samuel Osgood to John Adams, 14 December 1783, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress,* ed. Edmund C. Burnett (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1921-1938), 7: 416.

[16] Arthur Lee to John Adams, 14 January 1784, LDC 21: 272-273.

[17] Benjamin Franklin to Sarah Bache, 26 January 1784, *The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin,* ed. John Bigelow (New York and London,: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1887), 10: 273-81.

[18] John Jay to Gouverneur Morris, 7 February 1784, *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay,* ed. Henry P. Johnston, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1890), 3: 111; John Jay to Elbridge Gerry, 19 February 1784, *John Jay: The Winning of the Peace. Unpublished Papers 1780-1784,* ed. Richard B. Morris (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 2: 694-95.

[19] Marquis de Lafayette to George Washington, 9 March 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence Concerning the Society of the Cincinnati,* ed. Edgar Erskine Hume (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1941), 109.

[20] John Adams to Charles Spencer, 24 March 1784, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: With a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations,* ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little Brown, 1850), 9: 523-24.

[21] Abigail Adams to John Adams, 11 February 1784, *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. Richard Alan Ryerson (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1993), 5: 305.

[22] *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 29 January, 5, 12 February, 18, 25 March, 1, 8, 16, 22, 29 April 1784.

[23] *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 13 January, 19 February 1784.

[24] "Proceedings of Massachusetts Respecting the Cincinnati," 16 February 1784, Elbridge Gerry Papers, MHi [microfilm].

[25] *Charleston South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 10 February 1784.

[26] Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 16 April 1784, LDC 21: 521-24.

[27] *General Washington's Correspondence*, 152-74; Winthrop Sargent, "Journal of the General Meeting of the Cincinnati in 1784, by Major Winthrop Sargent," in *Contributions to American History*, Publications of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co. for the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1858); Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*. Chapter 5 covers the reform of 1784 and its fate in more detail.

[28] Henry Knox to George Washington, 26 July 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 201; Thomas Stone to George Washington, 12 June 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 196.

[29] *Philadelphia Freeman's Journal*, 2 June 1784

[30] *Hartford American Mercury*, 13 September 1784.

[31] *Boston Gazette*, 24 September 1784

[32] Massachusetts Delegates to James Bowdoin, 3 September 1785, LDC 22: 610-15.

[33] John Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 25 April, 19 September 1785; Elbridge Gerry to John Adams, 25 April, 3 August, 8 November 1785, Elbridge Gerry Papers, MHi [microfilm]. Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 27 August, 15 September 1785, Samuel Adams Papers, NN; Elbridge Gerry to Samuel Adams, 5 September, 30 September 1785, LDC 22: 617, 651-52.

[34] John Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 25 April 1785, Elbridge Gerry Papers, MHi [microfilm].

[35] Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, 27 April 1785, *Warren-Adams Letters: Being Chiefly a Correspondence among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1925), 2: 252-53.

[36] Gabriel-Honoré de Riquetti Mirabeau, *Considerations on the Order of Cincinnatus. To Which Are Added Several Original Papers Relative to That Institution. Translated from the French of the Count De Mirabeau* (Philadelphia: T. Seddon and W. Spotswood, 1786).

[37] Thomas Jefferson to Jean Nicholas de Meusnier, 22 June 1786, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson,* ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1905), 5: 49-59; see also Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 73.

[38] Stephen Mix Mitchell to Jeremiah Wadsworth, 3 May 1786, LDC 23: 259-60.

[39] Rufus King to Elbridge Gerry, 4 July 1786, *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King,* ed. Charles L. King (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1894), 1: 186.

[40] Philip H. Jordan, "Connecticut Anti-Federalism on the Eve of the Constitutional Convention," *Connecticut Historical Society* 28, no. 1 (1963): 14-21.

[41] *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 25 April 1787.

[42] Mercy Otis Warren to Catherine Macaulay, 2 August 1787, Mercy Otis Warren Papers, DLC; John Quincy Adams to John Adams, 30 June 1787, *Writings of John Quincy Adams,* ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913), 1: 32-33.

[43] Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 2: 214.

[44] *Boston Gazette*, 26 May, 2 June, 9, 16, 23, 30 June 1788.

[45] Hume, *Early Opposition to the Cincinnati*, 42; Richard Frank jr. Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati" (PhD dissertation, University of Georgia, 1969), 229; Minutes of the Proceedings of the Third General Meeting of the Society of the Cincinnati, Philadelphia, May 1790, Archives, DSoc.

[46] Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati," 228.

[47] Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry: Containing the Adventures of Captain John Farrago and Teague Oregan, His Servant*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: John McCulloch, 1792-1797).

[48] Burke, *Considerations*, 7.

[49] Elbridge Gerry to John Adams, 23 November 1783, LDC 21: 157-162.

[50] Samuel Osgood to John Adams, 14 December 1783, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 7: 416.

[51] Arthur Lee to John Adams, 14 January 1784, LDC 21: 272-273.

[52] the letter to the best of my knowledge no longer exists, but prompted a number of reactions, see below.

[53] The Marquis de Lafayette to John Adams, 8 March 1784, *The Works of John Adams*, 8: 187-89.

[54] John Adams to the Marquis de Lafayette, 28 March 1784, *The Works of John Adams*, 8: 192-93.

[55] Henry Knox to Friedrich von Steuben, 21 February 1784, quoted in Hume, *Early Opposition to the Cincinnati*, 7.

[56] Henry Knox to George Washington, 21 February 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 95.

[57] John Jay to Elbridge Gerry, 19 February 1784, *John Jay: The Winning of the Peace. Unpublished Papers 1780-1784*, 694-95.

[58] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 51; *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 25 March 1784

[59] Elbridge Gerry to Stephen Higginson, 4 March 1784, LDC 21: 407-12; this letter was anonymously reprinted in the *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 22, 29 April 1784.

[60] *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 25 March 1784

[61] Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 23 April 1784, *The Writings of Samuel Adams,* ed. Harry A. Cushing (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1908): 4: 300-03.

[62] Stephen Higginson to unknown (possibly John Adams), April 1784, "Letters of Stephen Higginson 1783-1804," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1897), 713-17.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Elbridge Gerry to Stephen Higginson, 13 May 1784, LDC 21: 609-11.

[65] ibid.

[66] Elbridge Gerry to John Adams, 8 November 1785, Elbridge Gerry Papers, MHi [microfilm].

[67] Burke, *Considerations*, 14.

[68] Ibid., 4.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid., 5.

[71] Ibid., 8, 14.

[72] Ibid., 4.

[73] Ibid., 5.

[74] Benjamin Franklin to Sarah Bache, 26 January 1784, *The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin,*10: 273-281.

[75] "A Minister of the Gospel" to Samuel Adams, 22 December 1783, in Samuel Adams Papers, NN.

[76] Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 23 April 1784, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 301.

[77] Chevalier de La Luzerne to Count de Vergennes, 14 February, 12 April 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 77-79.

[78] Marquis de Lafayette to George Washington, 9 March 1784. *General Washington's Correspondence*, 109.

[79] *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 7 April 1784.

[80] *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 3 June 1784.

[81] *Hartford American Mercury*, 12 December 1785.

[82] *Charleston South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 10 February 1784.

[83] *Philadelphia Freeman's Journal*, 2 June 1784.

[84] Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 27 August 1785, in Samuel Adams Papers, NN

[85] John Quincy Adams to John Adams, 30 June 1787, *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, 1: 32-33. The intention of the Cincinnati to bestow membership upon George Washington Greene had been published e.g. in the *Hartford American Mercury*, 17 June 1786.

[86] *Boston Gazette*, 26 May 1788.

[87] Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 15 September 1785, in Samuel Adams Papers, NN.

[88] Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 16 April 1784, LDC 21: 522.

[89] Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 15 September 1785, in Samuel Adams Papers, NN.

[90] DHRoC 3: 325.

[91] *Hartford American Mercury*, 12 December 1785; *Boston Gazette*, 2 April 1787.

[92] John Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 25 April 1785, in Elbridge Gerry Papers, DLC.

[93] Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 14 November 1786, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 270; Thomas Jefferson to M. Meusnier, 22 June 1786, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, 5: 59.

[94] *Charleston South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 10 February 1784.

[95] *Boston Gazette*, 2 June 1784.

[96] Burke, *Considerations*, 14.

[97] Arthur Lee to John Adams, 14 January 1784, LDC 21: 273.

[98] Mercy Otis Warren to Catherine Macaulay, 2 August 1787; Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, December 1786, Mercy Otis Warren Papers, DLC.

[99] *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 2 September 1783.

[100] John Adams to Charles Spencer, 24 March 1784, *The Works of John Adams*, 9: 523-24.

[101] *Boston Gazette*, 16 June 1788.

[102] Burke, *Considerations*, 2.

[103] Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 23 April 1784, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 301.

[104] *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 25 April 1787.

[105] *Boston Gazette*, 23 February 1789.

[106] Elbridge Gerry to Stephen Higginson, 4 March 1784, LDC 21: 410.

[107] Benjamin Gale to Francis Dana, 20 June 1789, Benjamin Gale Papers, CtY-B.

[108] Burke, *Considerations*, 2.

[109] *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 25 March 1784.

[110] Elbridge Gerry to Stephen Higginson, 4 March 1784, LDC 21: 408-09.

[111] Ibid.

[112] Elbridge Gerry to Samuel Adams, 14 May 1784, in Samuel Adams Papers, NN.

[113] Samuel Adams to John Adams, 16 April 1784, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 296-97.

[114] Elbridge Gerry to Samuel Adams, 5 September 1785, LDC 22: 617.

[115] Benjamin Gale to Ezra Stiles, 2 June 1786, Ezra Stiles Papers, CtY-B [microfilm].

[116] James Warren to John Adams, 18 May 1787, *Warren-Adams Letters*, 2: 291-292.

[117] *Boston Gazette*, 26 May 1788.

[118] Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 16 April 1784, LDC 21: 522.

[119] *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 25 April 1787.

[120] William Ellery to Francis Dana, 3 December 1783, LDC 21: 179.

[121] Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 27 August 1785, in Samuel Adams Papers, NN.

[122] Samuel Osgood to Stephen Higginson, 2 February 1784, *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings*, 5: 471-73.

[123] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 259; much of the argument about military gratitude and public memory as concerns the Cincinnati controversy is made in Sarah J. Purcell, *Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 86-91.

[124] Burke, *Considerations*, 4.

[125] Ibid., 6.

[126] Elbridge Gerry to Stephen Higginson, 4 March 1784, LDC 21: 407-12.

[127] Ibid.

[128] *Charleston South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 10 February 1784.

[129] James Warren to John Adams, 26 February 1784, *Warren-Adams Letters*, 237-38.

[130] *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 1 April 1784.

[131] *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 7 April 1784

[132] for a detailed description of the Cincinnati meeting, see Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 74-75.

[133] Rufus King to Elbridge Gerry, 4 July 1786, *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King*, 1: 186.

[134] Alexander Hamilton, "Eulogy on Nathanael Greene," 4 July 1789, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, eds. Harold C. Syrett and Jacob E. Cooke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 5: 345-51.

[135] *New-York Journal*, 15 April 1790. The exact invective Burke used is unfortunately lost. However, Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) contains a wonderful analysis of just what the revolutionaries considered fighting words.

[136] Alexander Hamilton to Aedanus Burke, 1 April 1790, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton,* 6: 333-34.

[137] Aedanus Burke to Alexander Hamilton, 1 April 1790, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 6: 335-37.

[138] Committee to Alexander Hamilton, 6 April 1790; Aedanus Burke to Alexander Hamilton, 7 April 1790, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 6: 353-54, 358.

[139] John C. Meleney, *The Public Life of Aedanus Burke: Revolutionary Republican in Post-Revolutionary South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 197.

[140] Incidentally, Burke seconded Burr in a 1799 duel with Hamilton's brother-in-law, John B. Church. Ibid., 28.

[141] Purcell, *Sealed with Blood*, 91.

Chapter Four

The Wicked and Traitorous Fabrication:

The Society of the Cincinnati Controversy and the Constitution

> *there have not been wanting, in the late political discussion, those, who were hardy enough to assert, that the proposed general government was the wicked and traitorous fabrication of the Cincinnati.*
>
> *George Washington[1]*

Commutation: Obstacle to Constitutional Reform

In 1781, after four years of bickering over Western land claims and with the revolutionary war still unresolved, the American states ratified their first constitution, the Articles of Confederation. Almost immediately, the need for reform became apparent, especially for an independent congressional income. States often paid only part or none of the congressional requisition – the only means of the federal legislature to obtain money under the Articles of Confederation. As a result, Congress often could not meet its various financial obligations. The most obvious way out of this dilemma was for Congress to levy a tax on all imports into the United States; a national impost could provide income and allow the regulation of international commerce. However, the Articles did not provide for this power and any changes needed ratification by all thirteen state legislatures. Therein lay the rub. Twelve states agreed to grant Congress the power to raise an impost in 1781, but the effort failed when Rhode Island refused and other states withdrew their earlier agreement. Thirteen indeed turned out to be an unlucky number for the fledgling American republic.

Amidst the confusion of the Newburgh crisis, the preliminary peace treaty with England, and the deteriorating financial situation of the federal government, Congress made another attempt to raise a five percent impost in early 1783 (see chapter two). However, this crucial piece of constitutional reform immediately became entangled with the controversy over military pensions, more precisely the commutation payments. While a number of states quickly agreed that the impost of 1783 was a necessary

reform, a storm of indignation over commutation erupted in New England. This controversy helped delay the passage of the impost and played a major role in the movement to revise the Articles of Confederation. The conspiracy theory surrounding the Society of the Cincinnati further complicated the struggle over commutation and constitutional reform.

In Massachusetts, during the summer of 1783, both Stephen Higginson and Samuel Holten wrote to Samuel Adams that commutation was "disagreeable to many."[2] An article in the *Boston Gazette* indicated why. "Freedom" argued that it was the duty of any man to rise to the defense of the commonwealth when needed, and these soldiers were justly entitled to adequate pay. However, military pensions after the war were subversive because they amounted to "a continual tribute to a useless set of beings for the privileges they enjoy." The author shook his head that the officers, "whose characters shone with such unsullied lustre, should so insensibly have slid into the dirt." In practice, "Freedom" argued, military pensions, commuted or not, amounted to the establishment of a privileged class of parasitic drones. Ironically, "Freedom" called upon the officers to take their cue from Washington and the historical Cincinnatus and return to the status of plain citizens. He could not have known of the formation of the Society of the Cincinnati yet.[3]

The link between commutation and the impost was clear to contemporaries. Many critics felt that the introduction of a national impost would shift the balance of power from the states to the federal government. Control over taxation, which had been at the center of the revolutionary conflict, was naturally a thorny issue. Moreover, the opponents of federal taxation feared that the impost money would be used to pay for commutation. While they could do little about Congress' decision to commute the officers' pensions – other than to question the constitutionality of the act – they could fight the impost at the state level because it required ratification by the legislatures.

Thus, the commutation controversy turned into a major roadblock for constitutional reform and impeded the passage of the impost amendment in the state legisla-

tures, especially in New England. Upon receiving the impost proposal, the Massachusetts legislature simply issued a protest against commutation and promptly adjourned. It was only after a plea from Robert Morris, supported by John Adams, that the supporters of an impost, typically tied to the mercantile interest of the eastern seaboard, managed to secure its ratification by the Commonwealth. Even so, they only narrowly managed to defeat a restriction forbidding the use of impost income to pay for commutation.[4]

It was in Connecticut that the impost ran into the greatest opposition, and here the protest was even more closely linked to commutation and the entire question of military distinction after the war. As early as May 1783, the *Connecticut Courant* printed a letter that denounced commutation and all officers' pensions as an injustice. The author was particularly incensed at giving "half pay to an officer or fully pay for five years, and to the soldier nothing." To him, the rank and file deserved consideration as much as the officers. For that matter, the civilian population had suffered during the war, as well. Granting a commutation payment to the officers, the author admonished, was inexcusable under such circumstances.[5]

Throughout the summer of 1783, the Connecticut press repeatedly condemned the commutation policy for setting up an undue distinction between officers, enlisted men, and civilians. The town meeting of Torrington denounced the officers as speculators who profited from buying up their desperate enlisted men's pay certificates at greatly deflated prices. These certificates would eventually have to be funded by taxes to the great profit of the officer speculators; commutation would add further insult to injury. Moreover, Torrington cautioned, it was in the interest of congressional delegates to set up a pension system, which they would promptly extend to themselves and their sycophants. In the end, a corrupt patronage system not unlike what royal governors had established in colonial times would result. In their declaration, the Torringtoners followed the arguments of "Cives" who had earlier stated that "the citizens of America, in general, have a very great abhorrence of *pensions*." This author denounced commutation as a "badge of distinction" for the officers, "which would tarnish all the glory of their former exploits."[6]

Many Connecticut towns debated commutation and the impost in early 1783, but the response was not limited to the local level. The lower house of the legislature drafted a letter of protest to Congress, but the upper house and the governor blocked it. As a result, the legislature did nothing about the congressional policies that year, much to the frustration of the critics. In response, oppositional Connecticut citizens organized the so-called Middletown convention, which met twice during September 1783. Delegates from twenty-eight towns attended the first session; by the second session the count had risen to at least fifty. The convention, which pro-impost forces soon attacked as illegal, condemned commutation as unconstitutional and dangerous, and rejected the impost as "impolitic." Convinced that only a close supervision of government by the people could preserve republican liberty, the Middletowners opposed grants of additional power to Congress and demanded that the state legislature do so as well.[7] Eventually, the state legislature did agree to the impost, but only on the condition that it would be used exclusively to pay the public debt.[8]

By the fall of 1783, the debate about commutation and the impost became further complicated by the emergence of the Society of the Cincinnati. It did not take the critics long to make the link between the society and the unpopular policies; after all, the former officers were the beneficiaries of commutation. As a result, the resistance against the impost as a means of raising money for, among other things, commutation increased. The resolution of the Killingworth town meeting in September 1783 was the first publication to link the Cincinnati and commutation, claiming that the society had in fact engineered the passage of pensions through Congress. In reality, the society had not been founded until after the passage of commutation and the impost, but this did not deter the Killingworthers from assigning blame for what they felt was "a specimen given us of their skill in the arts of intreague."[9]

Others, especially in Connecticut, were quick to take up the outcry against the connection of commutation and the Cincinnati. The Middletown convention met for a third time in March 1784 in order to discuss "Commutation and the alarming and dangerous scheme of the Cincinnati." When they adjourned, the convention recom-

mended Burke's "Considerations" to its public, further cementing the link between commutation and the Cincinnati controversy.[10] James Warren figured that the anti-commutation sentiment, widespread in New England throughout 1783, would have died out had it not been for the resentment against the Cincinnati. Because of the unpopular veterans organization, he reported, "County Conventions and Towns Meetings are now frequently expressing their Resentment and determination to pay no Taxes for the Commutations."[11] For the same reasons, many New Englanders refused to grant Congress the impost. "A Republican" explicitly cautioned the citizens of Connecticut that the commutation debt would accumulate heavy interest. In the future, a congressional majority might decide to squander the entire revenue of the impost to pay for commutation, leaving foreign and other domestic debts undischarged. The Society of the Cincinnati would profit, but "domestic animosities and national broils" would be the result of such a one-sided policy.[12]

During the winter of 1784-85, another "Republican" (or possibly the same; this pseudonym was widely used) explicitly linked commutation, the impost, and any attempts to strengthen the federal government to the machinations of the Cincinnati. Attacking another writer who had proposed granting Congress compulsory powers against the states, "Republican" wrote: "The paltry writer may be of the Cincinnati, the ensign of whose order is a Bald Eagle…he foresees terrible effects will originate from the jealousies of his fellow citizens, who are watching and guarding their constitutional rights and privileges against the rapaciousness of such Birds of Prey."[13] "Republican," on the other hand, foresaw terrible effects from unconstitutional measures such as commutation and the impost, the "intreagues of designing men," who aimed to elevate themselves and enslave their fellow citizens.[14] Only the Cincinnati would really profit from the introduction of an impost, a benefit for the few paid from the purse of the many.[15]

Hence by 1784, the Cincinnati and commutation were virtually synonymous. Nathanael Greene pointed out this problem in a letter to Washington in May. "People begin to say they should have no objection to paying the commutation," he wrote, "but for the dangerous combination of the Cincinnati."[16] Half-joking, Greene suggested that

if the Cincinnati controversy continued, people would forget their opposition to commutation altogether and focus exclusively on the society, thus finally opening the path for the payment of military pensions. He could not have been more wrong; commutation remained an issue inexorably connected to the anti-Cincinnati sentiment. This controversy continued to impede the movement for constitutional change, especially the impost that would allow Congress to meet its financial obligations.

Eventually, the impost of 1783 died when New York refused to ratify it in 1786. The state government wished to retain control over its revenue; the refusal had little to do with the fear of commutation or the Cincinnati. However, the controversy over the use of impost funds for commutation payments had delayed the acceptance of the impost in several other states, especially in New England. It thus helped prevent a constitutional reform that many felt was crucial to the success of any sort of federal government in the United States.

Fears of Cincinnati Influence over Constitutional Reform

Even beyond the issues of commutation and the impost, critics feared Cincinnati influence over constitutional reform. As early as 1783, Burke suspected that Congress, if invested with a revenue and armed forces, would one day try to consolidate the government of America, robbing the states of their autonomy. In such a conflict, he argued, the Cincinnati would play a crucial role: whichever side they aided would in all likelihood win. Burke did not clearly cast the Cincinnati on the side of centralized government, expecting them to opportunistically cast their lot with the side that promised the greatest rewards; the society's establishment as an official nobility would be the minimum price.[17]

Gerry more clearly saw the Cincinnati as a force for centralized government in the United States. In 1784 he argued that increasing the powers of Congress was part of their agenda. The society would use its political machine for many purposes, and altering the shape of the federal government would help them gain the exalted position they craved. If the Cincinnati had their way, Gerry wrote to Stephen Higginson, "you would probably see the government of the United States first consisting of three

Branches, under the humble Denominations of Governor General, Council & House, but with all the powers of King, Lords, and Commons." Soon thereafter, Gerry warned, any remaining pretense of republicanism would vanish.[18] By 1785, Sam Adams ascribed such power to the Cincinnati that he felt their "constitution" was already more important than the Articles of Confederation. Both critics shared their concern that the political clout of the society would dominate any reform of the American political system, ensuring that any change would benefit the Cincinnati and not the greater good.[19]

Nowhere did this attitude become more apparent than in a letter by the Massachusetts congressional delegates to Governor James Bowdoin in September 1785. The Massachusetts legislature, frustrated with the perpetual impasse of government, had resolved to call a convention to revise the Articles of Confederation. Gerry, King, and Samuel Holten, the Commonwealth's congressional delegates, were to deliver this resolution to Congress. They did not. Instead, they wrote to the governor, justifying their refusal and explaining why a call for constitutional reform was not a good idea. For one thing, they felt that the Massachusetts resolves were too vague since they did not specify whether any revisions should be permanent or temporary, nor whether only specific aspects of the Article should be revised or the work as a whole.

Most of all, according to Gerry and the others, any call for a federal convention posed a danger to republicanism at the hands of the Cincinnati. The delegates expected that should Congress call for a convention now, it "would produce thro out the Union, an Exertion of the Friends of Aristocracy, to send Members who would promote a Change of Government." The Cincinnati would subvert any attempts to bring about useful reform by planting their members and sycophants in the convention, which would produce a change from republicanism to odious aristocracy. Better to live with whatever defects the Articles had than to run such a risk, the delegates argued. Thus, Massachusetts' attempt to call a reform convention in 1785 was stymied by two of the sharpest critics of the Cincinnati, Gerry and King. Holten, on the other hand, was probably a little uneasy over this blatant defiance of the legislature's authority to instruct its delegates, and he never publicly criticized the Cincinnati afterwards. Nevertheless, he did sign the letter.[20]

A year later, several reformers made an attempt to revise the Articles at the Annapolis Convention, but they failed for lack of a sufficient number of states to support the effort. Instead, they called for yet another convention to meet in 1787, a move which Congress reluctantly sanctioned. King, despite his growing dismay over the disorganization of Congress and the United States in general, still feared an aristocratic subversion of the reform effort. Skeptically, he reported to Gerry that the second general meeting of the Society of the Cincinnati would take place at the same time and place as the proposed federal convention. The danger was clear, and King warned: "If Massachusetts should send deputies for God's sake be careful who are the men; the times are becoming critical: a movement of this nature ought to be carefully observed by every member of the community." King was all in favor of reforms, but not if the Cincinnati would dictate them.[21]

Meanwhile in Massachusetts, a crisis was mounting. Shays' Rebellion was one of the main reasons why the movement for positional reform was gaining steam in 1787. In western Massachusetts, backcountry farmers, groaning under a conservative fiscal policy and unable to pay their property taxes, took to preventing the courts from confiscating property through means of intimidation. What started as a direct action of civil disobedience, modeled on the protests of the revolutionary years, soon turned into an insurrection. Veterans, farmers, mechanics, and even some respected figures joined forces under the nominal leadership of Daniel Shays, probably planning to overthrow the state government and implement debtor-friendly policies.

The eastern political and economic establishment was badly shaken. While Congress waffled on the use of federal troops, Governor Bowdoin encouraged an effort by General Benjamin Lincoln to raise a special state army to quell the insurrection. Lincoln was the president of the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati, and he acted with the full backing of his organization.[22] Lincoln's troops handily defeated the poorly armed and organized rebel forces. However, the specter of civil unrest and the poor performance of Congress prompted many states to support the call for a federal convention in Philadelphia, which they otherwise might have ignored just like the Annapolis convention a year earlier.

It was not politically feasible to condemn the Cincinnati for helping to quell Shays' Rebellion. Doing so would have amounted to supporting the insurrection, which none of the society's critics did or wanted to appear to do. Instead, some anti-Cincinnati activists claimed that the society had actually provoked the rebellion in order to provide a pretext for establishing a more powerful federal government with coercive, i.e. military powers. Mercy Otis Warren made such a claim in a letter to John Adams in December 1786. Referring to the insurrection, she pointed out that "the Cincinnati, who have been waiting for a favorable tide to waft them on to the strong fortress of nobility, are manifestly elated by the present prospect." She predicted that the true culprits who incited the miserable insurgents in Western Massachusetts would turn out to be "a class of men least suspected" – presumably the Cincinnati.[23]

Warren was not the only one to suspect Cincinnati involvement in Shays' Rebellion. In the *Boston Independent Chronicle*, "Cato" argued that the society, with help from the governor, would seize the opportunity to establish military rule and establish themselves as nobility.[24] Similarly, "Mentor" argued that those who frequently talked of the inefficiencies of the current political system had aided Shays' Rebellion, so that "if the present government should fall, they might establish one more agreeable to their wishes."[25] Samuel Bryan of Pennsylvania later recalled rumors that according to Cincinnati plans, "nothing less than a Monarchy was to be erected & that the People of Massachusetts were driven into Rebellion for the very Purpose of smoothing the Way to this Step by their Suppression." In short, Bryan argued, the Cincinnati had deliberately fomented the rebellion to goad the states into supporting a strong federal government and also to gain political clout for their own role in crushing the insurrection.[26] Small wonder then, that critics of the Cincinnati tended to watch the approaching federal convention to revise the Articles of Confederation with great distrust.

Amidst the various accounts that linked the Cincinnati to the movement for a stronger federal government, none was more suspicious and comprehensive than that of Benjamin Gale. Just as Shays' Rebellion was coming to a close in Massachusetts, the doctor from Killingworth wrote to Erastus Wolcott, a member of the Connecticut legislature. Wolcott had earlier expressed some sympathy for hard-pressed Connecticut

farmers and debtors, whom some feared might stage something akin to the Massachusetts insurrection if not relieved. Gale likely expected to gain a sympathetic ear for his concerns. His main goal was to persuade Wolcott to use his considerable influence in the General Assembly against sending Connecticut delegates to the convention in Philadelphia. For behind the drive for a more vigorous federal government, the good doctor cautioned, lay "a fixed and Settled Design to Alter The Form of our *Republican* Government, …and to Convert It into An *Aristocracy.*" Gale then proceeded to outline what he felt was a nefarious plot against the American republic.[27]

As early as the spring of 1783, Gale narrated, the officers of the Continental army had plotted with leading members of Congress to secure the federal government some permanent and secure revenue. The Newburgh addresses were intended to pressure the Congressional majority into endorsing such plans by means of force, and only Washington's timely intervention had prevented disaster. Nevertheless, Congress did call for an impost in 1783, and according to Gale, the officers – now organized as the Society of the Cincinnati – worked relentlessly to secure the impost, ridiculing and threatening those who dared oppose their wishes. For their efforts, Congress would make the payment of commutation pensions their top priority once the impost had passed.

Since the vigilance of the people had so far prevented the ratification of the impost amendment, and commutation had come to naught, the Cincinnati had added a whole new level to their ambition, Gale wrote. Now the aristocratic conspirators called for generally enlarged congressional powers, and most of all a standing army to enforce the edicts of the federal government. Gale implied that the Cincinnati would be at the core of that standing army, ready to support a centralized government without liberty. Shays' Rebellion – and its suppression – was only a foreshadowing of things to come. The old doctor also felt that the Cincinnati were to blame for the blood that had been shed in Massachusetts.

In short, Gale described "a *Deep Laid Plan,* to Subvert our Present happy Constitution, and to Introduce Something More *Arbitrary, Sovereign* and *Despotic.*"[28] Three steps were needed to prevent such a dire outcome. The first, Gale argued, was to

scrupulously adhere to the stipulations of the Articles of Confederation – and pay the Congressional requisition – on the condition that it would only be used to pay for the public debt. Secondly, Connecticut should repeal its agreement to the impost amendment and grant no other tax to Congress until the revolutionary debt was fully paid. Finally, Gale demanded, Connecticut should outlaw any meetings of the Cincinnati "under any Cover or Pretext Whatever." Gale's recommendations amounted to a total rejection of the movement for constitutional reform, and his justification was based on a conspiratorial reading of the politics of the 1780s.

As the federal convention in Philadelphia approached, people remembered the misgivings they had earlier felt about the Cincinnati, especially in Connecticut. The *New Haven Connecticut Journal* saw fit to print a damning history of the Cincinnati, concluding that "never perhaps was a foundation more deep and equivocal laid for a new order in the state."[29] General Huntington, arguing in favor of sending delegates to Philadelphia in front of the Connecticut legislature, felt it was necessary to defend himself against those who would attribute his arguments to "the baneful influence of the Cincinnati."[30] So unpopular had the Cincinnati once again become in some circles that even harmless attempts to establish a medical society in Connecticut ran into anti-Cincinnati opposition. Colonel Burrall, a member of the legislature, stated "that he was against all Societies, whose constitutions and designs we did not know; such as the Cincinnati, Free Masons, and this Medical Society; that they were composed of cunning men, and we know not what mischief they may be upon."[31]

In Massachusetts, critics such as James Warren and John Quincy Adams restated their opposition to the Cincinnati on the eve of the federal convention.[32] The *Boston Gazette*, denounced the society as "an ORDER of military nobility, which…will reduce these free democratical states to a vassalage the most intolerable – I mean an aristocratical government."[33] All this suspicion came on top of the general skepticism many Americans felt about enlarged congressional power in principle; that attitude prompted Patrick Henry to decline his election to the federal convention because he "smelt a rat." It was in an atmosphere defined on the one side by the fiscal and political impotence of Congress, and on the other side by the deep suspicion against centralized power in gen-

eral and the machinations of the Cincinnati in particular that the federal convention met in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787.

Convention and Ratification

As it turned out, the Philadelphia convention included both leading members and critics of the Society of the Cincinnati. Washington, of course, was asked to chair the convention, a role which he fulfilled with his usual dignity and reluctance to get involved in disputes. Hamilton, John Dickinson, Robert Morris, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and many others were original or honorary members of the Cincinnati.[34] On the other hand, Gerry, King, and Franklin, all outspoken critics of the society at some point, were delegates as well. The federal convention might easily have become a showdown between the Cincinnati and their accusers; the controversy might have severely hampered the effort to revise the Articles of Confederation (which soon turned into a draft for a completely new constitution for the United States). However, for the most part, membership in or opposition to the Cincinnati did not define the dividing lines at the federal convention. King and Franklin, for their part, became supporters of the new Constitution; Edmund Randolph, an honorary Cincinnatus, ended up opposing the new system.

The topic of the Cincinnati did come up, however, in Gerry's stance on the debate about the presidency. While most delegates agreed that the federal government needed an executive branch, the suggestions varied from a committee to a president elected for life; the convention eventually agreed on a four-year presidency with the possibility of reelection. Yet Gerry voiced concern about the modality of presidential elections. The convention considered election by the national legislature, an electoral college, or the people. Gerry championed the electoral college because:

> A popular election in this case is radically vicious. The ignorance of the people would put it in the power of some one set of men dispersed throughout the Union & acting in Concert to delude them into any appointment. He observed that such a Society existed in the Order of the Cincinnati. They are respectable, United, and influencial. They will in fact elect the chief Magistrate in every instance, if the election be referred to the people. His respect

for the characters composing the Society could not blind him to the danger & impropriety of throwing such a power into their hands.[35]

Gerry's fear of the Cincinnati was strong enough to make him unwilling to entrust the presidential election to the people – an unbecoming attitude for a future Republican politician. He preferred the somewhat complicated electoral college, probably in the hope that critical men like himself could stop the Cincinnati on that level. George Mason, incidentally, shared Gerry's opinion; he too, never wished the Cincinnati "to have a preponderating influence in the Govt."[36]

In September 1787, after four months' deliberation, the federal convention presented a new constitution. Their plan incorporated most of the changes that reformers had demanded for some time: a complete federal government with a bicameral legislature, an executive, and a judiciary, endowed with the power to tax, raise armies, conduct foreign policy, and legislate for the general welfare of the United States. When it came to signing the finished proposal, not all members of the convention participated. Of those delegates who had remained till the end, Gerry, Mason, and Randolph refused to sign the Constitution. All had been productive, but increasingly skeptical participants in the Philadelphia proceedings; now they felt incapable of attaching their name to a document they felt was incomplete and dangerous. Gerry specifically pointed at the lack of a bill of rights and the vague, possibly unlimited power of Congress as grounds of objection. He demanded a second convention – a proposal which the majority unsurprisingly rejected.

The three objectors became the first Antifederalists, leading spokesmen in a struggle against the new constitution which lasted from September 1787 until Rhode Island's ratification in May 1790. During these ratification debates, fear of the Cincinnati, together with related topics such as the notion of a standing army and aristocratic distinction, played a significant role. As with the earlier opposition to alleged Cincinnati subversions, the Antifederalists felt that nothing less than the future of republicanism in America was at stake.

Antifederalists, who included many anti-Cincinnati authors such as Gerry, Burke, Gale, Arthur Lee, and Samuel Adams, felt that the Constitution was dangerous to the liberties of the people and destructive of true republicanism in America. They frequently charged that the new system established a consolidated government, effectively robbing the states of their political existence, that the representation of the people in the House was inadequate, and that the relationships among the branches of government violated the principle of the separation of powers. Moreover, Antifederalist critics argued that granting Congress extensive powers of taxation provided a tool for the oppression of the people, and that the federal judiciary would threaten due process of law at the state level. The most frequent – and ultimately most successful – criticism was the absence of a bill of rights. Americans cherished written guarantees of their freedoms, and the omission of such a list in the proposed Constitution provided the Antifederalist cause with its most potent argument.[37]

A number of Antifederalist fears closely resembled the conspiracy theory against the Society of the Cincinnati. Some argued that the Constitution would lead to aristocracy, or that an aristocratic cabal had engineered the document. Similar accusations surrounded the federal executive, which critics feared was a monarchy in disguise. Finally, the Constitution failed to prohibit standing armies, so Antifederalists dreaded an oppressive political order backed up by federal military might. Although these accusations did not always explicitly mention the Cincinnati, they closely resembled the charges leveled against the society. Within the larger Antifederalist argument ran a strong strain of conspiratorial fear that the Constitution, beneath a cover of well-intentioned reform, established an anti-republican, aristocratic, monarchical, and military nightmare.

Almost immediately after the federal convention, Mason exclaimed that the new government would begin as a moderate aristocracy and end up as a corrupt monarchy. Others were even more direct in their accusations. John Quincy Adams, for example, noted in his diary that the ratification of the Constitution would "be a grand point gained in favour of the aristocratic party."[38] Richard Henry Lee asserted that the Constitution would bring about "a coalition of Monarchy Men, Military men, Aristo-

crats, and Drones."[39] During the Pennsylvania ratification convention, William Findley noted that he could not have contrived a better plan for introducing aristocracy.[40] "The Yeomanry of Massachusetts" claimed that the Constitution exhibited "all the portraits of an over-bearing aristocracy."[41] These were not isolated statements; the fear of aristocracy ran throughout the Antifederalist movement.

Similarly, the office of president of the United States worried many Antifederalists who claimed it effectively amounted to, or would soon become, a monarchy. Again, Mason's objections served as a starting point for a larger debate. The fact that the constitution allowed for the reelection of the chief executive prompted some critics to interpret this office as that of an elective king.[42] Certainly, some old enemies of the Cincinnati were predisposed to do so. At the South Carolina ratification convention, Burke proposed a constitutional amendment forbidding the reelection of the president. That option, he asserted, would otherwise "terminate in what the good people of this state highly disapprove of, an hereditary monarchy." His proposal was quickly overruled. In Connecticut, Gale harrumphed that the Constitution established an elective monarchy anyway, so it might as well establish a hereditary one and save America a squabble every four years. And while they were at it, the people of Connecticut could furnish Congress with "as many *Queer Dukes* as they want."[43]

For revolutionary republicans like Richard Henry Lee and many others, it was an article of faith that "standing armies in times of peace are dangerous to liberty."[44] Antifederalists routinely pointed out that Congress held both the power of purse and the sword because it could both fund an army and declare war. Worse, it could establish a peacetime military establishment and even assume command over the state militia. Added to this was the power of the president as commander-in-chief. All these issues came under repeated attack during the public debate on the Constitution, as well as in the state ratifying conventions.[45] Critics liked pointing to the crisis at Newburgh to demonstrate that the problems of having a military establishment were not limited to the monarchies of Europe.[46]

While Antifederalist rhetoric was typically rather moderate, in some cases it was very radical. "Philadelphiensis" went so far as to denouncing the federal convention

as a deliberate effort to strip Americans of their liberty. Recalling the federal conven-

tion's rule of secrecy while it sat, "Philadelphiensis" exclaimed against such a "dark

conclave." To this author, the "monarchy-men in convention" were "a set of the basest

conspirators that ever disgraced a free country." They had plotted the downfall of the

republic whilst American families prayed for their successfully reforming the Articles

of Confederation; now they tried to ram the new Constitution down the throats of the

people. Under the new Constitution, in a short time, martial law would be declared,

and the "character of free citizens be changed to that of the subjects of a *military king*."

According to "Philadelphiensis," the supporters of the new Constitution were nothing

less than "*aristocratics, indendiaries,* and enemies to America."[47] In a similar way,

"Centinel," (Samuel Bryan) denounced the federal convention as "conspirators," and

the supporters of the constitution as "false detestable patriots." He even took on the

two most respected men in America, effectively saying that Franklin was senile and

Washington a dupe.[48] Bryan's writings were among the most widely read and published

Antifederalist accounts.

Most Antifederalist criticism did not directly draw on the four years of anti-

Cincinnati sentiment that had preceded the ratification debates. However, the older

controversy was still present in the public mind. Arthur Lee, a onetime critic of the

society, chose "Cincinnatus" as his Antifederalist pseudonym, in an attempt to reclaim

a perfectly good republican name that he felt had been abused by the Continental offi-

cers for long enough. In return, one Federalist chose the pen name "Anti-Cincinnatus,"

but found it necessary to clarify that he opposed Lee, not the "worthy patriotic society"

of the same name. Neither author dwelled on the Society of the Cincinnati in their dis-

cussion of the proposed Constitution, but "Anti-Cincinnatus'" disclaimer clearly dem-

onstrated that he remembered the controversy well enough to distance himself from it.

To avoid confusion, it would have been simpler to pick another pseudonym, but that

option apparently did not occur to "Anti-Cincinnatus."[49]

Accusations against the Cincinnati also played a more direct role in the ratifica-

tion debates. One aspect of this role existed in claims that the society would use force

to establish the Constitution if the American populace did not accept it freely. An early example of such sentiment came from Louis Guillaume Otto, the French chargé d'affaires, while the federal convention was still in session. Otto counted the Cincinnati among the firmest supporters of a strong government because they were interested in having their pensions paid. To that end, Otto reported to his superior the Comte de Montmorin that the Cincinnati planned a totally consolidated government under the leadership of George Washington. If the convention would establish this new order, fine; if not, the Cincinnati would establish it by force. However, Otto expected them to fail. "The Society of the Cincinnati, which was formed without any public sanction," he argued, "today thinks of adjusting the political constitution without having been authorised to do so by the people; but it is too weak and too unpopular to make any impression."[50]

Others felt the threat of a Cincinnati coup more sharply. "Harrington" warned in the *Connecticut Journal* that an ambitious group, "who may form themselves into an order of hereditary nobility," might "by surprize or stratagem, prostrate our liberties at their feet"[51] – clearly a reference to the society. Several Antifederalist authors expressed alarm at Washington's link to the Constitution and the Cincinnati. "Cato" feared that unless Americans gave Washington the presidency, "he should be solicited to command an army to impose it."[52] Similarly, "An American" mused that Washington was "a Man who, besides the CINCINNATI, could call out many followers." This Antifederalist author could not "resist the conclusion, that the General has declared that this Constitution shall be supported by the ULTIMO RATIO, that is – by force."[53]

The reformer and intellectual Benjamin Rush also contemplated the possibility of a Cincinnati coup to enforce the Constitution. However, he was so disgusted with the shape of American politics as they stood in 1787, that he actually *hoped* for military intervention.[54] Two years later, when the Constitution was ratified and the federal government established, Rush regretted his outbursts. In a letter to John Adams he disavowed any tendencies towards hereditary monarchy and aristocracy, and claimed that his republican principles had not wavered since the Declaration of Independence.[55] Such were the oscillations of political principle in the critical period.

Fears of a military coup were not the only influence of the conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati upon the ratification debates. Some critics felt that the officers were still trying to establish themselves as the hereditary nobility of America. In Delaware, for example, Thomas Rodney argued that the Cincinnati favored the Constitution because it would lead to a formal recognition of their titles. "By the Sword being once more put in their hands," he admonished, "they may Obtain their wishes: for while they ware the golden medal of the Cincinnati, they will not be easy Untill Some Order of military Knighthood is established."[56]

Of course, the new Constitution, just like the Articles of Confederation, explicitly forbade the establishment of titles of nobility. However, the *Connecticut Journal* noted that the prohibition under the Articles had not deterred the Cincinnati in 1783; the new Constitution was not likely to stop them, either.[57] In New York, "A Republican" even tortured the Constitution's prohibition of nobility into a conditional permission. He argued that the Constitution merely stated that "no title of nobility shall be granted by the United States;" from this he deduced that "among the other great blessings she may derive from the adoption of this new Constitution," America "may expect (by the permission of Congress) to be favored with a foreign or self-created nobility."[58] Obviously, the Cincinnati were the only "self-created nobility" around.

Other critics worried about the role the Cincinnati would play in a future government under the Constitution. In the Philadelphia press, several authors charged that "the starvelings of the Cin------i" would "riot in extravagance, supported by the hard earnings of our industrious citizens!"[59] In a letter to Gerry, John Wendell of Portsmouth feared that the Cincinnati would claim an inordinate number of public offices, giving them "too great an Interest & Influence" and opening the prospect of a standing army.[60] The "Republican Federalist" also commented that all military officers, even in the state militias, would be commissioned by the president, and thus tied to the interest of the federal government. In such a scenario, the well-organized character of the Cincinnati would give them "ten times the influence they would otherwise have."[61] Soon, the federal government would be little more than a political machine in the service of aristocratic forces.

There was also a relatively widespread sentiment that the Constitution was the work of the Cincinnati or that the society was part of an aristocratic faction who had instigated the movement for ratification. "A Federalist," for example (really an Antifederalist who refused to accept this label), identified the Cincinnati, holders of public securities, lawyers, and the rich as the forces behind the Constitution. These groups formed an "aristocratick combination," which "like greedy grudgeons…long to satiate their voracious stomacks with the golden bait."[62] Similarly, the *Freeman's Journal* printed a letter stating that in Westmoreland county, Pennsylvania, only "shopkeepers, packhorsemen, half-pay officers, Cincinnati, attorneys-at-law, public defaulters, and Jews" supported the Constitution.[63] Whenever an Antifederalist denounced the sinister forces of aristocracy, the Cincinnati were at least implied as part of that group.

At a town meeting in Killingworth, Connecticut, Gale addressed his fellow citizens in a very longwinded speech.[64] In keeping with his earlier arguments, Gale insisted that the Constitution would transform the republic into a military government and that the arguments in favor of the new Constitution were lies. "All this thought about the weakness of he federal government," Gale argued, "has been raised by the Hon.ble Society of the Cincinnati as they are now called to enforce the collection of their commutation securities which they will be able to do by the proposed amendment of our form of government." At Newburgh, the officers had staged a "pretended mutiny" to secure commutation, and their political allies had threatened Congressman Eliphalet Dyer into voting for the pension plan, which Gale denounced as unconstitutional. The Constitution, according to Gale, was only the final move of the Cincinnati's plan. This time, the society had raised such a hue and cry about the weakness of government that many honest citizens had come to believe it. Desperately, Gale called upon the state of Connecticut to reject the Constitution, to no avail.[65] Connecticut ratified 128 to 40, a majority Gale later blamed on the "zealous exertions of our clergy, the Cincinnati, and their Connections."[66]

In Massachusetts, too, at least one author claimed that the ratification of the Constitution was due to the Cincinnati's dirty tricks. "Time and investigation," the *Philadelphia Independent Gazeteer* reported, "will prove that there has been a deep

laid scheme to enslave us. This scheme was probably invented by the society of the Cincinnati, who were to start up in every state in favor of the new constitution, and to give their voice as the voice of the people. We have been very neglectful of our interests in suffering this society to exist among us."[67] Thus, a number of Antifederalists saw the Constitution as nothing less than the fulfillment of the conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati; the society had finally succeeded in bringing about the aristocratic, authoritarian state they craved.

Curiously, those who made the connection between the Constitution and the Cincinnati in 1787-1788 were not necessarily the same as those who had attacked the society in 1783-1785. King and Franklin supported the new Constitution; Jefferson and John Adams were at least not opposed. Gerry, Arthur Lee, and Samuel Adams did become Antifederalists but mostly attacked the Constitution on its own merits (or lack thereof), not as a Cincinnati fabrication. Anti-Cincinnati arguments during the ratification struggle came more frequently from relatively unknown men such as Gale or from a host of Antifederalists who had not publicly targeted the society before.

Still, the conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati did play a role in the ratification debates, although it was not as prominent an issue as the lack of a bill of rights or the issue of state autonomy. It certainly did not prevent the ratification of the Constitution, which proceeded with remarkable speed. By June 1788, New Hampshire's ratification put the number of agreeable states over the threshold of nine; shortly thereafter the ratification of Virginia and New York guaranteed that the new system would be viable, making the agreement of North Carolina and Rhode Island a matter of *when* rather than *if.*

While the Cincinnati controversy proved a relatively small obstacle to constitutional reform, it was definitely a nuisance to the man who would be the first president under the new system. A few weeks before the first federal election, Washington recalled the outcry against the society with some bitterness, especially because it had tarnished his reputation. In a letter to Col. William Barton, the general wrote:

> I have once been a witness to what I conceived to have been a most unreasonable prejudice against an innocent institution, I mean the Society of the Cincinnati. I was conscious

that my own proceedings on that subject were immaculate. …Yet we have been virulently traduced, as to our design; and I have not even escaped being represented as shortsighted in not forseeing the consequences, or wanting in patriotism for not discouraging an establishment calculated to create distinctions in society, and subvert the principles of republican government. …You will recollect that there have not been wanting in the late political discussions, those, who were hardy enough to assert, that the proposed general government was the wicked and traitorous fabrication of the Cincinnati.[68]

Clearly the president-to-be hoped that now that the Constitution was ratified, the American republic could forget such bickering and prosper under the aegis of unity and republican virtue. He was only partly right.

The New Republic

As the new federal government took shape under the recently ratified Constitution in 1790, the opponents of the Constitution slowly turned into a loyal opposition. However, not all former Antifederalists forgot their misgivings about the new order. Gerry and Burke, for example, used their seats in the first Congress to denounce the Bill of Rights as insufficient, and demanded additional reforms. The three Antifederalist senators and eleven representatives in the new federal legislature, and their compatriots outside of Congress, did not attempt to destabilize the new government, but they certainly continued to criticize it. And in that criticism, accusations against the Cincinnati and charges of conspiracy sprang up on a number of occasions.

One way in which former Antifederalists expressed their misgivings about the new order was through historical writing. Abraham Yates of New York, for example, drafted a *History of the Movement for the United States Constitution.* In this work, finished in 1789, Yates described the new order as the work of a group of aristocratic conspirators centered around Robert Morris, who had been active since 1778. After strategies such as commutation and the impost had failed, the aristocrats had organized the federal convention in Philadelphia. That body ought more properly be called a conspiracy, Yates wrote, because "under an Injunction of Secrecy they carried on their works of Darkness untill the Constitution passed their usurping hands." Through intimidation, deception and flattery, the conspirators secured ratification. Now, Yates,

lamented, prospects for reform were bleak. The cabal responsible for the Constitution had successfully turned a "*Convention* into a *Conspiracy*, and under the Epithet *Federal* have destroyed the Confederation."[69]

Burke planned a similar history of the genesis of the new Constitution. But where Yates based his conclusions on the journals of Congress and a few other contemporary documents, Burke went in a new direction. He sent out remarkably modern questionnaires to two men he expected to share his interpretation of recent events: Gerry and Samuel Bryan, the two most widely read Antifederalist authors in the United States. Presumably, Gerry would provide information on New England, Bryan on the middle states, and Burke himself would cover the South. The questionnaire included questions on the social and economic situation of the states on the eve of the federal convention, the political procedures that had led to the election of delegates, and the general opinion of the people on the topic of constitutional change.

Burke also included some "leading" questions that shed light on what he expected to find. For example, the South Carolinian asked whether a faction had existed prior to the convention "whose views, interests, and sentiments were unfavorable, or otherwise to the popular Govt. or favorable to a regal one." Even more revealing was Burke's question whether the Cincinnati had met at the time of the convention or not. And in a query about the stance certain groups had taken on the Constitution, the Cincinnati topped the list (which was not simply in alphabetical order). Clearly, Burke believed that the Constitution had been engineered for less than benevolent purposes, and he continued to assign the Society of the Cincinnati a prominent role in those machinations.

In answer to Burke's questionnaire, Bryan asserted that the "Gentlemen of the late Army, & the Tools of Aristocracy were loud in" support of the Constitution; he also repeated rumors that the Cincinnati had been behind Shays' Rebellion. The Constitution was not even the worst-case scenario, Bryan wrote, because some men "had deeper Views than they chose to declare & wished a Government even less popular than the one proposed." Gerry, unfortunately, never had a chance to answer his questionnaire: it was stolen along with a trunk when he was traveling. Like Yates' account, Burke's was

never published, or presumably even finished. The questionnaire underscored the South Carolinian's sharp mind as a pioneer of a sociological method in political history, but also his inclination to see malevolent forces, including the Cincinnati, behind the Constitution.[70]

It was not until 1805 that a major critical account of the movement for the Constitution actually saw publication; it was Mercy Otis Warren's *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*.[71] Warren took up the same themes as Yates and Burke, and like Burke, she assigned the Cincinnati a considerable part in bringing about what she saw as a counter-revolution. For Warren, opposition to the Cincinnati had been a constant concern since the mid-1780s, and she continued to worry under the new political system as well. Shortly after Washington's inauguration she predicted that the new government would eventually come to ruin through "exorbitant salaries," "regalia of office," and "ostentatious pomp." In her opinion, these signs of corruption "for which the ambitious have sighed and desired from the moment of the institution of the order of Cincinnati"[72] were already becoming reality.

In the 1790s, a political rearrangement took place in the United States that subsumed such topics as Antifederalism or criticism against the Cincinnati: the first party system. Hamilton's fiscal policies, the French Revolution, and Jay's treaty all served to define two political parties, the Federalists and the Republicans. So dominant were these issues and factions, that critics of the Cincinnati could be found on both sides of the political fence. Gerry became a prominent Republican, as did Burke, but King and John Adams were key leaders of the Federalist party. As a result, what few accusations against the Cincinnati occurred in the last decade of the eighteenth century were practically always employed in the context of the first party system. In the last decade of the eighteenth century, anti-Cincinnati sentiment practically ceased to be an issue in its own right.

Instead it became a weapon in the rhetorical arsenal of the Republican party, albeit a relatively rarely used one. The Republicans had absorbed the larger number of Antifederalists and anti-Cincinnati spokesmen, whereas many members of the society

tended towards the Federalists. Hamilton's role as a leading Federalist and prominent Cincinnatus also contributed to Republican disdain for the society. Most of all, the Republicans picked up much of the anti-aristocratic rhetoric that had already been present in the criticism against the Cincinnati. Thus, occasional anti-Cincinnati outbursts became part of the Republican style. Benjamin Franklin Bache, for example, Franklin's grandson and a leading Republican publisher, could not resist a jibe at the "self-created Noblemen" when they celebrated Washington's birthday in 1794.[73] The notion that the Cincinnati would become loafers in government employ also continued. Noting the number of posts created by the new federal government, William Maclay lamented: "It really seems as if We were to go on making Offices untill all the Cincinnati are provided for."[74]

Jefferson, in his capacity as the de facto leader of the Republican party, recalled his ire against the society in 1794. President Washington had recently criticized the political agitation of certain self-created societies, an obvious reference to the Democratic and Republican societies. These associations had organized to discuss the French Revolution, Hamilton's financial policies, and other political controversies of the day, and they formed the backbone of the Republican party. In a letter to his close ally James Madison, Jefferson fumed about Washington's gall to criticize self-created societies when he himself was a member of "the society of the Cincinnati, a *self-created* one, carving out for itself hereditary distinctions, lowering over our Constitution eternally, meeting together in all parts of the Union, periodically, with closed doors, accumulating a capital in their separate treasury, corresponding secretly & regularly."[75]

In 1824, at a very advanced age, Jefferson used the Cincinnati as a scapegoat one last time. In a letter to Martin Van Buren, Jefferson recalled how one of his most controversial statements had been taken out of context. Jefferson had once complained of "the men who were Samsons in the field, and Solomons in the council, but who had their heads shorn by the harlot England." This quote, Jefferson told Van Buren, had referred not to Washington, but the Cincinnati. Jefferson claimed that Washington had understood this perfectly.[76] However, Jefferson's letter was more of an attempt to polish his reputation for posterity than a realistic assessment of his words' impact. What-

ever Jefferson had intended to say with the Samson simile, Washington had taken it as a personal slight. It had been these very words that had burned the final bridge between two of the American Revolution's greatest leaders. Unlike his troubled friendship with John Adams, Jefferson never managed to repair the rift with Washington, whose death in 1799 had closed the door between the two men forever.[77]

On the other side of the political equation, John Adams, now a prominent Federalist, laid aside his misgiving against the society over the course of the 1790s. Recalling their earlier lively correspondence, Gerry in 1797 congratulated Adams on his election to the presidency. At the same time, Gerry offered his opinion that Washington as president had relied too much on the "cincinnati and antirevolutional or monarchist interest"[78] – probably an allusion to Hamilton's high Federalist faction, whom both Gerry and Adams hated. Adams, however, did not take the bait. In 1798, he wrote a number of flattering letters to various Cincinnati state societies, as a politician who expressed his gratitude to part of his constituency. For Adams, at least, the resentments of the critical period were things of the past as he worked to secure his political power base twenty years after the Declaration of Independence.[79]

Over the years, the fear of the Cincinnati became less and less a serious political issue. Republican politicians continued to use anti-Cincinnati rhetoric much in the same way that they attacked Federalists, lawyers, and other groups that were considered inimical to the party cause. Yet their accusations lacked the urgency of the 1780s. To the Republicans, the Cincinnati were merely a small faction in the larger antidemocratic scheme of the Federalists. At times, the rhetoric against the Federalists bordered on conspiracy theory, and it certainly borrowed heavily from the anti-Cincinnati diatribes of the critical period. Yet where the conspiracy theory of the 1780s had pitted the self-proclaimed guardians of the republic against the alleged secretive machinations of the Cincinnati, the political struggles of the first party system were fought in the open. Republican and Federalist leaders were professional politicians with real-life constituent groups and power bases; a great deal of mud-slinging and political invective was to be expected. Essentially, the first party system allowed Americans to channel

their differences of opinion in an overt, if highly controversial manner. Political leaders openly proclaimed themselves as Federalists or Republicans, and however much they lamented the existence of parties in the United States, no one could deny that a political dichotomy existed. In contrast, the Cincinnati reacted to the accusations leveled against them with outrage, denial, and reform.

Notes

[1] George Washington to Col. William Barton, 7 September 1788, *General Washington's Correspondence Concerning the Society of the Cincinnati,* ed. Edgar Erskine Hume (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1941), 337-39.

[2] Samuel Holten to Samuel Adams, 14 May 1783; Stephen Higginson to Samuel Adams, 20 May 1783, in Samuel Adams Papers, NN.

[3] *Boston Gazette*, 16 June 1783.

[4] Jackson Turner Main, *The Antifederalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781-1788* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 87.

[5] *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 13 May 1783.

[6] *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 29 July, 24 June 1783.

[7] for a detailed account of the opposition to the impost and commutation in Connecticut, see Harvey M. Wachtell, "The Conflict between Localism and Nationalism in Connecticut" (PhD dissertation, University of Missouri, 1971), 70-98.

[8] Main, *The Antifederalists*, 91-92.

[9] *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 2 September 1783.

[10] *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 10 March 1784.

[11] James Warren to John Adams, 10 March 1784, *Warren-Adams Letters: Being Chiefly a Correspondence among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1925), 237-38.

[12] *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 31 March 1784.

[13] *Hartford American Mercury*, 22 November 1784. See also *Hartford American Mercury*, 27 September through 10 January 1785.

[14] *Hartford American Mercury*, 8 November 1784.

[15] *Hartford American Mercury*, 10 January 1785.

[16] Nathanael Greene to George Washington, 6 May 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 164-65.

[17] Aedanus Burke, *Considerations on the Society or Order of Cincinnati; Lately Instituted by the Major-Generals, Brigadier-Generals, and Other Officers of the American Army. Proving That It Creates a Race of Hereditary Patricians or Nobility. Interspersed with Remarks on Its Consequences to the Freedom and Happiness of the Republic. Addressed to the People of South Carolina, and Their Representatives.* (Charleston: Timothy, 1783), 9.

[18] Elbridge Gerry to Stephen Higginson, 4 March 1784, LDC 21: 408.

[19] Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 27 August 1785, Samuel Adams Papers, NN.

[20] Massachusetts Delegates to James Bowdoin, 3 September 1785, LDC 22: 612.

[21] Rufus King to Elbridge Gerry, 7 January 1787, *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King,* ed. Charles L. King (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1894), 1: 200-01.

[22] The Massachusetts Cinncinnati's involvement with crushing Shays' Rebellion is treated in more detail in chapter 6.

[23] Mercy Otis Warren to John Adams, December 1786, Mercy Otis Warren Papers, DLC.

[24] *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 23 March 1787.

[25] *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 3 May 1787.

[26] Samuel Bryan to Aedanus Burke, after 5 December 1789, DHFFC 17 (forthcoming).

[27] Philip H. Jordan, "Connecticut Anti-Federalism on the Eve of the Constitutional Convention," *Connecticut Historical Society* 28, no. 1 (1963): 18.

[28] Ibid., 19.

[29] *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 25 April 1787

[30] *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 23 May 1787.

[31] *Hartford American Mercury*, 4 June 1787. This was probably the only instance where a critic drew parallels between the Cincinnati and the Freemasons; more typically, defenders of the Cincinnati pointed out those parallels as proof of the society's harmlessness. See next chapter.

[32] James Warren to John Adams, 18 May 1787, in *Warren-Adams Letters*, 2: 291-92; John Quincy Adams to John Adams, 30 June 1787, W*ritings of John Quincy Adams,* ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913), 1: 32-33.

[33] *Boston Gazette*, 2 April 1787.

[34] For a complete list of Cincinnati members in the convention, see Bryan Scott Johnson, "The Society of the Cincinnati: A Contemporary Organization with Revolutionary Origins" (M.A. thesis, Clemson University, 1992), 106. The impact of Cincinnati policies on the constitutional convention is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

[35] James Madison's Journal, 25 July 1787, *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787,* ed. Max Farrand (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 2: 114.

[36] James Madison's Journal, 26 July 1787, Ibid., 119.

[37] Saul Cornell, *The Other Founders: Anti-Federalism & the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788-1828* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 30-31 summarizes the antifederalist argument well. Other accounts of antifederalism are Main, *The Antifederalists* and Robert Allen Rutland, *The Ordeal of the Constitution; the Antifederalists and the Ratification Struggle of 1787-1788* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), and Cecilia M. Kenyon, *The Antifederalists* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).

[38] John Quincy Adams Diary, 12 October 1787, DHRoC 4: 67.

[39] Richard Henry Lee to George Mason, 1 October 1787, DHRoC 7: 28.

[40] Pennsylviania Convention debates, 6 December 1787, DHRoC 2: 510.

[41] *Massachusetts Gazette*, 25 January 1788, DHRoC 5: 803.

[42] Cornell, *The Other Founders*, 31; "An officer of the late Contintental Army," *Independent Gazeteer*, 6 November 1787, DHRoC 2: 212.

[43] Benjamin Gale to William Samuel Johnson, 13 November 1788, DHRoC 3: 458.

[44] Richard Henry Lee, proposed amendments to the constitution, 27 September 1787, DHRoC 1: 337.

[45] for example, Pennsylvania convention debates, 6 December, 11 December 1787, DHRoC 2: 510, 572. See also the entire DHRoC series and chapter 9.

[46] e.g. "Brutus X," *New York Journal*, 24 January 1788.

[47] "Philadelphiensis IX," Philadelphia Freeman's Journal, 6 February 1788, DHRoC 16: 57.

[48] DHRoC 13: 327.

[49] "Anti-Cincinnatus," *Northampton Hampshire Gazette*, 19 December 1787, DHRoC 5: 487-90. As for Arthur Lee's feelings on the name Cincinnatus, he commented to John Adams that the society resembled the great Roman in name alone: Arthur Lee to John Adams, 18 August 1788, DHFFE 4: 54.

[50] Louis Guillaume Otto to Comte de Montmorin, 10 June 1787, *The Emerging Nation: A Documentary History of the Foreign Relations of the United States under the Articles of Confederation, 1780-1789,* ed. Mary A. Giunta (Washington, DC: National Historical Publications and Records Commission, 1996), 525.

[51] *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 13 June 1787.

[52] "Cato II," *New York Journal*, 11 October 1787.

[53] *Boston American Herald*, 28 January 1788, DHFFE 4: 22.

[54] Benjamin Rush to Richard Price, 2 June 1787, *Letters of Benjamin Rush,* ed. L. H. Butterfield (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 1: 418.

[55] Benjamin Rush to John Adams, 4 June 1789, *Letters of Benjamin Rush,* 1: 514.

[56] From Thomas Rodney (no recipient specified), 15 April 1788, DHRoC 17: 100.

[57] "Letter from Massachusetts," *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 17 October, 24 October 1784, DHRoC 3: 379.

[58] *New York Journal*, 25 October 1787.

[59] Benjamin Russell to Eleazer Oswald, Philadelphia Independent Gazeteer, 4 December 1787, DHRoC 4: 46-47; "Philadelphiensis X," *Philadelphia Freeman's Journal*, 20 February 1788, DHRoC 16: 158-59.

[60] John Wendell to Elbridge Gerry, 15 December 1787, DHRoC 14: 444.

[61] "The Republican Federalist VII," *Massachusetts Centinel*, 6 February 1788, DHRoC 5: 870.

[62] "A Federalist," *Boston Gazette*, 26 November 1787, DHRoC 4: 322.

[63] *Philadelphia Freeman's Journal*, 19 March 1788, DHRoC 2: 723. This appears to be the only instance when the Cincinnati were attacked together with Jews; anti-Semitism did not play much of a role either in the ratification debates or in the accusations against the Cincinnati.

[64] Three versions of this speech exist in Gale's papers. It is unclear which one he actually gave at the town meeting, but at least two of the versions included anti-Cincinnati attacks along the lines described here.

[65] Benjamin Gale, speech at Kilingworth town meeting, 12 November 1787, DHRoC 3: 422; see also Benjamin Gale Papers, CtY-B.

[66] Benjamin Gale to Francis Dana, 20 June 1789, Benjamin Gale Papers, CtY-B.

[67] *Philadelphia Independent Gazeteer*, 27 February 1788, DHRoC 16: 527.

[68] George Washington to William Barton, 7 September 1788, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 337-39.

[69] Staughton Lynd, "Abraham Yates' History of the Movement for the United States," *William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 20 (1963): 242, 244.

[70] For an in-depth analysis of the questionnaire and Bryan's answer, see Saul Cornell, "Reflections on 'the Late Remarkable Revolution in Government': Aedanus Burke and Samuel Bryan's Unpublished History of the Ratification of the Federal Constitution," *Pennsylvanian Magazine of History and Biography* 112, no. 1 (1988): 103-30; the documents themselves will be published in DHFFC 17.

[71] Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution Interspersed with Biographical, Political and Moral Observations* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988), 3: 610-626. See also the section on historigraphy in the introduction.

[72] Mercy Otis Warren to Catherine Macaulay, July 1789, Mercy Otis Warren papers, DLC.

[73] *Philadelphia General Advertiser*, 22 February 1794; see also Donald Henderson Stewart, *The Opposition Press of the Federalist Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1969), 371-74.

[74] The Diary of William Maclay, 9 July 1790, DHFFC 9: 316.

[75] Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 28 December 1794, *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. Thomas A. Mason, Robert A. Rutland, and Jeanne K. Sission (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1985), 15: 426-28.

[76] Thomas Jefferson to Martin Van Buren, 1824, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson,* ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1905), 16: 62-65.

[77] Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).

[78] Elbridge Gerry to John Adams, 25 April 1797, Elbridge Gerry Papers, DLC; see also George Athan Billias, *Elbridge Gerry: Founding Father and Republican Statesman* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 106.

[79] Edgar Erskine Hume, *Early Opposition to the Cincinnati* (Providence: Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1936), 44.

Chapter Five

One Society of Friends:

Cincinnati Reactions to Conspiracy Theory

> *The young Marquis Henry Knox is already promised in marriage to a Princess of Hyder Ali, and … the young Comtesse of Huntington is to marry the hereditary Prince of Sweden*
>
> Friedrich von Steuben[1]

The Cincinnati on the Defensive

The Society of the Cincinnati consisted of men who had fought the British army with considerable valor and ultimate success. When the accusations against their association began to take shape in public, they could hardly be expected to take such abuse meekly. Given the surprise and indignation that many members must have felt upon reading Burke's *Considerations* or the Massachusetts committee report, the society might have mounted a massive counter-offensive against their tormentors. Indeed, a number of Cincinnati did take up the gauntlet and responded to the accusations with counter-arguments, counter-attacks, and ridicule. For the most part, however, the society's responses to the conspiracy theory remained sporadic, often private, and fairly limited. Their efforts, while spirited, never amounted to a coordinated offensive such as the military men had staged on the battlefield. The accusations against their society drove the Cincinnati into a defensive position.

When Burke's *Considerations* began spreading throughout the United States in late 1783, Cincinnati members began to worry about the effects of such heated accusations. The Delaware state society was cautiously optimistic; in a November circular letter it hoped that the "attack, or rather the compliment paid us by the learned Cassius, …will have no other effect than to excite us to laudable ambition, to engage our attention to maxims of prudence, and to contribute in establishing in us those republican principles of virtue, honor, and honesty, which we hope will ever be the most dis-

tinguishing badges of the Cincinnati."[2] Presumably, honorable and virtuous conduct would convince Americans that there was nothing to Burke's accusations.

In North Carolina, Adam Boyd of the state society was far less hopeful that the Cincinnati could escape the fray unscathed. Writing to Knox, Boyd summarized the arguments Burke had made against the society, especially the accusation of hereditary peerage. While Boyd scoffed that such trepidations had been "tortured" out of the Cincinnati's rule of hereditary membership, he feared that Burke's fears would fall on fertile soil. "Swarms of Butterfly-statesmen & patriots, who flutter & strutt in the sunshine of safety in peace" would be quick to accept Burke's arguments as "holy writ." Burke had hit a populist nerve, Boyd cautioned, and the problem would not simply go away.[3]

Knox, in turn, informed Washington that "the Cincinnati appears (however groundlessly) to be an object of jealousy." The former artillery general reported on the charges of French influence, political subversion and hereditary peerage, and worried that "Burke's pamphlet has had its full operation." Especially New England was in an uproar, as the Massachusetts legislature's inquiry indicated. Knox wrote that while moderates, "the cool, dispassionate men," approved of the society in general, even they were opposed to hereditary membership. Under such circumstances, it was best not to appoint any honorary members. Clearly, the society had run into trouble.[4] Similar warnings and worries were passed around among the Cincinnati during this troublesome spring of 1784.

From one source, at least, Washington received some solace as to the honorable example that the Cincinnati gave to their country: Thomas Paine. The author of *Common Sense* wrote that "the intention of the name [Society of the Cincinnati], appears to me either lost or not understood. For it is material to the future freedom of the Country, that the example of the late Army retiring to private Life on the principles of Cincinnatus, should be commemorated, that in future ages it may be imitated." Paine did wonder "whether every part of the institution is perfectly consistent with a republic" – probably a reference to the controversial heredity – but on the whole he approved of the society as a commendable display of civic virtue. Given Paine's later bitter enmity

to Washington, this letter proved that not everybody who might have endorsed the conspiracy theory necessarily did so.[5]

Another Cincinnatus, Winthrop Sargent, received moral support from his sister, the feminist intellectual and writer Judith Sargent Murray. In a series of lengthy letters to her brother, Mrs. Murray dismissed the charges against the society in their entirety. Burke, Murray wrote, was "prostrating himself at the shrine of phantom, which exists no where but in the splendid region of his own imagination." The Cincinnati, she continued, "usurp no part in the legislation, their regulations extend only to their own society. …As an Order, they never can take part in the government, they cannot, unmarked, possess themselves of immunities. It is always in the power of a democracy to choose its Legislators, and the Cincinnati prefers no superior claims to trusts so important." In short, the society was perfectly harmless.[6]

As for Burke's *Considerations* on the society, Murray sarcastically predicted that the pamphlet would one day become the matter of amusement. "The ingenious, and indefatigable researcher, of the annals of the Cincinnaty," she wrote, "will, some hundred years hence, view with wounderous, and vast surprise, this pretty flower of rhetoric and the appeallation Sin-Sinnati, will doubtless be admired as a prodigious acquisition to the literary World." For herself, Murray could only "stand amazed at the sordid ingratitude of my Country." To her brother's association, Murray offered a benediction: "May the Order of Cincinnati endure as long as Nature herself shall endure." Had Murray made her elaborate pro-Cincinnati arguments public, they would have constituted the most eloquent defense of the society. She did not, and so the task of exonerating the officers fell to lesser pens.[7]

As the Cincinnati leadership worried about the impact of Burke's pamphlet, voices arose here and there to defend the society from infamy. In the *South Carolina Gazette*, for example, one author took issue with Burke's intimations that Washington might be subtly opposed to the society. Such allegations were false, the author argued, because Washington himself had instituted the Order of the Purple Heart for especially meritorious conduct and had also authorized veteran enlisted men and non-

commissioned officers to wear a white angle of cloth on their shoulders. Surely Washington approved of the Society of the Cincinnati as well. In reality, neither the Purple Heart (awarded only three times during the Revolutionary War) nor the cloth insignia had much to do with the Cincinnati. The former two were military decorations awarded to individuals, the latter a veteran organization with hereditary descent. Nevertheless, the episode well displayed the confusion over what sort of military distinctions existed in the United States, as well as Washington's involvement with the Cincinnati.[8]

Only one "Obscure Individual" – presumably Stephen Moylan of the Pennsylvania state society – took on Burke in a pamphlet of his own. As with Burke's own work, the title was highly descriptive; Moylan offered *Observations on a Late Pamphlet entitled 'Considerations Upon the Society or Order of the Cincinnati,' clearly evincing the innocence and propriety of that honourable and respectable institution. In answer to vague conjectures, false insinuations, and ill-founded objections*. The Pennsylvanian likened the freedom of the press to a stream that, while normally clear and pure, could be corrupted by "venomous filth" such as Burke's propaganda. Moylan set out to clean up the polluted waters.[9]

Moylan reprinted the entire institution of the society, accusing Burke (with good cause) of having cited sections out of context. By means of malevolent and deliberate misinterpretation, Burke had painted a picture of "dangerous councils, violated rights and encroaching usurpations – instigating the people with outcries, uttered with malignity and echoed by folly." In reality, the society was without power or any insidious agenda; the eagle emblem was not a symbol of hereditary nobility, but merely like "the wreath of parsley or … the olive branch which decorated the foreheads of ancient heroes." Moylan cautioned his readers that *Considerations'* widespread publication did not make Burke's accusations any more true. At any rate, Moylan pointed out, "The Bible may be made treason --- and treachery extracted from the decalogue --- by construction."[10]

Moylan supposed that Burke was out to distinguish himself, his sharp pen motivated by vanity. The legal profession gave Burke the mindset and training he needed to

spread his lies. "Gentlemen of the long robe," Moylan argued, "from their professional practice acquire a wonderful fluency of expression and an uncommon facility of argument. Engaged in the indiscriminate defence of right and wrong, from the force of habit only, they argue a bad cause with the same zealous ardour that they would defend a good one." Ironically, this attack on the legal profession was almost a preview of the Republican party's anti-lawyer rhetoric of the 1790s.[11]

Moylan pointed out some of the contradictions in *Considerations*. For example, Burke had lambasted the American people for blindness and then praised them for vigilance with regard to their liberties. However, Moylan did not provide a point-by-point refutation of *Considerations*, and never came close to the cogent argument Burke had made in his pamphlet. Moylan himself acknowledged that he was no great writer and hoped "to rouse some abler pen in defence of this honourable order and valuable institutions." Consequently, Moylan's work had no great impact on the public debate concerning the Cincinnati. The *Philadelphia Freeman's Journal* reported that "the Obscure Individual is a very weak advocate for the Cincinnati," while "Cassius [Burke] is a sensible and masterly writer." Incidentally, the same printer who had reprinted *Considerations* in Philadelphia also published Moylan's text. Quite conceivably, Robert Bell published *Observations* primarily to boost the sales of its edition of *Considerations*. He certainly advertised Burke's booklet on the last page of Moylan's text.[12]

While the newspapers of late 1783 and early 1784 were full of anti-Cincinnati material, there were also a few items that defended the society. In South Carolina, "Another Patriot" boldly claimed that the Cincinnati were "an establishment worthy of the Compatriots of these Heroes in whose BLOOD is laid the Foundation of Independence … Distinctions in Republics are said to be odious – but I say 'tis a glorious MARK to be known as the determined Supporters and Promoters of the Foederal Union."[13] The *Hartford Connecticut Courant* printed an opinion scoffing at the idea that by paying one month's worth of pay into a charitable fund, any officer would become a member of the nobility.[14] An item in the *Boston Independent Chronicle* argued that the Society of the Cincinnati had been innocently conceived; should it ever become dangerous, the legislature could dissolve it at any time.[15] Whether written by Cincinnati or by

non-member supporters, such statements pointed out the hyperbole of the conspiracy theory and reminded the public that the society consisted of men who had accomplished great things for the revolution and deserved the benefit of the doubt.

Some defensive arguments, however, backfired. The uniqueness and scope of the Cincinnati worked against them; there were few other comparable organizations in America. The only such association that came to mind were the Freemasons. This fraternal organization, too, had lodges throughout the United States, held regular meetings, and engaged in charitable work. Consequently, some defenders proposed that the Cincinnati were as perfectly harmless as the Masons.[16] Immediately, the *Boston Independent Chronicle* printed an angry rebuttal entitled "Distinctions between the Free-Masons and the newly instituted Order of Cincinnati." The anonymous author argued that while the Masons drew their members from all classes of men, the Cincinnati organized the military profession only. Freemasonry was merely fraternal and charitable, the Cincinnati had a political agenda. Most of all, Freemasonry was not hereditary, whereas the Cincinnati bequeathed membership from father to son. The author concluded that "the institution of the Cincinnati is concerted to establish a compleat, and perpetual *personal* distinction, between the numerous *military* dignitaries of their corporation, and the whole remaining body of the people who will then be stiled Plebeans through the community."[17]

Over time, this spirited defense of Freemasonry from any taint of comparison with the Cincinnati became highly ironic. A generation later, the Freemasons would be the target of a conspiracy theory that made the charges against the Cincinnati seem tame by comparison. Even at the time the careful distinction between the two groups was off the mark, given the high percentage of Cincinnati that were also Masons (as high as forty percent in Connecticut), including prominent members like Washington, Steuben, and Hamilton. If anything, it was astonishing that nobody condemned the Freemasons along with the Cincinnati for guilt by association. Fortunately for the Masons, the time was not yet ripe for the anti-Masonic horror stories that would become a staple of the early nineteenth century.[18]

The sharpest counter-attack mounted on behalf of the society's honor did not come from a member, but from the poet John Trumbull, writing in the *Hartford Connecticut Courant* under the pseudonym "A.Z." Trumbull attacked the anti-commutation Middletown convention that had recently recommended Burke's *Considerations* for public perusal. While some Middletowners might have actually believed Burke's drivel, Trumbull assumed that not all members of the convention could be "such fools as to believe that the body of the Cincinnati have or ever can create a race of hereditary nobility." These notions of conspiracy were "too ridiculous to find any countenance even with children." The Cincinnati had nothing but an empty title, a symbolic medal, and a parchment of membership; their only "privilege" was access to a charitable fund in case of poverty. Consequently, Trumbull argued, *Considerations* and the Middletowners' endorsement were lies and propaganda, nothing more.[19]

Trumbull went one step further and accused Burke of attacking the Cincinnati for petty revenge. "We are credibly informed," "A.Z." wrote, "that the author of the pamphlet applied for admission into the order of Cincinnati, but not having been in the army long enough to entitle him to it, he was denied." Burke made yet another attempt to gain honorary membership, Trumbull claimed, but was denied again, this time because of his pro-Loyalist politics in South Carolina. As a result, Burke allegedly decided to get even: "His haughty spirit could not brook the disappointment – he determined to be revenged – and this pamphlet … was the child of the meanest as well as wickedest passion that ever found harbour in the human breast." On the whole, Trumbull claimed, the anti-commutation and anti-Cincinnati sentiment was the work of Tories and their sympathizers, Burke a chief among them. Other anti-Middletown authors took up similar themes.[20]

Burke had been silent since his publication of *Considerations* in October 1783, having "something better to do and think of," but Trumbull's accusations were too much to bear. In May 1784, Burke once again wrote "To the Public" in order to defend his honor. He acknowledged his identity as "Cassius," the author of *Considerations* (which had been an open secret in any case); Burke also denied that he had attacked the Cincinnati only because they had rejected him. Instead of meeting him on "a fair

open field of argument," Burke wrote, "A.Z." had resorted to defaming remarks which had no basis in reality.[21]

Burke insisted his opposition to the Cincinnati had been immediate and spontaneous, and gave his real reason for writing *Considerations*. In August 1783, General Moultrie had presented the institution to a group of listeners at the Corner Club in Charleston, Burke among them. Within five minutes, Burke exclaimed against the organization, in front of witnesses who included members of the society. A few days later, Burke laid his hands on a copy of the institution, "and the moment I read them over, far from wishing to become a member, I determined to devote the few hours I could spare to write against it." The gentleman who claimed otherwise was liar, and if he would but identify himself, Burke promised to "convince him of his error" – possibly on the dueling field.[22] Given the fact that no South Carolinian, Cincinnati or otherwise, contradicted Burke's rebuttal, his account seemed fairly accurate. Nevertheless, Burke was apparently better at dishing out blows then taking them, as his thin-skinned response proved.

Steuben apparently had a much better sense of humor. Soon after the publication of *Considerations*, the German adventurer turned revolutionary lamented the fact that Burke had singled him out as the sole leader of the Cincinnati. In a sarcastic letter to Knox, Steuben threatened to expose the true extent and the real string-pullers of the so-called "conspiracy":

> A ça, Monsieur Le Cincinnatus! Your pernicious designs are then unveiled, - you wish to introduce dukes and peers into our republic? No, my Lord, no, Your Grace, that will not do: there is a Cassius more far-sighted than this German baron, of whom you have made a cat's paw to draw the chestnuts out of the fire. Cassius knows only a part of the secret. He makes me author and grand master, thus whipping you over my shoulders. But listen! I will prove to Cassius that this dangerous plan had its birth in the brain of two Yankees: i.e. Knox and Huntington: therefore
> 'Blow ye the Trumpet in Zion'
> We know very well these Bostonians and the people of the Holy Land, who beneath a Presbyterian and modest air conceal the most ambitious designs. Cassius does not know all the danger. When I shall tell him that the young marquis Henry Knox is already

promised in marriage to a Princess of Hyder Ali, and that the young Comtesse of Hunt-
ington is to marry the hereditary Prince of Sweden, that the King of Spain wishes to ac-
cept the place of Treasurer of the Order, then
'Blow ye the Trumpet in Zion'
See the pamphlet of Cassius – read it – tremble![23]

In reality, of course, the Knox family was not planning any royal weddings, nor would the King of Spain dole out charity to the widows and orphans of the Continental officers. The much more unpleasant truth, according to Steuben, was that Major L'Enfant, who had been dispatched to France in order to commission the Cincinnati eagles, could not pay for his travel expenses. Without a loan from Steuben, Robert Morris, and Greene, "the ambassador of the Order would have made his entrée into the Philadelphia jail."[24]

Clearly, Steuben did not take Burke's pamphlet too seriously, but he neverthe-less resented being portrayed as the undertaker of American republicanism. In his re-ply, Knox pointed the finger right back at Steuben with equal sarcasm: "You see how much you have to answer for by the introduction of your European distinctions." Knox promised to clarify the situation and declare that Steuben was only one of the society's founders, but he feared that such efforts would remain ineffective. "Burke's allusion has fixed it," he wrote, "and you must support the credit of having created a new and he-reditary nobility." This playful banter between Steuben and Knox demonstrated that both were exasperated by Burke's accusations. Reputations were being damaged, and there was little the founders of the Society of the Cincinnati could do about it except grimace.[25]

In the public sphere, too, sarcasm became a means of countering the allegations against the society. In a parody entitled "Political Creed," one author sardonically praised *Considerations* as the infallibly true basis of political wisdom. Naturally, all wise republics must exclude their most eminent and virtuous citizens from dignities and influence; this was merely a fitting reward for the hardships they had endured. The same author warned that "the Beast with seven heads and ten horns mentioned in scripture, is a type of a beast which lately appeared in the political world." Surely, the Cincinnati were nothing less than the harbingers of the Apocalypse! To its authors, this

sort of hyperbole seemed a fitting retort to the exaggerated rhetoric of Burke and others. One bon-mot pointed out a particularly absurd reason why a critic of the Cincinnati might hate the society: "I dislike it – more particularly for having *two* original *Cin's* in it."[26]

A decade later, when the outcry against the Cincinnati had largely turned silent, the hyperbole directed against the society even became a source of entertainment. Hugh Brackenridge of Pennsylvania wrote *Modern Chivalry,* a series of humorous episodes featuring the exploits of one Captain Farrago and his Irish manservant Teague. In one story, the pair chanced upon a member of the Cincinnati, wearing his badge. In confusion about the meaning of the eagle emblem, Teague convinced the landlady of an inn that the symbol depicted a goose, and meant that the Cincinnatus preferred roast goose over any other dinner. Given the delicious results of Teague's antics, the Cincinnatus accommodated himself to this benign misinterpretation. The officer then proceeded to tell the less delectable anecdote of a clergyman who mistook the Cincinnati eagle for a graven image:

> He insisted that it was contrary to the injunction of the decalogue, which prohibits any such representation for the purpose of worship; and he alledged this to fall within the meaning of that part of holy writ. The officer, in answer, declared that so far from worshipping the image, he seldom prayed at all, and never discussed religious tenets except now and then with some deistical chaplains of the army ...that what he thought a graven image was nothing more than a hieroglyphic, being the effigy of a bald eagle, a native of America, and which designates the cause in which he had successfully served. ...It was admitted by the holy man that in rigid strictness it might not be a graven image ...It was, at all events, continued the priest, a molten one, and therefore was doubtless for the purpose of idolatry. It was the representation of a bird, the emblem of some heathen deity. The eagle was sacred to Jupiter, and perhaps was now worn in honour of that false god. In vain the officer maintained his position; the priest persisted that it was an idol; shewing from scripture that in the last times idolaters were to spring up, and including by insinuation, that this order of the Cincinnati might be the Gog and Magog of the Apocalypse.[27]

However, in the spring of 1784, the accusations against the Cincinnati were no laughing matter. Rather than improving, matters were getting worse, and the damning report of the Massachusetts legislature raised the prospect of official sanctions against the society. Neither rebuttals like Moylan's haphazard pamphlet nor sharp (and untrue) counter-attacks like Trumbull's seemed to lessen the outcry against the so-called Cincinnati nobility. The society's membership included some sharper pens, such as John Dickinson, Hamilton or McDougall, but these men remained silent, possibly expecting to do more harm than good should they speak out on behalf of the Cincinnati. It therefore fell to the society's nominal leader, George Washington, to do something about the vast unpopularity of the organization. His reponse was the reform of May 1784.

A Society Reformed

Back in 1783, Washington had accepted the position of president-general of the society with only a vague notion of what it might entail; he had even written to Knox asking for instructions on what was expected from him at the first general meeting of the society. By March 1784, however, Washington was profoundly worried about "jealousies, which are already imbibed, and more than probably, through ignorance, envy, and perhaps even worse motives will increase in spread." The outcry against the society threatened the great Virginian's own hitherto unassailable reputation. Washington, an avid reader of newspapers, was only too aware of the conspiracy theory. Alarming letters from fellow Cincinnati and other correspondents substantiated his perception that something was deeply amiss. Consequently, Washington decided to take a more active role in the affairs of the society.[28]

Alarmed, Washington began to poll his Cincinnati brethren on the criticism directed against the society; for example, he wrote to Benjamin Walker, his former aide-de-camp, "that the Society of the Cincinnati is the cause of much jealousy and uneasiness in the New England States. Pray what is said of it in yours, and in the Jerseys." Clearly, the society needed to address these problems. The first general meeting, scheduled for May 1784, provided the ideal opportunity, so Washington urged prominent members of the society to attend. Already, the president-general hinted that he

wanted a reform of the society. "If we cannot convince the people that their fears are ill-founded," he wrote Walker, "we should (at least in degree) yield to them and not suffer that which was intended for the best purposes to produce a bad one."[29]

Seeking outside advice, Washington wrote Jefferson in early April asking for personal advice and the mood of Congress on the subject. Jefferson replied with a summary of the many accusations against the Cincinnati, and declared that Congress, while officially silent, was deeply opposed to the organization. The author of the Declaration of Independence recommended to either abolish the society or reform it to the point of unrecognizability. Failing that, Washington should leave the society and "stand on ground separated from it." Many years later, Jefferson recalled that Washington had also visited him in Annapolis on the way to the first general meeting. Talking late into the night, Jefferson remembered, Washington had come over to his critical point of view and resolved to abolish the society entirely, exclaiming that "not a fibre of it ought to be left, to be an eye-sore to the public, a ground of dissatisfaction, and a line of separation between them and their country."[30]

Jefferson's recollection was separated from the fact by forty years and motivated by his desire to stress the cordial relationship he had enjoyed with Washington at the time; it might not have been entirely trustworthy. Still, in 1785 and 1786, Washington hinted to Hamilton and Madison that he might have preferred to abolish the society altogether, and that only the vast popularity of the Cincinnati in France prevented such an outcome.[31] Apparently, Washington at the very least toyed with the idea of urging a complete dissolution of the society. However, given Washington's typical disposition to avoid sharp conflict, dissolution was probably only one option that Washington considered. As it turned out, Washington instead urged his fellow officers to consent to a sweeping reform.

On 4 May 1784, the first general meeting of the Society of the Cincinnati convened at the City Tavern in Philadelphia. Forty-five delegates from twelve states attended the meeting; only Rhode Island and the French society were not represented. This conclave was by far the most momentous one in the history of the Cincinnati: not

until the twentieth century would so many states send delegates to the general society. Washington presided over the meeting, and it was quickly agreed to keep the deliberations secret. Given the public uproar against the society, the Cincinnati apparently felt the need to exert as much control over their publicity as they possibly could. Winthrop Sargent of the Massachusetts society kept a coded journal of the proceedings. Deciphered and published by his grandson in 1847, Sargent's journal painted a detailed picture of what went on behind closed doors.[32]

At the meeting, Washington immediately polled the delegates on the public opinion concerning the society. For his own state Virginia, Washington asserted that the opposition "had become violent and formidable, and called for serious consideration." The results were not uniform, but generally quite alarming. Apparently, the situation was the worst in the New England states. Connecticut reported "a very general disapprobation of the People." Knox admitted the same for Massachusetts, and urged "alterations material." New Hampshire "declared that the opinions of the State were very generally in opposition to the Institution in its present Establishment." In South Carolina, the birthplace of Burke's pamphlet, opposition was common among "almost all the various classes in the State." For Pennsylvania, John Dickinson admitted to a widespread opposition against hereditary membership. New York and Georgia, in contrast, reported little or no opposition, and Delaware defiantly claimed that only Tories were against the society. Captain Dayton of New Jersey declared that he did not know the public opinion, nor did he much care, as "it was the determination of the Society to preserve and support its dignity."[33]

Already two camps were taking shape: those who reacted to the conspiracy theory with grave concern and called for a major reform, and those who scoffed at the public outcry and were determined not to let these accusations destroy or deform the society. Washington clearly belonged to the former group as he "endeavoured to prove the disagreeable consequences which would result to the Members of the Cincinnati from preserving the Institution in its present form" and "illustrated the force and strength of opposition to it in a variety of examples, supported by his own knowledge, and information from confidential friends." For once, the great Virginian did not pre-

side over a meeting in dignified neutrality, but used his considerable authority and influence to urge his brethren towards reform.[34]

Washington called on his fellow delegates to eliminate from the institution "every word, sentence, and clause which has a political tendency," to discontinue heredity "*absolutely,* without any substitution which can be construed into concealment," and to abolish honorary memberships. Recalling a controversial gift from the French officers, the president-general proposed rejecting any donations from foreigners in the future. The charitable fund should be placed under the authority of the state legislatures, "for the *express purpose* for which they were intended." The French Cincinnati, Washington argued, should become largely independent of the general society. Finally, he proposed the abolition of all general and district meetings, leaving the state societies as the only centers of Cincinnati activity.[35]

Washington had done his homework and tailored his proposals exactly to counter the main charges of the conspiracy theory. Abolishing heredity addressed the accusations of nobility. Eliminating any political goals, along with the abolition of general and district meetings, contradicted the charge that the Cincinnati formed a parallel government. Ending honorary memberships and placing the charitable fund under the supervision of the state legislatures targeted allegations of bribery and corruption. The prohibition of donations from foreigners aimed at the alarms over French intrigue, as did autonomy for the French society.[36]

Many of Washington's suggestions were based on Jefferson's letter, in some cases almost verbatim. The president-general warned that "no alteration short of what is here enummerated will, in my opinion, reconcile the Society to the Community," and cautioned that even "whether these will do it, is questionable."[37] Washington told the meeting of the congressional plans to prohibit all bearers of hereditary titles from the Northwest territories. Public opinion and Congress were against the Cincinnati, and unless "made conformable to their sense of republican principles," the society "might expect every discouragement and even *persecution* from them and the States severally." Exerting the ultimate pressure against his fellow officers, Washington made

clear "his determination to vacate his place in the Society, if it could not be accommodated to the feeling and pleasure of the several States."[38]

Knox, too, threatened to resign if the society were not reformed. Nevertheless, considerable opposition arose against changing the principles of the society. The New York and New Jersey delegations, consistent with their own assessment of the situation, repeatedly spoke out against the abolition of heredity. New York's voice might have had considerable weight, but its most prominent members (including Steuben, George Clinton, Philip Schuyler, and Hamilton) were not present at the general meeting.[39] As it was, the middle states' delegations were outnumbered at the Philadelphia meeting, but they were heard.

A committee of one member from each state drafted a revised institution which incorporated many of Washington's proposals, but allowed for the transferral of a member's share in the charitable fund by deed or gift. Should a member die without having transferred his share, the respective state society would assign it to a worthy person – presumably the deceased member's heir. Washington had warned against precisely this sort of roundabout continuation of heredity, and consequently opposed the revision draft. A new committee, which included Knox and Dickinson, produced yet another revision incorporating nearly all of Washington's proposals, which the general meeting approved after some debate and minor alterations.[40]

The altered and amended institution eliminated all traces of heredity. There would be no more honorary members except those already allowed into the society. A new preamble stressed the charitable, commemorative and fraternal purposes of the society and stated only one political goal, "to inculcate to the latest ages the duty of laying down in peace, arms assumed for the public defence." Under the new order, the state societies would loan their funds to the states. Eventually, the state societies would die out, in which case the legislatures should dispose of the funds in a manner "correspondent with the original design of the Institution." The French society received autonomy, and the American societies would not accept gifts from foreigners. On the whole, the wording of the new institution was concise, relatively clear, and answered most of the objections raised by the various critics of the Cincinnati.[41]

In one respect, the revised institution fell short of Washington's proposals: it did not dissolve the general society, its triennial meetings, or its officers. However, the business of the general meetings was limited to "the distribution of surplus funds, to appoint officers for the ensuing term, and to conform the by-laws of the State meetings to the general objects of the Institution." At the same time, the revised institution went beyond Washington's reforms. Each state society was to "make applications to their respective legislatures for grants of charters." This instruction countered accusations that the state societies were self-created and lacked legal standing; however, the rule also threw the state societies at the mercy of the legislatures, as some societies would come to find out.[42]

The only really controversial feature that remained in the revised institution was the eagle emblem. L'Enfant had just brought the first eagles from France, including a particularly splendid diamond version the French navy donated to the president-general. Washington had expected that the emblem was too popular among the former officers to abolish, "a feather we cannot consent to pluck from *ourselves*, tho' we have taken it from our descendants." Nevertheless, the general meeting agreed unofficially that wearing the badge "should not be ostentatious and in common; and only on days of convention to commemorate the Institution, or when we were to attend the funeral of some deceased Member." In short, the badge would remain a distinguishing feature of the society, but the members would be careful not to distinguish themselves in public. "Out of sight, out of mind," was the maxim the Cincinnati adopted concerning their eagles.[43]

In order to explain the reform to the members of the state societies and to publicize the reforms to a hitherto hostile public, a committee drafted a circular letter. Whereas the proceedings of the general meetings had been kept confidential, the Society of the Cincinnati now went very public indeed. Endowed with the ultimate authority of Washington's signature, the circular letter, often accompanied by the full text of the revised institution, saw publication in a large number of newspapers throughout the country. Surely, many Cincinnati must have hoped that this bold declaration of

patriotic conformity to public opinion would silence the specter of opposition once and for all.[44]

The circular letter lamented that the public had "misapprehended" the design of the society, but admitted that the original institution "was of necessity drawn up in a hasty manner at an epoch as extraordinary as it will be memorable in the annals of mankind." Thus, the framers had not thought through every aspect of the institution and how Americans would perceive it. Now was the time to reform the society in order "to remove every cause of inquietude; to annihilate every source of jealousy; to designate explicitly the ground on which we wish to stand; and to give one more proof, that the late Officers of the American Army have a claim to be reckoned among the most faithful Citizens."

Heredity, the circular letter claimed, had been intended only to perpetuate friendships formed in times of war "by our posterity to the remotest ages." Since so many Americans saw this as a harmful distinction, the Cincinnati were willing "to relinquish everything but our personal Friendships," and abolish the rule of descent. The original institution's commitment to promote national union and honor had arisen from officers' support of these goals on the battlefield, the letter continued. Since that feature had been deemed an indication of "sinister designs," out it went. The new institution placed the charitable fund and the very organization of the state societies under the authority of the state legislatures, proof of the Cincinnati's "disposition to remove every source of uneasiness respecting our Society."[45]

On the whole, the society had retained only "those devices which recognize the Manner of our returning to our Citizenship; not as ostentatious marks of discrimination, but as pledges of our friendship." The eagle emblems, the letter admitted, were still part of the reformed institution, but these were "the most endearing tokens of Friendship," nothing more. Besides, the eagles were "no small additional cement to that harmony and reciprocation of good offices" between America and its ally France. "Having now relinquished whatever has been found objectionable in our original Institution," the letter concluded, the society would concentrate on the "two great original pillars, Friendship and Charity." In the future, the Cincinnati would "prosecute with

ardor what we have instituted in sincerity. Let heaven and our own consciences approve our conduct; let our actions be the best comment on our words; and let us leave a lesson to posterity that the glory of soldiers cannot be completed without acting well the part of citizens."[46]

A Reform Rejected

In addition to the circular letter, various members of the Cincinnati reported on the changes made to the institution. Gen. John Cadwalader of Maryland, for example, summarized the changes in detail in a letter to his former subordinate, Maj. James Meredith. The Marquis de Lafayette, well aware of John Adams' misgivings against the society from earlier correspondence, wrote to his friend in June, expressing his great relief that the controversial heredity was now abandoned. Lafayette clearly hoped that matter would no longer stand between him and his friend, whose esteem he valued greatly. "Whatever has been thought offensive," the Frenchman asserted, "you see the Cincinnati has given it up."[47]

As it turned out, this eloquent declaration of reformed harmlessness turned out to be premature. In one way, at least, the Society of the Cincinnati really did function in parallel to the federal union under the Articles of Confederation: changes as profound as the reform of 1784 required the consent of all thirteen state societies. Theoretically, this consent might occur within only a few weeks, as state meetings were scheduled for the fourth of July. Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia all declared their assent at that time, and Virginia followed suit in October. Yet those were only eight of thirteen state societies, and it soon became clear that others were more recalcitrant.

Connecticut, for example, merely discussed the proposed changes – and then tabled them. A year later in 1785, the state society again took no action on the revised institution, and in 1786 they once again voted to postpone the issue. The state society's secretary, Gen. Jonathan Trumbull[48], was personally in favor of the revision, but he despaired of persuading his fellows to follow the general meeting's lead.[49] Given the especially heavy opposition to the Cincinnati in Connecticut, the state society's refusal

to adopt the revised institution was a bold move, likely born out of the determination not to yield to hostile fire.

New Hampshire did more than just table the reform; it outright rejected the revised institution. The state society angrily protested that citizens of all free countries enjoyed privileges to institute societies and establish funds. If merely wearing a badge established an illegal order of nobility, why were not the Freemasons accused of the same thing? In a letter to their Connecticut brethren, the New Hampshire society expressed its astonishment at the criticism against the Cincinnati, "to finde the pen of Malice so successfully employed, in construing actions that flowed from the present motives, into secret and dangerous attempts, to subvert a government, which we had toiled and bled to rear up and defend." The Cincinnati of New Hampshire would not give in to slander, and argued that adopting the revisions would seem an admission of guilt. Ceding control over the charitable funds amounted to nothing less than a violation of property rights. New Hampshire rejected the revisions as unjustified and lukewarm. "If friendship must cease to exist," the officers declared, "the tongue of slander, and the pen of malice be silenced at all events, we think it better to lay the ax at the root of the tree and abolish the society at once."[50]

New Jersey remained silent in 1784 and postponed action in 1785. In 1786, the state society adopted the revised institution with a slight majority and after considerable debate – and then immediately did something to render their assent almost meaningless. The state society proposed to retain hereditary succession, and issued a circular lauding the original institution's principles. Abolition of heredity was the cornerstone of the revised institution; thus New Jersey's behavior meant an effective rejection of the spirit, if not the wording of the general meeting's recommendations. Delaware for its part simply did not adopt the revised institution, and in 1788 formally resolved to oppose any changes to the original plan.[51]

New York, true to its opposing role at the general meeting, neither adopted the revisions in 1784 nor in 1785. In 1786, the state society went one step further and proposed a reform of the reform. A committee, which counted Hamilton among its members, reported the state's reservations about the revised institution. The report admitted

"that some alterations on the original institution will be proper," and acknowledged that heredity and honorary membership might have to be abandoned. However, Hamilton and the other members of the committee were unwilling to grant the state legislature control over their charitable fund, and they also refused to strike out the Cincinnati's commitment to the federal union. In a circular letter, the New Yorkers made their position known to the others, and explicitly encouraged those state societies who had already ratified the revised institution to reconsider.[52]

Whether in answer to New York's proposals or for reasons of their own, some state societies who had endorsed the reform now shifted sides. Massachusetts, for example, voted to reconsider its assent to the reforms in 1786, and once again advocated heredity as a means to perpetuate the society. Rhode Island, too, rescinded its vote and instructed its delegates for the next general meeting in 1787 to propose the reinstatement of the original institution. As the general meeting of 1787 approached, only six states stood more or less firmly behind the reform; several of these expressed a desire to amend the reform in some way. Most dramatically, no state north of Pennsylvania approved of the revised institution.[53]

Next to Washington's home state Virginia, the Carolinians remained most committed to the revised institution. General Boyd of the North Carolina society wrote to Secretary Trumbull of Connecticut, one of the few New Englanders who supported the reform, in March 1786. "However agreeable the original institution might have been to the society," Boyd argued, "so much respect is due to our country, as not to establish a society so generally offensive to our fellow citizens." Adopting the revised institution remained the only promising way to quiet the criticism against the Cincinnati, but "if we attempt to readopt the original institution, we shall lose most of the friends, who are not immediately of the society." It was very unfortunate, Boyd wrote, that Connecticut remained opposed to the revision. Yet even in North Carolina, there were voices of dissent. Many Cincinnati could not "be persuaded that an amendment is expedient, notwithstanding the general opposition which is made to the original institution by the citizens of the state."[54]

Similarly, the South Carolina state society justified its assent to the revisions in a circular letter of April 1786. The massive criticism from the general population had prompted their decision, the South Carolinian Cincinnati wrote: "We could not consent to persist in an establishment, which our fellow citizens, considered in no other light, than as a division line between them and us. Their objections, we thought, were generally founded in error – but the whole voice of the people was against this opinion." There simply had been no other way than to adopt the revised institution; presumably other state societies should do the same. However, there were differing opinions among the South Carolina Cincinnati, as well. Only half a year after the circular letter, the state society instructed its delegates to the next general meeting to push for alterations. Specifically, they were to advocate the resumption of honorary memberships, as well as some form of filling vacancies – another euphemism for the resumption of heredity.[55]

As the general meeting of 1787 approached, Washington was quite aware that the reform was not merely crumbling at the edges, but collapsing. As early as January 1785, Knox reported to Washington that none of the New England societies had yet applied for a charter. Washington relayed this fact to St. Clair and fretted that "the jealousies of the people are rather asleep than removed on this occasion." When no state society ratified the revised institution in 1785, the president-general grumbled about the lack of progress in letters to Hamilton and Knox. He reminded Hamilton that complete dissolution of the society would have been a better idea in the first place. To Knox, Washington pointed out that he had recently received a copy of Mirabeau's anti-Cincinnati pamphlet translated into English. Unless the revisions were ratified, Washington clearly feared that the barrage of criticism could flare up yet again. Nevertheless, 1786 produced a disconcerting movement away from the revisions, rather than any progress in ratification. Washington clearly began to consider taking Jefferson's advice to distance himself from the Cincinnati.[56]

On 31 October 1786, Washington made a momentous announcement in a circular letter addressed to Horatio Gates, the vice president-general of the society. He would not attend the general meeting, scheduled for May 1787 in Philadelphia, nor

would he accept another nomination as president-general. As justification Washington drew heavily upon the Cincinnatus persona many contemporaries ascribed to him: he wished to pass the remainder of his days as a retiree on his farm. Too many people called on Washington for information, advice, or assistance, leaving too little time for his private affairs. Furthermore, the Virginian claimed to be in bad health, a violent fever coming on top of chronic rheumatism. There was simply no way he could continue to serve as president-general or make the trip to Philadelphia in the spring.[57]

Furthermore, the president-general claimed that he had never intended to seek re-election in the first place. Washington argued that he would not have accepted the leadership position in 1784, but then felt it was his duty to do so. At that time, a refusal "might have been misrepresented as a kind of dereliction of the Society on my part, or imputed to a disapprobation of the principles on which it was then established." So, in 1784, Washington had become president-general out of loyalty to his officers and to help protect them from public criticism. Now, he claimed, the opposition had disappeared and the society had a revised institution, so there was no more need for Washington's remaining in office. In conclusion, the general implored "the benediction of Heaven on the virtuous Associates in this illustrious Institution."[58] Effectively, the circular letter was a farewell message.

Of course, Washington knew that the revised institution had not been ratified, and he doubted whether the opposition was truly dead. The circular letter was basically a diplomatic version of what Washington had threatened at the general meeting in 1784: if the revisions were not adopted, he would withdraw himself from the society. Although Washington did not resign his membership in 1786, the letter established his intention to effectively separate himself from the public affairs of the Cincinnati in the future. To be sure, Washington's claims of ill health and lack of time were valid enough; for example, Washington had not been able to keep track of who presided over which state society. At the same time, the circular letter was clearly the result of Washington's frustration with the failure of the revised institution; the general was far too polite to say so openly, but he had apparently had enough of the Cincinnati.

Washington's intended withdrawal from the society's leadership had considerable impact, including publication in the *New York Journal* and other newspapers. In the winter of 1786-87, the president-general received many letters from fellow Cincinnati urging him to reconsider. Yet the most important objection came from a man who had little to do with the Cincinnati but a lot with the future shape of the American Republic: James Madison. In December 1786, Madison wrote to Washington that it was of the utmost importance he come to Philadelphia next May – not for the Cincinnati meeting, but for the federal convention. Washington could briefly visit with the officers, Madison wrote, but should make the federal convention his focus.[59] Madison anticipated that Washington's presence would lend the convention authority; the movement for constitutional reform needed the prestige of America's greatest leader.

In his reply to Madison, Washington acknowledged that he had declined re-election as president-general of the Cincinnati for political reasons. Since several state societies refused to ratify the revisions, the president-general had to choose between offending the Cincinnati by resigning from the society or risking damage to his reputation by accepting a continuation of the highly unpopular original institution. Simply not going to Philadelphia seemed the best solution. However, now that Virginia had elected him representative to the federal convention, Washington faced yet another dilemma. If he attended the convention, but not the Cincinnati meeting, he would insult his former officers; if he did not go to Philadelphia at all, he would miss the best opportunity to reform the government of the United States. Agonizing, Washington wrote Madison that he probably would not come.[60]

Washington continued to waffle for several months despite incessant urging from Knox to continue his leadership of the Cincinnati. Knox pointed out that that the Cincinnati had been founded innocently and without political ambition. The only instance when the Cincinnati had acted politically, Knox continued, had been its vehement opposition to Shays' Rebellion. According to Knox, that stance had actually made the society more popular; many former critics now acknowledged the Cincinnati as a force for stability. Under such circumstances, Washington's resignation as president-general would be a mistake. By the end of March 1787, Washington apparently decided

to attend both the Cincinnati meeting and the federal convention. He stated this intention in letters to Edmund Randolph and Knox, but once again complained to the latter that the revised institution had not been ratified.[61]

Then, just before the two meetings were to convene in Philadelphia, Washington reconsidered again. His brother had recently died, both his mother and sister were gravely ill, and his own health was poor. Consequently, Washington wrote to Knox on 27 April 1787 and declared his intention not to come to Philadelphia after all. Subsequently, the second general meeting of the Society of the Cincinnati convened on 7 May without the prospect of Washington's attendance, but also lacking several delegations to make up a quorum. The meeting was delayed from doing any business until 13 May, when there were enough delegates present. Washington, for his part, left for Philadelphia on 9 May, and arrived the same day the Cincinnati finally reached their quorum. Quite possibly, Washington had hoped to intentionally "miss" the Cincinnati meeting and still be in time for the federal convention, but was thwarted in his design by the society's own delay. Then again, the reasons Washington indicated to Knox for his short-term cancellation were grave and valid enough, and such duplicity was not really in character for the Continental Army's former commander-in-chief.[62]

At any rate, the second general meeting of the Society of the Cincinnati turned out rather disappointing. Washington did not attend the proceedings proper, but dined with the officers, and contrary to his earlier intentions agreed to serve as president-general once more. However, he made it clear that his position would be purely symbolic, and expected vice president-general Thomas Mifflin to do the actual work. Washington remained president-general until his death in 1799, and he continued to sign membership certificates and carried on substantial correspondence with fellow Cincinnati. However, he never again attended any of the meetings of the general society, nor did he get involved in the politics of the organization.[63]

As for the revised institution, the general meeting stalled, and the delegates called for a special session next year to finally decide the matter. However, neither in 1788 nor afterwards did the Cincinnati finalize their reform. After 1787, no meeting of the general society achieved the full representation needed to change the institution.

Attempts to lower the number of state societies required for ratification failed, as well. Attendance continued to decline; in 1799 only two delegations were present. Another special meeting in 1800 finally admitted that "the Institution of the Society of the Cincinnati remains as it was originally proposed an adopted by the Officers of the American Army at the Cantonment on the banks of the Hudson River in 1783."[64] Since at that meeting the society officially mourned Washington's death, it was perhaps fitting that they finally buried his reform, which had been a corpse for many years, at the same time.

The Impact of a Failed Reform

Despite its failure, the abortive reform changed the structure of the society. The general society became little more than a formality; most meetings merely elected the general officers for lack of a quorum to do any new business. In the years immediately after the reform, some state societies were probably reluctant to send delegates to a meeting which was supposed to finalize the unpopular revised institution. During the 1790s, interest in the general society simply faded. The state societies became the center of activity, an ironic development considering that the Cincinnati stood accused of wanting to bring the United States under a centralized yoke. The Constitution of the United States eventually overcame the obstacle of unanimous consent to reform that the Articles of Confederation required; the institution of the Society of the Cincinnati never did.

The revised institution also had an impact on the existence of several state societies. Virginia's Cincinnati, for example, never returned to the principle of hereditary succession, heeding Washington's wishes. By the early nineteenth century, the society's ultimate demise seemed inevitable, and the remaining members started looking for a worthy future for the charitable fund. Jefferson, despite his former criticism, actually had the gall to petition the Virginians to donate their funds to his pet project, Central College (the modern-day University of Virginia). Unsurprisingly, the Cincinnati refused. Instead they donated the money to what eventually became Lee and Washing-

ton college. Without heredity, the society winked out of existence until its revival many decades later.

Connecticut had a much more uneven relationship with the revised institution. Despite their opposition in the 1780s, the state society finally adopted the reforms in 1795.[65] Since the revised institution stipulated that the state society should seek a charter from the legislature, the Connecticut Cincinnati sought such incorporation in 1803. Yet the state Senate refused to grant a charter. In response, the Connecticut society in 1804 voted to dissolve itself and donated its funds (only $3,778) to Yale. Other state societies faded more quietly, their fate more the result of waning interest than the revised institution; North Carolina, Georgia, and Delaware all disappeared in the early decades of the nineteenth century.[66]

As for silencing the Cincinnati's critics, the reform was a partial success. The revised institution and the circular letter accompanying caused the largest peak of Cincinnati newspaper coverage since the publication of *Considerations*. Afterwards, critical reports of the Cincinnati became fewer and farther in-between, although they never quite ceased. Furthermore, there was in increase in neutral and even pro-Cincinnati articles. Many newspapers reported on the annual meetings of the respective state societies, often including a list of toasts drunk and notables present. These reports portrayed the Cincinnati as a fraternal and charitable organization, and made little reference to the controversy surrounding the society. The *New York Journal*, for example, commented on the state society's meeting in July 1784: "It was a meeting of the most respectable characters."[67]

Most importantly, however, newspapers did not notice that the state societies had not ratified the revised institution. Only in one instance in 1788 did the *Boston Gazette* report that "We certainly know that one, or more of them [state societies] have positively *refused* to ratify and adopt the constitution as *altered* by the *Convention* of the *Order* – therefore we view it as resting upon its *original basis* – governed by its *original constitution* – and, like the pyramids of Egypt, to endure *forever!*" The *Gazette* correctly assessed the truth of the matter twelve years before the general society would admit it even to itself, but the impact of the revelation was limited. Even though the

quote was part of a six week series that rivaled Burke's essay in length and sharpness, it did not generate another wave of national outcry as *Considerations* had in 1784.[68]

Among the more prominent critics of the Cincinnati, however, the reform of 1784 did little to quiet suspicions. As described in the previous two chapters, Gerry, the Adamses, the Warrens, Jefferson and King all continued to denounce the Cincinnati on a variety of occasions even after the publication of the revised institution. Samuel Adams even noticed that New York had not ratified the reforms, yet he was uncertain whether the nay of any one state society could prevent the revisions from taking effect.[69] Many other critics noted that the Cincinnati could easily work around the restrictions imposed by the revised institution, and continued to attack the society on the basis of their supposed intentions, not their formal organization.

On the whole, the reactions of the Cincinnati to the conspiracy theory were not those of the well-oiled political machine their critics made them out to be. Individual members agonized over the impact the accusations might have on their reputations, and some tried to strike back with counter-accusations or ridicule. But not until Washington took the matter into his own hands was there a coordinated response in the form of the revised institution. That reform worked somewhat to the advantage of the Cincinnati, even though the state societies ultimately denied it their sanction. Yet the failure to ratify the revised institution – and the subsequent failure of the press to report that fact – was not the result of well-coordinated Cincinnati duplicity. If anything, the lively debates about the revisions and the almost absurd failure of the general society to pass *any* reform proved that the Cincinnati had no military command structure, or even a well-organized national organization. It was true that a majority of former officers wished to retain heredity and were apparently willing to risk the wrath of their beloved president-general in the process. Yet their conviction stemmed from an unwillingness to give in to the howls of the critics, rather than a nefarious plan to establish a nobility at all costs. Had the Cincinnati really been a conspiracy, they should have adopted and ratified the reform, and then continued their plans of political consolidation in secrecy. As it was, the failure of thirteen state societies to unite behind

any single national rule showed that the Cincinnati embodied the spirit of the Articles of Confederation – and its shortcomings – rather than any notions of centralized command.

Notes

[1] Friedrich von Steuben to Henry Knox, 11 November 1783, *The Papers of General Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben.* eds. Edith von Zemensky and Robert J. Schulmann (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus Internation Publications, 1982), Microfilm.

[2] Circular letter of the Delaware Society of the Cincinnati, 6 November 1783, Papers of the Connecticut Society of the Cincinnati, NN.

[3] Adam Boyd to Henry Knox, 29 December 1783, quoted in Curtis Carroll Davis, *Revolution's Godchild: The Birth, Death, and Regeneration of the Society of the Cincinnati in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 30.

[4] Henry Knox to George Washington, 21 February 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence Concerning the Society of the Cincinnati,* ed. Edgar Erskine Hume (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1941), 95.

[5] Thomas Paine to George Washington, 28 April 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence,* 145.

[6] Judith Sargent Murray to Winthrop Sargent, 18 February 1784, Judith Sargent Murray Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, transcripts courtesy of Mary Rose Kasraie. See also Mary R. Kasraie, "'Left to Affectionate Partiality': An Authoritative Edition of Selected Letters by Judith Sargent Murray" (PhD dissertation, Georgia State University, 2001).

[7] Judith Sargent Murray to Winthrop Sargent, 29 January, 28 February 1784, Judith Sargent Murray Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, transcripts courtesy of Mary Rose Kasraie. The transcripts were taken from a letterbook written on paper not available until 1802. Thus we know they are non-contemporary; they were probably made in the second decade of the 19th century and may contain reflections made then and not in 1784. However, her comments on the Cincinnati controversy probably stem from 1784, as the topic was current at that time and had mostly died down by the 1800s.

[8] *Charleston South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 2 December 1783.

[9] "An Obscure Individual," *Observations on a Late Pamphlet Entitled 'Considerations Upon the Society or Order of the Cincinnati,' Clearly Evincing the Innocence and Propriety of That Honourable and Respectable Institution. In Answer to Vague Conjectures, False Insinuations, Andd Ill-Founded Objections* (Philadelphia: Robert Bell, 1783).

[10] Ibid., 14, 21, 23.

[11] Ibid., 13.

[12] Ibid., 15; *Philadelphia Freeman's Journal*, 31 December 1783.

[13] *Charleston South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 11 November 1783.

[14] *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 13 April 1784.

[15] *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 6 May 1784.

[16] *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 13 January 1784.

[17] *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 18 March 1784.

[18] for the number of Cincinnati who were also Freemasons, see Minor Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983), 136.

[19] *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 13 January 1784.

[20] Ibid.; *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 20 January, 6 April 1784,

[21] *Charleston South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 15 May 1784.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Friedrich von Steuben to Henry Knox, 11 November 1783, quoted in Edgar Erskine Hume, "Steuben and the Society of the Cincinnati," *The American-German Review* I, no. 3 (1935): 17-19.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Henry Knox to Friedrich von Steuben, 21 February 1784, quoted in Edgar Erskine Hume, *Early Opposition to the Cincinnati* (Providence: Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1936), 7.

[26] *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 6 January 1784; *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 24 March 1784.

[27] Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry: Containing the Adventures of Captain John Farrago and Teague Oregan, His Servant*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: John McCulloch, 1792-1797); Charles William Janson, *The Stranger in America: Containing Observations Made During a Long Residence in That Country, on the Genius, Manners and Customs of the People of the United States; with Biographical Particulars of Public Characters; Hints and Facts Relative to the Arts, Sciences, Commerce, Agriculture, Manufactures, Emigration, and the Slave Trade* (London: Albion Press, 1807), 288.

[28] George Washington to Henry Knox, 23 September 1783, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799,* eds. John C. Fitzpatrick and David M. Matteson (Washington: U.S. Govt. print. off., 1931), 27: 162-65; George Washington to Henry Knox, 20 March 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 122.

[29] George Washington to Benjamin Walker, 24 March 1784; George Washington to Nathanael Greene, 27 March 1784; George Washington to Jonathan Trumbull, 4 April 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 124-26.

[30] George Washington to Thomas Jefferson, 8 April 1784, Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 16 April 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 130-136; Thomas Jefferson to Martin Van Buren, 29 June 1824, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson,* ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1905), 12: 367.

[31] George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, 11 December 1785, quoted in Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 65; George Washingto to James Madison, 16 December 1786, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 280-82.

[32] for detailed accounts of the general meeting, see Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 58-66; Richard Frank jr. Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati" (PhD dissertation, University of Georgia, 1969), 157-69; Winthrop Sargent, "Journal of the General Meeting of the Cincinnati in 1784, by Major Winthrop Sargent," *Contributions to American History*, Publications of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1858).

[33] Sargent, "Journal of the General Meeting of the Cincinnati in 1784," 23-24.

[34] Ibid.

[35] "General Washington's Suggestions for Changes in the Institution," 4 May 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 152-54.

[36] granting the French society independence also served a personal purpose of Washington's: the general had been swamped with letters from French officers asking for admission.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Sargent, "Journal of the General Meeting of the Cincinnati in 1784," 80.

[39] The New York delegation consisted of Philip Cortlandt, William S. Smith, Nicholas Fish, and James Farile. For a roster of delegates see Sargent, "Journal of the General Meeting of the Cincinnati in 1784," 80.

[40] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 61. The revised institution passed with eleven states in favor and New York divided.

[41] "The Institution of the Society of the Cincinnati as Altered and Amended at their First General Meeting," *General Washington's Correspondence*, 160-63.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Hume, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 154; Sargent, "Journal of the General Meeting of the Cincinnati in 1784," 114-15.

[44] for reprints of the circular letter and revised institution, see *Boston Massachusetts Centinel*, 2, 5 June 1784; *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 1, 8 June 1784; *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 2, 16 June 1784; *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 3, 10 June 1784; *Providence Gazette*, 5 June 1784; *Portsmouth New Hampshire Gazette*, 12 June 1784; *New York Journal*, 27 May and 3 June 1784; *Charleston South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 1 June 1784; *Bennington Vermont Gazette*, 21 June 1784.

[45] "Washington's Circular Letter after the May 1784 Meeting," *General Washington's Correspondence*, 170-74.

[46] Ibid.

[47] John Cadwalader to James Meredith, 16 May 1784, Samuel Meredith Papers, Clymer-Meredith-Read collection, NN; Marquis de Lafayette to John Adams, 25 June 1784, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: With a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations,* ed, Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little and Brown, 1850), 8: 205-06.

[48] this was a different Jonathan Trumbull than the one who accused Burke under the pseudonym "A.Z."

[49] For the various reactions of state societies to the revised institution, see Hume, *Early Opposition to the Cincinnati*, 24-28; Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati", 171-82; Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 76-78; Jonathan Trumbull to Adam Boyd, 1 May 1786, Papers of the Connecticut Society of the Cincinnati, NN.

[50] New Hampshire Society of the Cincinnati to Connecticut Society of the Cincinnati, 3 February 1785, Papers of the Connecticut Society of the Cincinnati, NN.

[51] Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati", 172-74.

[52] Ibid., 180; Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 78; New York Society of the Cincinnati to Connecticut Society of the Cincinnati, 1 November 1786, Papers of the Connecticut Society of the Cincinnati, NN.

[53] Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati", 170-71.

[54] Adam Boyd to Jonathan Trumbull, 3 March 1786, Papers of the Connecticut Society of the Cincinnati, NN.

[55] South Carolina Society of the Cincinnati to Connecticut Society of the Cincinnati, 3 April 1786, Papers of the Connecticut Society of the Cincinnati, NN; Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati", 177.

[56] Henry Knox to George Washington, 31 January 1785; George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, 11 Dec 1785; George Washington to Henry Knox, 11 December 1785, *General Washington's Correspondence,* 213, 239-42. Washington had received a copy of Mirabeau's pamphlet from Samuel Vaughan, a British merchant. George Washington to Samuel Vaughan, 30 November 1785, *General Washington's Correspondence,* 239.

[57] George Washington to Horatio Gates (circular), 31 October 1786, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 264-65.

[58] Ibid.

[59] *New York Journal*, 28 December 1786; James Madison to George Washington, 7 December 1786, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 279-80.

[60] George Washington to Madison, 16 December 1786, *General Washington's Correspondence,* 280-82.

[61] Henry Knox to George Washington, 19 March 1787; George Washington to Edmund Randolph, 28 March 1787; George Washington to Henry Knox, 2 April 1787, *General Washington's Correspondence* 296-300.

[62] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 95-97; Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati", 187-88.

[63] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 97.

[64] For the various meetings of 1787-1800, see ibid., 189-90; Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati", 240-45; "Minutes of the Proceedings of the Adjourned General Meetings of the Society of the Cincinnati," Philadelphia, May 1800, Archives, DSoc.

[65] Hume, *Early Opposition to the Cincinnati*, 24.

[66] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 200.

[67] *New York Journal*, 8 July 1784.

[68] *Boston Gazette*, 26 May 1788.

[69] Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 27 August 1785, Samuel Adams Papers, NN.

Chapter Six

Was it all true? The Politics of the Society of the Cincinnati

The Society is the only bar to lawless ambition and dreadful anarchy to which the imbecility of government renders us so liable.

Henry Knox[1]

In the 1780s, the Cincinnati stood accused of conspiring to establish a monarchy, a hereditary nobility, or a secret government in the United States out of lust for power and personal gain. Some critics felt that the society subverted the effort to reform the Articles of Confederation and forged a new constitution more to their liking. Soon, the accusations ran, the Cincinnati would control the new government, possibly through military coercion. While this conspiracy theory was frantically alarmist and ascribed to the Cincinnati an improbable amount of power and effectiveness, it was not completely irrational. The accusations did not aim at space aliens or an obtuse secret society, but at a real-life organization that counted many intelligent, prominent, and powerful men among its members. Conceivably, the Cincinnati *could* have become a danger to American republicanism, or at least exerted considerable influence to further their own interests. Whether they did so is another question altogether.

Monarchy and Nobility

There were indeed men in the United States who favored a monarchy during the critical period, and some of them were officers. After all, monarchy was not an alien form of government to Americans, who had been loyal subjects of the Hanoverian kings of England until the Revolution. While independence had severed that bond and Paine's *Common Sense* had repudiated monarchy in principle, there were still men who felt that a strong executive form of government was best in times of crisis. In 1780, for example, when the war's outcome stood on the edge of a knife, New York openly discussed a dictatorship. The same year, John Matthews of South Carolina suggested

that Congress should give Washington emergency powers. Both movements, however, came to naught.[2]

In May 1782, Col. Lewis Nicola proposed precisely what the critics of the Cincinnati later came to fear: a monarchy, with Washington bearing the crown, supported by the military. Nicola had it all planned out. Among other things, he proposed granting soldiers massive tracts of land in the Western territories to ensure the king could count upon a strong and independent military. James Varnum, a brigadier general in the Continental Army, similarly argued that the Confederation was failure and that only absolute monarchy or a military state could rescue America. Both monarchists addressed their suggestions to Washington, who promptly shot them down. Varnum, who had kept his ideas abstract, merely received notice of Washington's disagreement, but Nicola faced sterner criticism. Washington bluntly expressed his disgust and told Nicola to shut up.[3] Neither Varnum nor Nicola were involved with the organization of the Cincinnati.

Noah Webster, the creator of the American Dictionary, also despaired of republicanism in 1786, the worst year of crisis under the Articles of Confederation. In an anonymous essay he wrote: "I confess, I was once as strong a republican as any man in America. *Now*, a republican is among the last kinds of governments I should choose. I should infinitely prefer a limited monarchy, for I would sooner be subject to the caprice of one man, than to the ignorance and passions of a multitude." Indeed, anarchy or "mob rule" had an even worse reputation in America than monarchy could ever have.[4]

Webster, although sympathetic to the Cincinnati, was not a member, and the Nicola and Varnum letters preceded the formation of the society. Another episode, however, had closer links to the society. On 2 November 1786, Steuben wrote a letter to Henry, Prince of Prussia. Apparently, this letter also contained a letter from Nathaniel Gorham, the president of Congress, suggesting that Henry assume an American crown modeled on the British limited monarchy. In his reply, the prince agreed that the British constitution was a fine system of government, but declined to get involved in American politics. He agreed to meet a friend of Steuben's in Paris, but nothing

came of it. Gorham was not a member of the Cincinnati, but Steuben was president of the New York society. Was a leading Cincinnatus involved in a serious effort to establish monarchy in America?

The entire episode survived only in circumstantial evidence. Only a draft of Henry's reply was ever found, and Gorham's identity as the author of the original letter was established by Rufus King based on oral tradition several years later. Minor Myers, the leading historian of the Cincinnati, found it suspicious that two members of the Rhode Island Cincinnati traveled to Boston in November on undisclosed business with the Massachusetts society. Possibly, they discussed the Prince Henry scheme there, but the timing of their journey made Shays' Rebellion a more likely topic. As Myers admitted, "any answer is speculation." The Henry affair was one of the more bizarre incidents in American history and cast a shadow of doubt over Steuben, who was something of a maverick anyway: a German noble turned American war hero, always short on cash and possessed of a certain eccentricity. At the same time, no clear evidence linked the Cincinnati as an organization to the incident.[5]

A year later, at the federal convention, Hamilton proposed an extremely strong executive bordering on monarchy (discussed below). Clearly, in the crisis of the 1780s a number of Cincinnati saw limited monarchy as an alternative to the political deadlock many Americans had come to detest. At one point or another, Hamilton, Steuben, Benjamin Tupper, John Armstrong, and William Hull all toyed with monarchist ideas.[6] Yet they were hardly alone in their frustration with national politics under the Articles of Confederation; even John Adams stood accused of royalist tendencies because he endorsed a powerful executive in his *Defence of the Constitutions.* A yearning for stable government did not by itself make a monarchist conspiracy. The conspiracy theory argued that a return to monarchy was imminent, that the Society of the Cincinnati planned to hand Washington a crown. No such concerted scheme existed. For one thing, the president-general repeatedly opposed any notion of monarchy, much less with himself as king. For another, no evidence ever surfaced that the Cincinnati pursued a monarchist scheme. While some members of the society might have wished for

a king, they realized that Americans would not willingly accept a royal government ever again.

The Cincinnati also stood accused of conspiring to establish a hereditary nobility. Indeed, heredity was a feature of the original institution, and it was popular enough to survive the reform of 1784 despite Washington's best efforts. But did that make the former officers a nobility? The society was a somewhat exclusive club, with three years service as an officer being the principal requirement for membership; former officers of the Continental Army formed the predominant core. However, the Cincinnati also admitted naval officers and also some officers of regular state troops, although not the state militias. Then there were honorary members, often prominent civilians. While honoraries did not enjoy all privileges of membership, some of them like Pennsylvania's Dickinson were very active in the organization.[7]

In terms of social class, the society had its share of the rich and famous. It included some members of America's most prominent families: there were Pinckneys, Lees, Livingstons, Morrises, and of course Washington himself. The extremely wealthy Philip Schuyler was a member, and Robert Morris, the financial magnate of the Confederation, became an honorary Cincinnatus. There were meteoric social risers Hamilton and Knox, who secured advantageous marriages (Hamilton was Schuyler's son-in-law) and profitable careers. Knox' penchant for luxury was well known, and even fellow Cincinnati jested about the pomposity of General Heath, whom McDougall called the "Duke of Roxbury." Steuben continuously lived above his means, much to the chagrin of his friends. A relatively high number of Cincinnati had attended college (about 165 out of 2,160 American members); in Connecticut the percentage ran as high as twenty. Among its ranks, the Cincinnati counted plantation owners, bankers, and financial speculators, men who in other countries might have held titles of nobility or at least exalted social standing.

Yet at the same time, many Cincinnati never attained riches or prominence. The society included innkeepers, craftsmen, surveyors, merchants, and many farmers. Perhaps the most typical path to success for members lay in the professions: while there

were few clergy, the Cincinnati included many prominent lawyers. Hamilton and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney dominated the bar of their respective states. There were a number of judges, including Henry Livingston who eventually attained a seat on the Supreme Court, but also Edward Roche, a humble justice of the peace in Delaware. The society was really economically and socially too diverse to give an aggregate judgment, but if anything, the Cincinnati resembled a moderately successful, upwardly mobile *bourgeoisie* much more than any sort of European nobility.

Even so, the Cincinnati could have stressed their exclusive status and separated themselves from the people, as so many critics feared. Burke had warned that the society would marry only amongst itself, disdaining the families of "plebeians." There was a moderate tendency towards intermarriage in the society, and members also tended to name their children after fellow Cincinnati, or even the great Roman himself. However, these practices were neither exclusive nor predominant. William Stephens Smith, for example, who later became the vice president of the New York society, in 1786 married Abigail Amelia Adams, the daughter of John Adams, one of the society's most persistent critics. The bride's mother Abigail subsequently entertained frequent social contacts with the Massachusetts society. Apparently, the Cincinnati were not reluctant to marry outside the fold, even if it meant potential family quarrels.[8]

Members of the society went very light on the visible trappings of nobility. The eagle emblem, so frequently denounced by the society's critics, was virtually invisible in the new republic. As discussed at the general meeting of 1784, the Cincinnati wore their eagles at society meetings and burials, but rarely on other occasions. Washington's birthday was the only public event when the eagles came out in force, and even the Virginian himself sported his diamond medal then. Otherwise, the emblem rarely appeared on public occasions, even when full dress was required. One critic argued that the Pierre L'Enfant, member of the society and designer of the emblem, had engraved Cincinnati eagle on the federal building in New York. However, in reality the building carried the Great Seal of the United States, which was a year older than the society. Not every eagle in America was the design of the Cincinnati.[9]

The Cincinnati did not express their membership with an abbreviation added to their name, as members of European knightly orders did. Members were typically addressed by their military rank as an honorific, but this was the customary among militia officers, as well. The only distinction in this case was that former officers of the Continental Army continued to carry their rank from the revolution, even if they had subsequently earned a higher rank in the militia. There certainly was a prevailing sentiment that militia service did not amount to as much as Continental service; on this count the Cincinnati were guilty of distinction. However, conflicts between Continentals and militia, as well as bickering about rank, had been a constant feature of the revolutionary war and had little to do with the establishment of an aristocracy.

None if these behaviors branded the society as peers modeled on European knightly orders, let alone the high nobility of the old world. To be sure, some members entered into and emerged from the war as wealthy and influential men; others gained such advantages in the years of the early republic. A few blatantly displayed luxury, and some undoubtedly were quite arrogant. But practically all worked vigorously for their living, whether opulent or simple, and most Cincinnati did so in professions that true nobility would never steep to. As titles, they merely retained the rank they had earned in military service for the republic. Steuben and Knox, the founders of the society, could only jest about the splendid royal weddings they had arranged for the next generation. At no point did the Society of the Cincinnati considered themselves a nobility for America, current, nascent, or otherwise.

Rebellion and Constitutional Reform

Washington once claimed that the Cincinnati had been founded without political aims in mind.[10] On that account the president-general was certainly wrong. The chaotic fate of the revised institution showed that the society was not a political machine that could simply determine and implement policy, much less subvert the political system of the American republic on a grand scale. Nevertheless, various levels of the Cincinnati organization, or at least a large number of members, did get involved in the politics of the early republic, sometimes with spectacular results. Over the course of the

1780s, the Cincinnati played a role in Shays' Rebellion, the controversy about paper money, and the movement for constitutional reform. Whether their behavior amounted to the nefarious schemes their critics feared was another matter.

Shays' Rebellion broke out in Massachusetts in 1786 in protest against enforcing debts and taxes in times of scarce specie and general economic hardship. Leading Cincinnati played a central role in quelling the uprising. The Massachusetts society passed a resolution condemning the disorder, and called upon all soldiers not to support the insurgents. In the same document, the society expressed its "determination to support the present government" and commitment to "public faith & private credit." Their statement was highly political, especially because there were many former soldiers among the rebels, and even their leaders. Daniel Shays himself had been eligible for membership in the Cincinnati but had never joined. Even more problematic was the fact that Luke Day, another leader of the rebellion, was indeed a member of the society, along with his brother and fellow insurgent Elijah. Through their resolution, the leadership of the local Cincinnati publicized that they did not tolerate lawlessness and stood with the creditor-dominated coastal merchant elite rather than the insurgent western farmers.[11]

At the same time, Governor James Bowdoin secretly approached a leading Cincinnatus for help from the federal government. Knox, who served as secretary at war of the Confederation at the time, subsequently persuaded Congress to vote a $530,000 special requisition in order to raise an army of 1,340 federal soldiers. Ostensibly, these troops were to fight Indians in New England, but that was an obvious euphemism for the Shaysite rebels. Earlier, Knox had already expressed his conviction that he would have to "depend on the noble and ind[ependent] spirit of the late continental officers." He promptly secured the appointment of Henry Jackson, member of the Massachusetts society and co-author of the anti-Shays resolution, to command the proposed regiment. However, all states but Virginia rejected the requisition needed to finance the corps, and thus any Cincinnati-engineered plans for federal intervention in Massachusetts failed.[12]

Yet the Cincinnati were also active on the state level. Frustrated by Congress, Bowdoin raised a local army of 4,400 men to put down the rebellion. Benjamin Lincoln, president of the Massachusetts society, received overall command, and many other commissions went to members of the Cincinnati as well. Financed predominantly by Boston merchants, Lincoln's army subsequently defeated the insurgent forces and crushed the rebellion. At their next meeting, the Massachusetts society expelled the Day brothers for their participation in Shays' Rebellion, bringing the affair to a close. Subsequently, Knox rejoiced that the vigorous action of the Cincinnati had convinced many critics that "the Society is the only bar to lawless ambition and dreadful anarchy to which the imbecility of government renders us so liable." The New York society also celebrated the end of the insurgency with the grim motto "May the sword of justice draw the blood of rebellion."[13]

The Cincinnati of Massachusetts were clearly on the side of law and order, and also supported mercantile-creditor interests against indebted backcountry farmers. While this was a highly political stance, the officers hardly stood alone. Even staunch critics of the society condemned the rebellion. Samuel Adams wrote a Riot Act against the insurgents; the Warrens and Higginson urged their sons to serve in Lincoln's army. Still, Mercy Warren and other critics resented the society's role in the affair, and even accused the society of deliberately fomenting Shays' Rebellion to gain support for a stronger central government. The presence of a Cincinnatus in the Shaysite leadership might have supported such an accusation. But unless one were to believe that the Cincinnati willingly sacrificed one of their own, Luke Day's quick expulsion from the society was proof to the contrary.

The only other indication of potential Cincinnati duplicity was an article Steuben wrote under the pseudonym "Belisarius," in which he attacked Knox's plan for a federal intervention as supportive of "an abominable oligarchy." Conceivably, Steuben felt sympathetic to the Massachusetts insurgents, but more likely the article was a ruse to draw scorn upon any criticism against federal troops. Writing exaggerated, immoderate attacks against policies one actually supported was not an uncommon tactic at the time. At any rate, the "Belisarius" article hardly made Steuben a ringleader of Shays'

Rebellion, or even an intriguer on the insurgents behalf. The actions of the Massachusetts Cincinnati showed that the officers could be a political force for conservatism, but quelling Shays' Rebellion was not an underhanded effort to bring America under the society's sway.[14]

In Rhode Island, the Cincinnati displayed similar political tendencies as in Massachusetts. While the Massachusetts' legislature policies had always favored creditors, the opposite was true in Rhode Island. There, the legislature had passed a number of paper money laws, which eased the scarcity of specie and thus allowed debtors to meet their obligations more easily. However, paper money often depreciated rapidly and thus was bad for creditors, who were legally obligated to accept the scrip. As in Massachusetts, the Cincinnati took the creditors' side. In July 1789, the Rhode Island society expelled Joseph Arnold for insisting on paying a specie debt with paper money. The society concluded that Arnold had "forfeited all claim to those principles of honor and justice which are the basis of the institution, and thereby rendered himself no longer deserving the friendship and confidence of that class of his fellow-citizens, or the patronage of good men." It was a harsh condemnation, but then the officers had all had bad experiences with paper money during the revolution, when they were sometimes paid with near-worthless scrip.[15]

Of course, the most important political issue of the critical period was the movement to reform the Articles of Confederation. Unsurprisingly, a good many Cincinnati supported giving more authority to the federal government. After all, the original institution committed the society to "union and national honor" between the states. Moreover, the increasingly disastrous fiscal situation of Congress in the 1780s clouded any hope that one day, military pay and commutation certificates would be worth more than the pittance speculators offered. Some leading Cincinnati became spokesmen for a stronger central government. Three of twelve members of the Annapolis Convention (Hamilton, Dickinson, and Randolph) were Cincinnati, although the latter two were honorary members. Throughout the critical period, state societies toasted the federal union at their meetings. Georgia member George Turner spoke for many when

he expressed his impatience with the lack of reforms: "Let us never lose sight of the rational Liberties of the People; But let us remember that energetic Government is essential to their Security."[16]

If a majority of Cincinnati worried about the sorry state of government in 1787, they were hardly alone: even critics of the society agreed that things were amiss. In the aftermath of Shays' Rebellion, for example, Knox and Higginson discovered that they could agree on political reform. Knox argued that Shays' Rebellion had clearly demonstrated the need for a stronger federal government, and that the convention scheduled for Philadelphia in May was the best bet. In reply, Higginson agreed that "the government of the Union must be the result of deliberation and choice or of necessity and chance." The man who once denounced the Cincinnati as a tool of French subversion now saw eye to eye with the society's founder. In their correspondence, Knox and Higginson already foresaw the precise mechanism by which the Constitution would eventually be accepted: ratification by nine states in special conventions.[17]

Even so, had Higginson seen a roster of society members from all states (something even Knox did not possess) and cross-referenced that with the delegates to the federal convention, he would likely have panicked. Among the fifty-five delegates who attended the deliberations in Philadelphia, twelve were original Cincinnati and nine honorary. In the years to come, another five (including former critics Franklin and King) gained honorary membership. The secretary of the convention, William Jackson, was a Cincinnatus, as was of course its chairman Washington. Furthermore, the general meeting of the society was sitting at the same time and in the same city as the Philadelphia convention. Judging merely from these numbers and facts, the darkest aspects of the conspiracy theory seemed to make sense, the framers appeared a cabal of power-hungry Cincinnati. Certainly, through strength of numbers, the society *could* have shaped the Constitution to fit their design.[18]

However, Cincinnati influence over the federal convention was much more limited than the circumstances suggested. It was coincidence, not design, that brought the general meeting and the convention to Philadelphia in May 1787; the society's second triennial meeting had been scheduled years ago. Moreover, only four Cincinnati

attended both gatherings: Hamilton, Thomas Mifflin of Pennsylvania, David Brearly and Jonathan Dayton of New Jersey. Finally, by the time the deliberations at the federal convention attained a quorum, the general meeting was already over. The Cincinnati adjourned on 18 May, whereas the convention delegates could not begin to organize until 25 May and remained in the State House until 17 September.[19]

During the convention itself, there was no such thing as a Cincinnati party line. Most society delegates, like a majority of all participants, favored a stronger national government, but they did not necessarily agree on its shape. For the most part, Cincinnati delegates pursued the interests of their home states and their own individual convictions. Those from small states tended to favor equal representation, while those from large states felt that population size should determine the number of Congressmen. Whether on the executive, the slave trade, or the powers of Congress, individual Cincinnati held differing views. The one topic where a number of society delegates made common cause was a national army. Two members, Dayton and General Pinckney, argued in for a professional standing army, while several other members at least favored federal control over the state militias. Still, there was no indication whatsoever that any pre-planned Cincinnati design for a new federal government existed.[20]

Given the sheer number of Cincinnati delegates, their impact on the Constitution was remarkably limited. Historian Clinton Rossiter offered a ranking of the delegates based on their contributions to the deliberations in Philadelphia; the top tiers of his list were strikingly devoid of society members. Only Washington appeared in the category of "principal" delegates, and that more for his forceful presence than any intellectual contribution. Two members, Randolph and General Pinckney, Rossiter deemed "influential," Dickinson as "very useful," and another five as "useful." Three Cincinnati were merely "visible," four were "ciphers," and two "disappointments." Another three went home early, without significant contribution. The two leading thinkers of the convention, Madison and James Wilson, were not members of the society[21], and neither were the principal architects of the Great Compromise. Cincinnati delegates certainly contributed to the outcome of the federal convention, but most of them did not do so very eloquently or brilliantly.[22]

Only on one occasion did a Cincinnatus live up to the suspicions of the society's critics. On 18 June, shortly after William Patterson proposed the New Jersey plan, a much more limited reform than Madison's Virginia plan currently under discussion, Hamilton held a six hour speech outlining his own ideas for government. He advocated a single executive chosen by electors for life, endowed with an absolute veto. Senators, Hamilton argued, should hold their seats for life as well, and the national government should have complete sovereignty, including the power to appoint state governors. It was by far the most radical plan proposed at the convention, closely modeled on the British constitution, and more than a little reminiscent of a constitutional monarchy. Later in life, his suggestions in Philadelphia came to haunt Hamilton, when the Republican turned them into political ammunition.

What was Hamilton's motivation for voicing such radical ideas? Historian Catherine Drinker Bowen proposed that he deliberately played devil's advocate. The Hamilton plan made the moderately nationalist Virginia plan seem tame by comparison, thus increasing its chances against the New Jersey plan. Hamilton, whose fellow New York delegates were adamantly opposed to a strong national government, could not hope to influence the convention with his vote, so he might have tried it with rhetoric. At the same time, Hamilton was a strong admirer of the British constitution; possibly he simply wished to make a statement of principle. In any case, the convention did not consider Hamilton's speech a serious alternative to the Virginia and New Jersey plans. Not one of the other twenty Cincinnati delegates spoke up to agree with Hamilton or even discuss his ideas, nor did any other member of the convention. Hamilton left Philadelphia soon thereafter and only returned near the end to put his signature on the finished Constitution.[23]

Neither the so-called Hamilton plan nor the eventual Constitution was the conspiratorial work of the Society of the Cincinnati. In fact, a number of Cincinnati delegates refused to give their consent to the Constitution. The most important of these was Randolph, an honorary member who had originally sponsored Madison's Virginia plan, but came to oppose the finished work. John Lansing and Robert Yates, both honorary members from New York, opposed a stronger national government at the behest of

Governor George Clinton, a hereditary member. Thus, even though the New York delegation (Lansing, Yates, and Hamilton), was entirely made up of Cincinnati, it proved an obstacle to constitutional reform at Philadelphia. Five more Cincinnati delegates (William Davie, Daniel St. John Jenifer, Alexander Martin, James McClurg, and William Pierce) returned home early although they did not oppose the Constitution. Thus of the twenty-one Cincinnati delegates, only thirteen signed the Constitution, hardly the record of an organization that wanted to subvert constitutional reform into a bid for power.

When it came to ratification, the Cincinnati's track record was just as mixed. Many state societies toasted the new Constitution at their annual meetings, but the circular letters of 1787 and 1788 remained surprisingly silent on the topic. More importantly, Cincinnati delegates to the various state ratifying conventions did not necessarily form a coherent Federalist bloc in favor of ratification. Instead, they often mirrored the level of dividedness in their respective states. In states that ratified relatively easily, such as Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Georgia, and Connecticut, Cincinnati delegates voted for the Constitution. Massachusetts was somewhat different. The state was heavily contested and ratified on the narrow margin of 187 to 168. Despite this high level of division, the Cincinnati delegates voted solidly for the Constitution, much in keeping with their earlier policies on Shays' Rebellion. However, their power was quite limited, since there were only eight of them.

But in two of the most contested states, the Cincinnati also were at odds with one another. Virginia ratified narrowly, 89 to 79. Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee, a member of the society, had called upon former military men to support the Constitution, but his success was limited. A majority of former Continental army officers in the convention voted for ratification, but the Cincinnati members were actually divided eleven to nine *against* it. In New York, the conflict between Hamilton and Clinton's men repeated itself. Hamilton became the chief voice of "Publius" and wrote most of the Federalist papers, whereas Clinton became the Antifederalist leader of the state. The state convention ratified 30 to 27, and Cincinnati delegates voted six to two in fa-

vor. Only the fact that he presided over the ratifying convention prevented Governor Clinton from adding a third vote to the New York Cincinnati Antifederalists.

In the two straggler states, North Carolina and Rhode Island, the Cincinnati went in different directions. North Carolina's first ratifying convention had rejected the Constitution 184 to 84, including four Cincinnati against and two in favor. After Washington's inauguration, a second convention yielded a 194 to 77 vote in favor; this time, five Cincinnati went along with the majority, but four were still opposed. It was in Rhode Island that the Cincinnati most openly became a political force in favor of ratification. The Rhode Island Cincinnati repeatedly toasted the Constitution and condemned the state's folly in rejecting a speedy ratification. Finally, a state ratifying convention voted 34 to 32 for the Constitution, with all four Cincinnati delegates in favor.[24]

Overall, the Cincinnati role in the ratification struggle mirrored their stance on constitutional reform all along: a majority of members favored a new federal government, and a number of state societies cautiously supported it. In states where there was a sizeable and energetic Antifederalist opposition, there was also a significant minority of Antifederalist Cincinnati. The two main exceptions to this rule were Massachusetts and Rhode Island. In both states, the Cincinnati were united for ratification despite a heavily divided public opinion in Massachusetts and a strong Antifederalist majority in Rhode Island. In both cases, the society's commitment to the Constitution reflected conservative political positions the local Cincinnati had held all along.

On the whole, the society's influence over the movement for constitutional reform was remarkably limited. In Philadelphia, the Cincinnati failed to use their numerical strength to press a coherent program. And in most state ratifying conventions, there were only a handful of Cincinnati delegates, who did not always vote in favor. If there had not been a majority in favor of the Constitution among the people of America (or at least their political representatives) the new political system would never have come to pass. In no appreciable way was the Constitution the "wicked and traitorous fabrication" of the Society of the Cincinnati.

Cincinnati Politics under a Federalist Government

Critics of the society feared that if not stopped, the Cincinnati would eventually dominate the federal government or otherwise secure privileges and inordinate profits. In the latter days of the Confederation and under Washington's new government, there were certainly many opportunities for advancement. Furthermore, the new Constitution significantly raised hopes that the national government would honor its financial obligations; Congress now had the authority to raise an independent income. The Cincinnati, as creditors of the state, stood to profit from this fact. To what extent did the Cincinnati manage to attain power and profit under the new Federalist regime? If the society was a conspiracy, its members should have done very well under the new order.

One area in which former officers stood to profit was the settlement of Western lands. In 1783, almost at the same time as the formation of the society, Ebenezer Huntington, Rufus Putnam, and Timothy Pickering developed a plan to turn a large part of the Ohio territory into land grants for revolutionary officers and men. 288 officers presented this plan as a petition to Congress, the vast majority of them Cincinnati. The motion proved unsuccessful, mostly because Congress had not yet sorted out the questions of state versus federal land ownership. While the society was not directly involved with any applications for Western lands, the topic apparently came up at the first general meeting in 1784, which resolved that "Applications should be made & signed by the Officers concerned in each State Meeting praying Congress to make speedy reply to their petition for a Grant of Western Lands." While Congress proved unresponsive, a number of states made land grants to former soldiers. Presumably, the state societies served as information networks and coordination meetings for the lobbying effort.[25]

In 1786, Putnam and Benjamin Tupper made another start on the Ohio project. They organized the Ohio company, which planned to buy massive tracts of lands from Congress, paying with Continental debt certificates. Of the eleven founders, nine were members of the Cincinnati. In achieving their goal, they were massively aided by William Duer, secretary of the United States Board of Treasury and an honorary member of the New York society. Allowing the land speculators to pay with debt certificates

(which had depreciated massively at that time) amounted to a huge federal subsidy. On the other hand, this system made it possible Congress to discharge some small part of its debt through the sale of Western lands; this became the method Antifederalists much preferred to federal taxes.[26]

The Ohio company materialized in October 1787, and once again the state societies served as key networks for the sale of shares. Cincinnati played a prominent role in the settlement of the Ohio Company territory, and as historian Myers pointed out, "on a per capita basis Marietta, Ohio, may have been the heaviest concentration of Cincinnati in the United States." Cincinnati also contributed to the streams of settlers heading to other parts of the West, often in leadership positions. St. Clair became the first territorial governor of Ohio, and he eventually renamed the principal settlement "Cincinnati." All over the West, towns and counties were named for members of the society, in recognition of their achievements in the revolution as well as in settling the territory.[27] Some Cincinnati even looked to the West as an alternative to political deadlock and economic depression. Fearing that Massachusetts might reject the new Constitution, Knox wrote to Samuel Holden Parsons (a co-founder of the Ohio company) that if constitutional reform were to fail, "we must all I believe become inhabitants of the Ohio."[28]

Did that mean the Cincinnati intended to establish a military state or a feudal system in the Ohio territory? The 1783 petition for land grants was certainly reminiscent of the Roman system of granting land to veterans, who would then help defend that territory against the "barbarians." However, the original petition came to naught and the eventual Ohio Company was a privately owned land company, not a systematic effort to use the veteran's military potential. Congress' official policy on Western lands, the Land Ordinances of 1785 and 1787, stipulated that the territory would become a full-fledged state with a republican government. Indeed Ohio moved rapidly into that direction, attaining statehood in 1803. Despite the presence of many former military men, and despite the fact that some individuals owned large tracts of land, the new state had widespread individual landownership and solidly republican government. It was not the quasi-feudal military colony Samuel Adams had once feared.

The best proof that the Cincinnati did not plan to transform Ohio into their fiefdom came from the society itself. In 1804 Putnam, speaking for a number of Cincinnati now living in Ohio, asked the Massachusetts society for their share of the Massachusetts charitable fund, hoping to create a new state society. The reply from Boston quickly shattered their plans: not only did the Massachusetts society refuse to part with some of its money, it also asserted that there would never be more than the original thirteen state societies (plus the French). Thus, the state which boasted the city with the most Cincinnati per capita was prevented from organizing its own state society.[29]

Critics had also argued that the Cincinnati would form the core of a standing army, ready to oppress the people and enforce their will through military might. Under the new Constitution, Congress had the power to raise a peacetime military, although it did so only on a very small scale.[30] And indeed, Cincinnati members dominated the officer corps of the small federal forces. In the 1790s, John Doughty of the New York society, Josiah Harmar of Pennsylvania, St. Clair, and Anthony Wayne all held top positions of command, and many other Cincinnati served under them. In the navy, of six captains appointed by Congress in 1794, five were Cincinnati, and the sixth received an honorary membership.[31] It was hardly a surprise that the federal government should draw its officers from the veterans of the Continental army; these men had more professional military experience than anyone else in the United States. For the most part, this small congressional army served on the frontier, in campaigns against the Indians. At the Battle of Maumee in 1791, for example, many former Cincinnati fought and died. Using the army in this manner was no real cause for complaint to those who feared military oppression, although the Indians presumably felt differently.

In one instance, Washington's government did use military force to combat domestic insurrection: the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion in backcountry Pennsylvania. Instead of using the small federal forces, however, Washington and his chief advisors (among them Hamilton, whose tax policies the insurgents were protesting in the first place) decided to use militia troops from Virginia, Maryland, and New Jersey. The president gave command to Henry "Lighthorse Harry" Lee, the governor of Virginia. Lee was a

prominent Cincinnatus, but that was not the reason Washington relied on him. Thomas Mifflin, governor of Pennsylvania, would have been a more obvious choice. Like Lee, Mifflin was a leading Cincinnatus, but he was also a prominent Republican, and Washington did not trust him. Instead, the president called on a fellow Virginian. In the end, the rebellion was ended almost without bloodshed, and due to Washington's insistence, there were few of the vandalisms and lootings typically associated with soldiers in the 18th century.[32]

The quelling of the Whiskey Rebellion cemented the authority of the federal government, but it did so without relying on excessive force and the dreaded oppression of a standing army. If several important Cincinnati were involved, that was due to their political offices at the time. In contrast to Shays' Rebellion, the society did not play an important role in organizing and executing the counter-insurgent forces. As Washington's distrust of Mifflin showed, the society was not even a reliable network of political support for military action. A number of Cincinnati engaged in military careers under the Constitution, but they hardly formed the core of a secret military cabal. Despite incidents such as the Whiskey Rebellion, the new republic did not become a military dictatorship; once again, the fears of the anti-Cincinnati opposition proved to be unfounded.

Several members of the Cincinnati gained political influence in the new federal government under the Constitution. Seventeen members were elected into the first Congress, including four senators and thirteen representatives. However, given a total number of ninety-five Congressmen, these Cincinnati were hardly a dominant force. Several members secured posts in Washington's cabinet or otherwise gained federal patronage. Hamilton, for example, headed the treasury, yet it was more due to his personal relationship with Washington than his membership in the Cincinnati that he managed to dominate the cabinet. Knox became secretary of war, a natural choice given his function as Washington's right hand during the war and his previous service as Congressional secretary at war. Randolph, an honorary member, served as attorney general, but his previous Antifederalism hardly qualified him as a protagonist of mas-

sive national power. And not all principal members of Washington's cabinet had ties to the Cincinnati. Jefferson, the man who had urged the president to dissolve the society in 1784, was the secretary of state.[33]

Members of the society also served in key subordinate positions. Curiously enough, Hamilton had none in his direct employ, but four of the thirteen commissioners of loans were Cincinnati, as were Knox' secretary and principal clerk. Even Jefferson's department had its share: two members of the society served as foreign ministers and another two as consuls. Still, a prominent position in the Cincinnati did not necessarily guarantee a high-prestige government job. Lincoln, the president of the Massachusetts society and the commander who had crushed Shays' Rebellion, lobbied for a position but only became collector of the Port of Boston. Henry Jackson, the Cincinnatus who would have headed the abortive Congressional force against Shays' Rebellion, got nothing, despite repeated attempts. And although the society counted many prominent lawyers among its members, only four received appointments into the federal judiciary.[34] On the whole, the actual influence of the society's members was only moderate. Anything less would have severely underrepresented the Continental officers' role as part of the revolutionary elite.

Did the Cincinnati form a political faction or party? William Maclay, who opposed Hamilton's fiscal policies, identified the Cincinnati as a chief pillar of the nascent Federalist party. "Hamilton literally speaking is moving heaven and Earth in favour of his System," Maclay recorded in his journal. "The Cincinnati are another of his Machines, and the Whole City of New York."[35] Maclay was not entirely off the mark. Many, perhaps most Cincinnati did support Hamilton's policies and became Federalists under the first party system. Some of them, like Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, became prominent party leaders. However, as historian Richard Saunders put it, "it is doubtful that the Cincinnati did much to mold the thoughts and actions of its members or maintain party loyalty. More realistically, it was apparent that common interest was their binding cement; naturally fraternization in the Society made it easier to discover their harmony of opinion."[36]

And there was a substantial minority of Cincinnati who became Republicans instead. New York was continuously split between Governor Clinton's Republicans and Hamilton's Federalists to the point where even the election of society officers became politicized. William Eustis, Joseph Bloomfield, Thomas Mifflin, and Thomas McKean all were vice-presidents or presidents of state societies – and Republican politicians. James Monroe, another Republican leader, was an honorary member of the Virginia society.[37] Furthermore, not only did the Cincinnati split along party lines, but so did their critics: Jefferson, Gerry, Burke, and Warren became prominent Republicans, while John Adams and King became Federalist leaders. Quite simply, the first party system transformed American politics to the point where they transcended earlier lines of division. The critical period had turned into the early republic, and while the new era still grappled with the problems of the old, it did so in a new framework. Personal interests and convictions determined a man's political position, not membership in or opposition to the Society of the Cincinnati.

Finally, there was one political cause with which the Cincinnati had been involved from the beginning: the question of outstanding military pay, especially commutation. One purpose of the new Constitution was to put the federal government on a more solid financial footing in order to restore the confidence of creditors abroad and at home. However, whereas in 1783 all Continental army officers had one interest in common, namely to get their pensions paid, in 1790 the situation looked quite different. Many holders of commutation certificates, including Cincinnati, had sold their bonds to speculators at greatly depreciated values out of necessity or frustration. Yet some of the speculators, too, were Cincinnati: Philip Schuyler, Robert Morris, and several others had bought huge amounts of federal paper. Finally, the state societies themselves held a large number of commutation certificates in their charitable funds. As historian Minor Myers put it, "the societies as a group then were interested parties in any legislation dealing with funding the federal debt, for the future of the debt was the future of their charitable fund." Cincinnati who had sold their certificates, officer speculators, and the state societies all had differing interests when the new federal leg-

islature convened, and their opinions were part of a larger controversy surrounding the treatment of the federal debt in general.[38]

In Congress, Madison proposed discrimination in favor of the original bond-holders, meaning that the federal government would compensate even those who had sold their bonds, presumably at the expense of speculators. At this point the Society of the Cincinnati could have exerted considerable pressure on behalf of its members, but which ones? Speculators naturally opposed discrimination while original bondholders favored it. The state societies had to look out for their charitable funds. Not everybody understood how divided the officers were in their interests. Burke, who otherwise followed Madison's lead in Congress, felt that discrimination would benefit the officers unfairly; he believed most of them had already procured public employment and were thus well compensated. The South Carolinian was wrong. Many officers sharply felt the sting of money lost to speculation and economic uncertainty.[39]

In New York, a number of former Continentals petitioned Congress to favor original bondholders. However, the state Society of the Cincinnati held a meeting in February and unanimously rejected discrimination as "incompatible with the principles of an honorable policy." The society widely publicized their statement in the press. Why did the Cincinnati of New York not support their comrades? Hamilton and Schuyler obviously opposed discrimination for political and financial reasons, but that did not explain the unanimity of the decision in the politically divided New York society. One reason may have been that discrimination could have hurt the charitable fund; after all, the society was not the original bondholder. Or else the society wished to avoid the impression that they craved special privileges for the officers; it would have been easy for the society's enemies to twist discrimination into another assault on commutation privileges such as the Cincinnati had experienced in 1783-84. This interpretation also explained why the Cincinnati of New York went public with their decision instead of silently refusing to support the petition.[40]

Meanwhile in Congress, discrimination failed to gain a majority. Instead, the legislature passed the Funding Act on August 4, 1790, which among other things allowed the owners of commutation certificates to exchange their bonds for new, inter-

est-bearing federal stock. This policy massively benefited the current bondholders, especially the speculators. Within a short time, the market value of commutation certificates rose massively, even slightly surpassing face value in 1792. The state societies, too, benefited from the situation; several continued to invest their funds in government bonds. Since their commutation-based charitable funds were finally worth something, the societies also commenced helping indigent members, widows, and orphans over the course of the 1790s. These payments were not only intended to help cover living expenses, but also to support the education of impoverished members' children, sometimes with special emphasis on the eldest son and presumable future Cincinnatus.[41]

In 1792, a group of officers from New York under the leadership of Cincinnati member Ebenezer Stevens once again petitioned Congress to aid those who had sold their certificates to speculators. Stevens, recalling the stance of the New York society two years earlier, organized his movement in competition to the Cincinnati, calling a meeting on 4 July. Clinton joined Stevens' movement, and the petitioners eventually called for the support of the state societies outside New York. Only Georgia endorsed the petition, as the state society had made similar demands in its circular letter that year. Eventually, officers of many states, including many members of the Cincinnati but no additional state societies, joined the petition, but to no avail. The House of Representatives rejected the motion on 16 January 1793, 10 in favor and 43 against. Among the legislators, four Cincinnati supported the petition and three opposed it.[42] Once again, the society was at odds with itself.

Not until 1808 did the society throw what weight it had behind a movement to benefit all veterans with pensions. Even then, it took twenty more years and considerable lobbying to spur Congress into action. In 1828, the federal legislature voted to award all surviving veterans – officers and enlisted men alike – a pension of full pay for life. It had taken forty-five years for military pensions to become a reality.[43] On the whole, as a political pressure group the Society of the Cincinnati was a failure. Lack of unity in interests and policy, the fact that it included only about half of the Continental officers and no enlisted men, and the gradual collapse of the general society all severely limited the Cincinnati as a veterans organization. It was not until after the Civil War

that veterans became a lobbying force to be reckoned with. Nevertheless, the society introduced the idea of a veteran's organization into American political culture; later organizations such as the American Legion would eventually achieve what the Cincinnati could not.[44]

The history of the Society of the Cincinnati as a political group was decidedly mixed. Throughout the 1780s and 90s, a majority of members endorsed policies that could have variously been designated "law and order," conservative, or Federalist. Cincinnati played a role in quelling Shays' Rebellion, drafting and ratifying the Constitution, and in shaping the new federal government as well as the post-revolutionary military. Some members, above all Hamilton, became prominent politicians who vigorously pursued controversial policies that critics interpreted as a betrayal of the revolution. Hamilton's republican credentials were indeed somewhat less than perfect: his maverick proposals at the Philadelphia Convention branded him as a borderline monarchist, and he certainly was no egalitarian by anyone's reckoning. Yet his fiscal-monetary genius quite possibly saved the early republic from collapse and set the United States on its course to industrial affluence and international greatness.

Whatever the stance of individual members, at no time did the society pursue any policies in a concerted, organized, let alone conspiratorial manner. No matter what politics a majority of Cincinnati supported, there was always a numerically or politically significant minority on the other side. The society brought fourth not only conservatives and Federalists, but Shaysites, Antifederalists, and Republicans, as well. Unless expelled (as happened in a few cases), these dissidents could and did take part in the deliberations of the state and general societies and were thus privy to what was going on behind closed doors. The best example was the New York society, which was continuously torn between Hamilton, Schuyler, and the somewhat erratic Steuben on the one hand, and Clinton and his followers on the other. Even though Hamilton drew support from many Cincinnati, the society itself was contested ground, not a political machine that could pursue ambitious or subversive plans with ease.

Furthermore, the Society of the Cincinnati as a whole was simply not a very effective organization. The dismal fate of the reform of 1784 clearly disproved Gerry's fears of the society as a secret government, even though the result was the preservation of the controversial hereditary feature. Not even George Washington could impose his will on the society. There was simply no hierarchic chain of command, no system of carefully organized political influence. And while the system of circular letters provided a relatively good communication amongst the various branches of the society, they often reflected considerable disagreements between the state societies.

Finally, as early as 1787 the general meeting ceased to be a decision-making body of any great importance, and interest in the general society continuously waned to the point where few states even bothered to send delegates. Left to their own devices, the state societies pursued their own agendas. Some, like Rhode Island and Massachusetts, were relatively united and stood for identifiable political positions. Others, like New York, were divided along the same political lines as the rest of the state. Still others, like Virginia, were mostly quiet fraternal organizations that eventually faded from view until revitalized in the second half of the nineteenth century. As stated before, the Society of the Cincinnati as an organization displayed many more characteristics of the somewhat haphazard Articles of Confederation than any tendencies towards centralized, conspiratorial power.

In short, the Society of the Cincinnati were not even a political party or faction, let alone a powerful secretive conspiracy capable of subverting the American republic. However, none of the above observations can conclusively prove that the Cincinnati were essentially harmless. This is in the nature of conspiracy theories. A lack of documentation for nefarious plots might be explained away by stating that conspirators do not tend to leave a paper trail. The organizational weaknesses of the society might merely be a smokescreen to disguise the smoothly running machine underneath. The presence of numerous dissenters within the society might mean that the real conspiracy was limited only to a few powerful members "in the know" who manipulated the rest of the organization as they pleased. Against a logic of plots wrapped in secrets hidden beneath lies, there is no ultimate counter-argument. Yet common sense shows that

a conspiratorial interpretation of the Cincinnati is extremely improbable, if not impossible; a close shave with Occam's razor reveals harmless confusion rather than preternaturally effective secrecy. And since more than two hundred years have passed since the formation of the Cincinnati, we also have the benefit of hindsight. Anderson House, the headquarters of the Society of the Cincinnati in Washington DC is certainly impressive, but the United States has yet to see the introduction of dukes and peers.

In the end, it was the fraternal and commemorative aspect of the Cincinnati that most characterized the organization, not political ambitions. Sometimes, the fraternity could get quite merry: the seventy-eight diners at the Massachusetts state meeting on 4 July 1809 consumed slightly above one bottle of wine on average each – not to mention sundries such as porter, cider, and six quarts of hard liquor.[45] Perhaps this sort of merriment allowed the members to get along even if they differed in social status, economic prowess, and political opinion. More likely it was a spirit of common achievement and commitment to American liberty that brought the societies together year after year. One Cincinnatus attempted to preserve that spirit in a song written for the decennial of Independence, which while perhaps lacking in great poetry was certainly not devoid of great sentiment:

> Welcome hither each brave brother
> Souls who nobly scorn to yield
> Friendship binds us to each other
> Friendship form'd in hostile field
>
> Chorus:
> Hail Cincinnatus great in arms
> Thy sons revere thy name
> To them like thee sweet peace hath charms
> When conquest crowns their fame
>
> Tyrants here behold the foes
> Can make your armies flee
> No more your slavish plans propose
> Columbia now is free
>
> To freedom sacred be this day
> In each revovling year
> And we'll our grateful homage pay
> With hearts devoid of fear[46]

Notes

[1] Henry Knox to George Washington, 19 March 1787, *General Washington's Correspondence Concerning the Society of the Cincinnati*, ed. Edgar Erskine Hume (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1941), 296.

[2] "Monarchical Tendencies in America," DHRoC 13: 168-69.

[3] Ibid.; Richard Frank jr. Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati" (PhD dissertation, University of Georgia, 1969), 4; Louise B. Dunbar, *A Study in Monarchical Tendencies in the United States from 1776-1801* (Urbana: University of Illinoirs, 1922).

[4] *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 20 November 1786; "Monarchical Tendencies in America," DHRoC 13: 168-69.

[5] Ibid.; Minor Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983), 83-86; Dunbar, *Monarchical Tendencies*, 58-70.

[6] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 102.

[7] much of this information is taken from Myers chapter "The Original Members," a careful study including numerical, sociological, and political observations on the original Cincinnati: Ibid., 120-44.

[8] Ibid., 130.

[9] Ibid., 179-81.

[10] George Washinton to Thomas Jefferson, 30 May 1787, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 311-13.

[11] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 80-81; David P. Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 86-87.

[12] Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion*, 82-84.

[13] Ibid., 86-87; Henry Knox to George Washington, 19 March 1787, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 296; *New York Journal*, 19 July 1787.

[14] Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion*, 87; John McAuley Palmer, *General Von Steuben* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1966), 336-40.

[15] Robert Rogers (Secretary of the Rhode Island Society of the Cincinnati) to Connecticut Society of the Cincinnati, July 1789, Papers of the Society of the Cincinnati of Connecticut, NN.

[16] George Turner to Samuel Blachley Webb, 12 May 1787, *Correspondence and Journals of Samuel Blachley Webb,* ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (New York: Wickersham press, 1893), 3: 78-79.

[17] Henry Knox to Stephen Higgison, 28 January 1787; Stephen Higginson to Henry Knox, 8 February 1787, Henry Knox papers, MHi [microfilm].

[18] Bryan Scott Johnson, "The Society of the Cincinnati: A Contemporary Organization with Revolutionary Origins" (M.A. thesis, Clemson University, 1992), 106 contains a marvelously detailed list of all Cincinnati members to the federal convention.

[19] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 96.

[20] for accounts of the federal convention, see Clinton Lawrence Rossiter, *1787: The Grand Convention* (New York: Macmillan, 1966); Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia: The Story of the Constitutional Convention* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1966); Max Farrand, *The Framing of the Constitution of the United States* (New Haven: Yale University press, 1913); see also Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 100-01.

[21] Wilson later became an honorary member.

[22] Rossiter, *1787: The Grand Convention*, 247-53; Johnson, "The Society of the Cincinnati: A Contemporary Organization with Revolutionary Origins," 106. Some leading members of the convention, especially James Wilson and Gouverneur Morris, but also former critics Rufus King and Benjamin Franklin later became honorary members of the society.

[23] Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia: The Story of the Constitutional Convention*, 108-15.

[24] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 103-07.

[25] *Papers of the Connecticut State Society of the Cincinnati* (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1916); Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 64, 107-13.

[26] Harry M. Ward, *The American Revolution: Nationhood Achieved, 1763-1788* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 295-96.

[27] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 64, 107-13.

[28] Henry Knox to Samuel Holden Parsons, 13 January 1788, Knox Papers, MHi [microfilm]; Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 113.

[29] Ibid., 209.

[30] The issue of standing armies is treated in more depth in chapter 9.

[31] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 114.

[32] Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783-1802* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1975), 161-70.

[33] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 176-197; Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati", 223-24.

[34] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 176-97.

[35] Journal of William Maclay, 9 February 1790, DHFFC 9: 199-200.

[36] Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati," 224-25; this also includes a list of Federalist and Republican Cincinnati members.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 181-82 also includes a list of Cincinnati speculators.

[39] Ibid., 182.

[40] The decision of the New York Cincinnati was publicized well beyond the state's borders; see *Providence Gazette*, 13 February 1790; *Salem Gazette*, 16 February 1790; *Baltimore Maryland Journal*, 12 February 1790.

[41] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 183-88.

[42] Ibid., 184-85.

[43] Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati", 236-39.

[44] for the role of the Cincinnati as predecessor to later veterans organizations, see Wallace Evans Davies, *Patriotism on Parade: The Story of Veterans and Hereditary Organizations in America, 1783-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955).

[45] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 187.

[46] "Lyrics for a Song," 4 July 1786, Samuel Blachley Webb papers, CtY.

Chapter Seven

Guardians of the Republic:

The Critics of the Society of the Cincinnati

> *These things I know too well, to entertain the vain hope of any individual succeeding in opposition. But although I foresee the consequences, yet I think it a point of duty to give this public testimony of my dislike of the Order.*
>
> *Aedanus Burke[1]*

Profiles in Suspicion

Who were these men and women who were willing and ready to see a veterans organization as an insidious plot to subvert the American Republic? Unlike the Cincinnati themselves, the critics did not have an organization, however informal; they left no membership rosters or meeting notes. Most penned their attacks under pseudonyms or without any name at all; Burke's willingness to reveal his identity as Cassius was the exception, not the norm. Corresponding among one another, the critics were less secretive, but only the wealthy and well-educated left substantial private papers. Probably, a good portion of anti-Cincinnati sources was lost over time, leaving historians with too little material to allow a comprehensive political and sociological analysis.

Nevertheless, the opposition against the Cincinnati exhibited some general characteristics. For one thing, the outcry was distributed unevenly across the United States. New England was clearly the hotbed of anti-Cincinnati dissent, especially the states of Massachusetts and Connecticut. Massachusetts was the only state whose legislature ever censured the Cincinnati and it brought fourth more critics than any other: Gerry, the Adamses, the Warrens, King, Higginson, and Osgood all hailed from the commonwealth. The Massachusetts press, especially the *Boston Independent Chronicle* and the *Boston Gazette*, published the most scathing condemnations of the Cincinnati, and continued to do so well after the reform of 1784 reduced the level of public outrage. Connecticut was home to the Middletown Convention that connected anti-commutation sentiment with suspicion of the Cincinnati.[2] Connecticut's prominent

leaders were not as susceptible to the conspiracy theory as their peers across the border, but several town meetings passed resolution against the Cincinnati[3], and the press was almost as alarmed as its counterpart in Massachusetts. At the general meeting of the Cincinnati in 1784, the state societies of Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Hampshire all reported high levels of criticism. Rhode Island, too, had its share of anti-Cincinnati outrage, although rumors that the legislature had disenfranchised the society proved false.[4]

Still, the outcry against the Society of the Cincinnati was by no means limited to New England. With Burke, South Carolina produced the Cincinnati's most influential critic, and Governor Guerard lambasted the society, as well. The Charleston press was more moderate and printed defenses of the society as often as condemnations.[5] As for Virginia, George Washington recalled "violent and formidable" opposition.[6] Actually, the Old Dominion press was relatively quiet, but Washington drew his information largely from the one Virginian critic who really mattered: Jefferson. Another prominent Virginian, Arthur Lee, also distrusted the society.[7] North Carolina did not produce any prominent spokesmen against the society, but an attempt in the legislature to disenfranchise the Cincinnati proved that opposition existed.[8] Georgia was apparently quiet on the topic. Anti-military sentiment was not widespread in the young and vulnerable state, which honored war hero and Cincinnatus Nathanael Greene with the gift of a large plantation.

Of the middle states, only Pennsylvania produced a vocal opposition against the society. The state's premier citizen, Franklin, mocked the society during its early days, and in the press, the *Philadelphia Freeman's Journal* rivaled the *Boston Independent Chronicle* for most frequent anti-Cincinnati coverage. According to the Cincinnati general meeting of 1784, Delaware, New Jersey, and New York did not fall under the sway of the conspiracy theory; the press in these states was largely silent. For New York, at least, this lack of anti-Cincinnati sentiment was probably due to the fact that the populist leader of the state, Governor Clinton, was himself a member of the society.

Thus, the spread of the conspiracy theory was wide but not universal. Concentrations existed in New England and parts of the South. Still, at a time when most poli-

tics were local and regional, the geographic distribution of anti-Cincinnati sentiment was remarkable. What might have remained a local outbreak of anti-commutation protests in New England became a national phenomenon. This dissemination of suspicion was linked primarily to the publication of Burke's *Considerations,* with its many editions well beyond the borders of South Carolina. Newspapers across the country devoted entire front pages to Burke's accusations, and misgivings against the society spread rapidly. Burke's pamphlet was not quite as successful (or well-written) as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, but it created a similar effect: The conspiracy theory against the Society of the Cincinnati became part of an American, not just a local or regional debate.

In terms of economic standing and social prestige, the critics of the Cincinnati were not limited to the fringes of society. On the contrary, their ranks included many wealthy and influential individuals. John Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin were arguably the most famous leaders of the American Revolution after Washington himself, and other critics were prominent as well. Gerry, King, Osgood, and Higginson were members of Congress. Guerard served as governor of South Carolina, and Samuel Adams was a prominent figure in Massachusetts politics. James Warren was a wealthy merchant in Boston, and his wife Mercy was arguably the best-educated and most respected female author in America. Burke himself served as a justice on the high court of South Carolina. Quite clearly, the conspiracy theory against the Society of the Cincinnati was well at home in the center of the American polity.

However, anti-Cincinnati sentiment also existed among those who did not hold exalted positions in politics and society. Resolutions by the town meetings of Killingworth, Connecticut and Cambridge, Massachusetts showed that opposition against the Cincinnati was a viable concern in the traditional local politics of New England, as did the criticism voiced by the Middletown convention.[9] Similarly, no less than fifty inhabitants of Orange county, North Carolina, signed a petition against the society.[10] Apparently, the accusations against the society had their share of popular support.

One group of American revolutionaries stood almost completely united in its condemnation of the Cincinnati: the diplomats. Practically every congressional envoy

to France opposed the society: Franklin, Jefferson, Jay, Arthur Lee, and John Adams.[11] Jay, for example, wrote to Gouverneur Morris in 1784 that "the institution of the Order of Cincinnatus does not, in the opinion of the wisest men whom I have heard speak on the subject, either do credit to those who formed and patronized it or to those who suffered it." Lafayette noticed this peculiar concentration of anti-Cincinnati sentiment and reported it to Washington.[12] In all likelihood, the diplomats drew their wariness of a hereditary nobility from their experiences with the lords of Europe. Jefferson certainly justified his particularly sharp disdain for all things hereditary with his experiences as an ambassador in France, and Franklin voiced similar sentiments in his letter to Sarah Bache.[13]

Most critics of the Cincinnati shared one characteristic: they had earned their reputation primarily as politicians, not in the military. It was in committee and public office that men like John Adams and Jefferson served the Revolution, leaving the field to men like Washington, Gates, and Greene. Some of the critics, most notably Burke, had seen brief military service, but typically in the militia than in the Continental Army. Members of the Cincinnati typically ascribed the outcry against their society to the jealousy of civilians, and they were partly right. The society represented a bid to tie revolutionary prestige to military service. Obviously, this was contrary to the interests and sentiments of those who had seen to the administrative and political side of the revolution. Fear of losing prestige to a military system of merit surely played a role in prompting the opposition to the Cincinnati.

Two other groups had reason to distrust the society: former enlisted men and militia officers. Enlisted men left few records, but many militia officers resented the Cincinnati's pomp and circumstance to which they were not invited. Burke himself concluded his *Considerations* by decrying that "those gallant citizens, who with as much valour and perseverance, though not with the same eclat, as the continental officers, stepped fourth and assisted in subduing the Lion, should submit to be degraded by creatures of their own rank and condition."[14] Burke's later quarrel with Hamilton showed that he remained a staunch defender of the militia's prestige. Some militia officers openly met the society with suspicion. Colonel Burral, a member of the Connecti-

cut legislature whose rank was in the militia, described the Cincinnati as "cunning men, and we know not what mischief they may be upon." And the John Butler who moved to disenfranchise the Cincinnati in the North Carolina legislature in 1784 was most likely a general in the state militia.[15]

When it came to political affiliations, the critics were just as divided as the Cincinnati, although many tended towards an anti-centralist, states' rights position. Franklin supported the Pennsylvanian Constitutionalists, with their endorsement of democratic rule and a unicameral legislature. Arthur Lee was one of the leading anti-centralists in the Continental Congress, an opponent of Robert Morris and Hamilton. Samuel Adams, Osgood, Gerry, the Warrens, and Burke opposed the Constitution as Antifederalists and the latter three eventually supported Jefferson and the Republican party. On the other hand, John Adams, King, and Stephenson all supported the Constitution and remained Federalist in the first party system of the 1790s. Clearly, opposition to the Cincinnati was not limited to a specific political camp, but permeated the evolving political system of the United States in its early decades.

As mentioned earlier, the opponents of the Cincinnati were too diverse and left too few records to allow a useful aggregate analysis beyond these general statements. However, some of the more vocal critics left a rich trail of public statements and political achievement. Three men especially were somewhat representative of the anti-Cincinnati movement as a whole. Gerry and Burke did more than anyone else to spread the conspiracy theory against the society, and while Gerry was a member of the Massachusetts elite, Burke lived a life on the fringes of South Carolinian high society. A third man, Gale, was an example of a politically and socially much less prominent, but equally dedicated and even more eccentric critic of the society. Together these three spanned a significant portion of the conspiracy theory; they were premiere examples of the kind of person who believed that the Cincinnati were out to destroy the American Republic.

The Man from Marblehead: Elbridge Gerry

Gerry was probably the most underestimated of the founding fathers. Remembered primarily for his refusal to sign the constitution and subsequent Antifederalist stance, Gerry helped shape the American republic from the earliest stirrings of the revolution until his death in 1814. He was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation, contributed significantly at the Constitutional Convention and was a member of the Continental, Confederation, and United States Congress. Later in life, he served as governor of Massachusetts and as vice-president of the United States. He also became the focus of controversy in the XYZ affair, and because of him the word "Gerrymander" became part of the American political dictionary. To some, he was "a Friend who was neither warped nor shaken by change of times or fortune,"[16] as Abigail Adams phrased it. To others, he was a political maverick, full of unpredictable idiosyncrasies, a "grumbletonian," and the cause of much aggravation. And, during the critical period of the mid-1780s, he was one of the most influential and critical voices against the Society of the Cincinnati.[17]

Born 1744 in Marblehead, Gerry was the son of a Massachusetts mother and an English immigrant father. Thomas Gerry's wealth earned as a successful trader and merchant established his family among the social and political elite of the coastal fishing town and also allowed Elbridge access to higher education. At Harvard, young Gerry showed a particular interest in classical studies, ancient history, and political theory, yet upon graduation he joined his father's merchant business. Once the crisis over British taxation commenced in the 1760s, Gerry became involved in revolutionary politics. He came into contact with James Warren and Samuel Adams; the latter became a mentor to the young revolutionary. Gerry shared Warren's and Adams' Whiggish beliefs in balanced government, the separation of powers, and a wary distrust against any form of concentrated power. According to his biographer Billias, Gerry also believed "that a sinister plot against liberty was underway in both England and America;" a "vast conspiracy … between the British government and royal officials to rob Americans of their rights as Englishmen."[18]

Gerry served the Revolution in Massachusetts in various roles. He helped shape and enforce boycott policies, was a member of the General Court in the critical years just before independence, a member of the committee of correspondence, and once the Coercive Acts dissolved the assembly, he was elected to the Provincial Congress. An early advocate of independence, Gerry was part of the delegates Massachusetts sent to the second Continental Congress to replace more hesitant men; there, he became a close ally of John and Samuel Adams in their advocacy of independence.[19]

In Congress, Gerry served on key committees charged with the organization and supply of the army, as well as financing the revolutionary effort. He supported the formation of the Continental Army and was among the first to propose Washington as its commander-in-chief. At the same time, Gerry was extremely wary of the dangers of militarism. While he acknowledged the need for a professional army to win the war of independence, Gerry then and later insisted on maintaining a viable, decentralized militia raised and controlled by the states. Similarly, Gerry helped carry many decisions that concentrated power in the hands of Congress but never lost sight of his insistence on states' rights. So strong was his commitment to the states' check on congressional power that he left Congress in 1780 in a controversy over parliamentary control privileges. When Congress refused to record the yeas and nays of a vote Gerry felt hurt the interests of Massachusetts, he refused to attend further sessions. Despite repeated appointments by his home state, Gerry did not return to Congress until 1783. Meanwhile, he became once again involved in state politics as a member of the General Court, where he opposed John Hancock's high-handed governorship, a position he shared with Samuel Adams and King. But even in his home state, Gerry refused to serve in the state Senate with its aristocratic trappings, insisting that the House best understood the will of the people.[20]

Nevertheless, Gerry was no egalitarian. He strongly believed in the leadership of a virtuous elite and feared anarchy as much as he did tyranny. Too ingrained was the expectation of deference in this member of the Marblehead elite. Republican virtue, according to Whig ideology and Gerry's own beliefs, consisted in the ability to put principle and the common good before personal interest. Gerry felt he possessed this

quality, with some justification. While Gerry grew wealthy over the course of the revolution, nobody ever accused him of profiteering.[21] Later, at the federal convention, Gerry definitely placed principle ahead of interest when he refused to sign the finished document. As one of the largest holders of public securities, he stood to profit immensely from a strong central government with the ability to honor its financial obligations.[22]

Gerry rejoined Congress in the summer of 1783 – just as the Cincinnati were organizing. Throughout his tenure, which lasted until 1785, Gerry opposed all sorts of measures which he felt conducive to centralism and militarism. He stood against Hamilton's efforts to create a standing army, and he also opposed the impost of 1783 because he feared the centralizing and corrupting tendencies of federal taxation. Instead, he favored funding the national debt through the sale of Western lands. Yet his opposition to centralized power notwithstanding, Gerry was highly alarmed at the failure of many states to send a full delegation to Congress, and he also detested the fact that all too many delegates did not reliably attend sessions. Despite his insistence on states' rights, Gerry did support the federal government as long as it did not overreach its authority.[23]

Gerry's term in Congress also coincided with the phase of his heaviest criticism against the Cincinnati. Basically, Gerry became the hub that connected the correspondence on the Cincinnati among most of the prominent critics. He wrote long letters to the Adamses and Higginson. Equally important, he was the one to whom his contacts and friends aired their misgivings against the society. If there was a center to the conspiracy theory among the Massachusetts elite, it was Gerry. He detested the aristocratic features of the Cincinnati, opposed their militaristic mindset, feared French influence, and even doubted Washington's capability to resist the offer of a crown from the society. Most importantly, he pioneered the idea that the organizational structure of the Cincinnati was designed to subvert and eventually replace that of the Confederation. Interestingly, Gerry did not make his concerns public, but mostly limited them to his circle of influential friends and allies. Gerry's most momentous condemnation of the society came when he, together with King and Holten, refused to report Massachusetts' call for a constitutional convention to Congress, for fear the society would subvert the

effort.[24] Yet despite this relative lack of publicity, Gerry was extremely influential in spreading the conspiracy theory among the political elite.

When Massachusetts appointed Gerry as one of its delegates to the federal convention in 1787, he retained his personal balance between supporting necessary reform while at the same guarding individual and state rights and opposing military centralization. For most of the convention, Gerry participated constructively, and he chaired the committee that drafted the Great Compromise. However, in the last few weeks he turned increasingly critical, and eventually refused to sign the finished document. Gerry felt the Constitution would subvert the independence of the states. He also objected to the lack of a bill of rights, and insisted on state control over the militias as a safeguard against federal tyranny. In the subsequent ratification struggle, Gerry's public letter to the Massachusetts legislature became one of the most influential Antifederalist documents; he feared the Constitution would establish a "government of force and fraud." A number of dedicated Federalists began to revile him with a vengeance.[25]

Despite his Antifederalist stance, Gerry embraced loyal opposition upon ratification. He accepted election to the first Congress, where he remained independent of the early stirrings of party division. For example, Gerry supported Hamilton's financial program and opposed discrimination in favor of original bondholders, but he also opposed the bill of rights because he thought it did not go far enough. Repelled by the growing partisanship, Gerry once again retired from Congress in 1793. By this time, he had mostly shed his alarm against the Society of the Cincinnati, although he continued to identify a "cincinnati and antirevolutional or monarchist interest" as a threat to the republic for years to come.[26]

Throughout the mid-1790s, Gerry shared with John Adams a disdain for the party system now in full swing throughout the United States. In 1797, president Adams appointed Gerry part of a critical mission to France, hoping to prevent war with the directorate. Gerry, while no Francophile, proved more conciliatory than his Federalist colleagues John Marshall and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. When these two left Paris in outrage over what would become known as the XYZ affair, Gerry disobeyed his instructions and stayed in the hope of preventing an escalation. That made him the target

of biting criticism from the most conservative elements of the Federalist party, including threats to his family. When the high Federalists around Hamilton pushed for a large army in preparation for full-scale war, Gerry's fears of a militaristic conspiracy were revived. He dropped his anti-party stance and joined forces with the Jeffersonian Republicans. Once again, it was the fear of militarism that pushed Gerry into an opposition role; the Republicans' states' rights stance and anti-centralist ideology also matched Gerry's long-time convictions. [27]

As a party man, Gerry became a mainstay of the Republicans in New England. He increasingly feared that the Federalists were bent on overthrowing republicanism in the United States, and his partisanship became more pronounced. He served as governor of Massachusetts, where he appointed offices on a partisan basis. A Republican reform of the state's election districts prompted the Federalists to coin the term "gerrymander" in protest. The practice was not new, but the name stuck. In recognition of Gerry's contributions, the Republicans successfully ran him as their candidate for vice-president. Ironically, the man who had retired from congressional politics twice only to return a few years later did not have a chance to retire permanently. He died while still in office, on 23 November 1814.[28]

Despite his often controversial politics, Gerry was adept at making and keeping political and personal friends. His Antifederalism cost him the support of King and Francis Dana, but Gerry preserved most of the other relationships he had formed during the revolution. Especially his friendship with John Adams remained firm. In 1785, when Adams despaired over Cincinnati influence, Gerry was the man to whom he bared his soul. And later, even though Gerry's mission to France turned into a political embarrassment, Adams still valued the Marbleheader's personal loyalty. For his part, Gerry tried to bring about a reconciliation between Adams and Jefferson, whom he both valued, but without success. Surprisingly, Gerry apparently did not even carry his enmity against the Cincinnati to a personal level. When he attacked the society at the federal convention, he nevertheless stressed his respect for the members present. And when he sought so secure a patronage position for his brother, Gerry did not hesitate to call upon Knox, the very man who had founded the Cincinnati.[29]

Throughout his long and distinguished public life, Gerry was a man of strong republican principles, as formed by revolutionary ideology and experience. Among these principles were a strong fear of militarism and centralized power, and for most of his life, a rejection of political factions and parties. To secure the American republic, Gerry wished to preserve a direct representation of the people, so he insisted on the autonomy of the states as opposed to the remoter federal government. He also believed that the people should choose their representatives from a virtuous republican elite, including himself. At the same time, he was no inflexible ideologue. Gerry was fully capable of compromise, as he proved during his time in the Continental Congress and at the federal convention. He supported moderate measures and reforms that would help to secure good government, and after ratification he even accommodated himself to a Constitution he had deemed dangerous.

All the while, Gerry was on the lookout for the subversive dangers of centralism and militarism, and he saw these forces perpetually at work against the proper order and stability of a free state. During the American Revolution, he saw that danger in a conspiracy between the British ministry and crown officials in the colonies. In the 1790s and 1800s, he suspected the Federalists of planning to replace republicanism with something more authoritarian. And in the difficult years of the mid-1780s, Gerry believed that the Society of the Cincinnati was ready to bury the fledgling republic. For the man from Marblehead, suspicion was a continual way of seeing the world, and it arose from his desire to protect the republic he helped to create.

The Spear of Ithuriel: Aedanus Burke

Judge Burke of South Carolina was far less prominent a politician than Gerry. He was, as his biographer John C. Meleney admitted, "essentially a secondary figure" of the American Revolution. However, he did play a variety of roles as soldier, jurist, legislator, and pamphleteer, and his commitment to the American cause was certainly not inferior to that of his more famous contemporaries. Burke reached the height of his fame by denouncing the Cincinnati, and he did more than any other man to establish the conspiracy theory against the society. Yet as in Gerry's case, Burke's opposition to

the Cincinnati stood in close relationship to his revolutionary and republican experiences and convictions.[30]

Born in Galway, Ireland in 1743, Burke received his early education at a Jesuit seminary in France. By 1769, he was studying law in Virginia, from whence he migrated to South Carolina on the eve of the Revolution in 1775. Burke was apparently a man of considerable education in law, languages, and history. As for his economic and social standing, he soon became a prominent judge in South Carolina; his professional career secured him a measure of respect and financial security. However, he never became a member of the South Carolinian elite. Burke owned some slaves, but the large estate required of the plantation gentry remained forever out of his reach. Despite his successes in law and politics, Burke remained on the fringes of high society.[31]

In the early phase of the revolutionary war, Burke served as lieutenant in a South Carolina regiment that eventually became part of the Continental line. He resigned his commission in 1778 to accept an appointment to the Court of Common Pleas. Around this time, Burke justified the revolution and defended the new constitution of South Carolina because it did away with the "unnatural distinctions of nobleman and commons." He was also elected to the state legislature for the first time, all the while continuing to ride circuit as a judge. In 1780, Burke joined the state militia to help defend South Carolina against British invasion, and became a prisoner of war for over a year. On his way back from captivity to South Carolina, he witnessed the British surrender at Yorktown and stayed for a while with the family of General St. Clair, a future Cincinnatus.[32]

The controversial part of Burke's political career began in 1782, when Burke took his seat in the state legislature, called the Jacksonborough Assembly because the British still held Charleston. In South Carolina, the civil war character of the revolution had been especially strong; popular thirst for vengeance against the Tories raged high. The Jacksonborough Assembly passed a number of punitive measures against selected Loyalists. Burke opposed these acts out of principle; he felt that men should not be deprived of their property and franchise because they had been forced to swim with the tides of war. Instead, Burke wished to pardon most supporters of the Crown and

exile only the most egregious offenders. Thus, in January 1783, he first assumed the pseudonym "Cassius" to criticize the Jacksonborough policies in a pamphlet entitled *An Address to the Freemen of South Carolina.* Burke argued that bills of attainder, such as the anti-Tory legislation, were suitable for the tyranny of monarchs, but never for the liberty of a republic. Such concentration of arbitrary power might pave the way for other abuses and endanger republican principles in the future.[33]

Despite these misgivings, on the close of the American Revolution, Burke displayed an idealistic commitment to peace, stability, forgiveness, and the glorious future of republicanism in the United States. In his instructions to the grand jury of the Court of General sessions, Burke declared that "Our new republic is beginning in the world, and launching into the immense ocean of future time, blessed with peace and security; our own happiness, and that of generations unborn given in charge to us; a distinction, a trust this, awfully great; and which must excite in every human creature who interests his heart in the welfare of his kind, a reverential concern mixed with glowing pious wishes for our welfare."[34] However, Burke's cautious optimism would not last. Shortly after this stirring speech, Cassius again took up his pen, this time against the Society of the Cincinnati.

Burke learned of the society's formation earlier than most other critics, when he overheard Gen. William Moultrie making plans for a state society in August 1783. In the following weeks, Burke spent his free time writing *Considerations.*[35] The pamphlet was intended as a warning to the entire American republic, and soon inspired critics of the Cincinnati all the way to New England. However, Cassius also connected his accusations against the society with his earlier concerns about the treatment of Loyalists in South Carolina.

His home state, Burke argued, was particularly vulnerable to aristocratic machinations, because the well-aimed exclusion and expropriation of leading Loyalists had already created a de facto aristocracy of "about 1,000 or 1,500 families." The society added the formal structures of nobility to this already exclusive situation. "If the Order of Cincinnati be suffered to take root and spread" in this fertile soil, Burke cautioned, "it will compleat what the Jacksonborough policy has left undone. There fresh slips of

nobility will spring up, overshade and prevent the growth and flourishing of our youth … and finally yield such bitter fruit, as will work a fatal poison to the little political health and happiness there is left us."[36]

Consequently, Burke hoped for opposition from the people of South Carolina, especially the legislature. A declaration against the Cincinnati might not force the order to dissolve, but it would serve to expose its evil intentions just as the touch of Ithuriel's spear had exposed the devil in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The state legislature never acted, even though Governor Guerard's effectively endorsed of Burke's warning. Instead, it was *Considerations* itself that did more than any other document to create a general alarm about the society. Burke's own pen became the spear of Ithuriel, and it was quite sharp, whatever the quality of its aim.

Given the pamphlet's phenomenal circulation, Burke dropped the issue of the Cincinnati with surprising quickness. Subsequently, he defended himself against a counterattack and denounced Mirabeau for plagiarizing from *Considerations*. Burke did not entirely shed his misgivings against the society, but he never publicly followed up on his earlier writing. Suspicion, however, remained part of Burke's political style. In 1785, as South Carolina groaned under economic depression, he turned his ire against British merchants living in the state. A new pamphlet, *Salutary Hints*, vented Burke's outrage over English policy restricting American trade with the West Indies. Finding it difficult to get his newest work printed, Burke blamed his problems on the fear of "every creature of offending the British. It put me in mind of a conspiracy whenever I spoke of it to anyone." In an interesting turn of events, Burke reported his suspicions to none other than General Greene, one of the Cincinnati he had reviled two years earlier. Apparently, Burke once again feared the British threat to American liberty more than any domestic ambitions.[37]

Still, when the question of ratifying the Constitution reached South Carolina in 1788, Burke became a leading Antifederalist in the state. A delegate to the ratifying convention, Burke spoke out in favor of term limits for senators and the president in order to reduce the dangers of aristocracy and monarchy. Failing to prevent ratification, Burke accepted the will of the majority and promised to do his best to reconcile

his constituents to the new order. Still, in his writings to other Antifederalists, Burke blamed a British-dominated press for ratification against the will of the people, and he even hinted that Washington was the man truly to blame. Yet none of these misgivings prevented him from accepting an election to the first Congress.[38]

Burke's tenure in Congress was brief and fairly frustrating. He wanted a wider bill of rights, spoke out against a standing army and opposed the creation of federal district courts, all to no avail. It was during this time that Burke planned to write his critical history of the ratification of the Constitution. He polled Gerry and Samuel Bryan on their observations and asked questions about Cincinnati involvement with ratification. Burke still suspected that the passage of the Constitution had been engineered by aristocratic forces.[39]

As Congress went into its second session, Burke's Antifederalism wavered somewhat. He supported the federal assumption of state debts (which benefited South Carolina) and opposed discrimination in favor of original bondholders, judging faith in public finances to be of utmost importance. But when Hamilton mocked the militia in an address to the Cincinnati, Burke's temper flared. The affair nearly led to a duel, and it cost Burke most of the political prestige he had gathered in Congress. As Meleney put it, "after three sessions, he was an unpredictable, hot-tempered, sometimes rough Irishman who had once written a famous pamphlet attacking the Cincinnati." Subsequently, Burke did not seek reelection and left Congress in 1791.[40] In the course of the 1790s, Burke became a Republican and was discussed as a candidate for the Senate or as minister to Spain; none of these plans ever materialized. He continued to serve on the courts of South Carolina until the end of his life in March 1802.

A relatively recent immigrant to the United States, Burke nevertheless embraced the revolution as his own. He firmly believed in the tenets of republicanism, especially popular sovereignty, but he constantly feared that the concentration of power in the hands of the few would destroy the republic. Burke watched out for aristocratic subversion and found it in the unjust anti-Loyalist legislation of South Carolina, the Cincinnati, and the influence of British merchants in America. Although he changed the focus of his suspicion several times, he did not repudiate his earlier

stances; nevertheless, the frequently changing topics of his pamphlets made him seem somewhat fickle. Burke definitely had a temper to go along with his suspiciousness, as the quarrel with Hamilton attested. Yet despite his eccentricities, Burke was no mere obstructionist. His defense of the South Carolina Loyalists stemmed from conviction and principle. He supported a variety of reforms in the 1780s and even grudgingly embraced a stance of loyal opposition when the Constitution was ratified. His heated attacks against the Cincinnati and others were the result of genuine concern, not demagoguery. Judge Burke contributed to the success of the revolution and helped shape the republic, even though the "Spear of Ithuriel" was not always as accurate as he felt he was.

The Good Doctor: Benjamin Gale

Gerry and Burke were members of the immediate revolutionary generation who spent their prime years bringing about independence and dealing with its consequences. Benjamin Gale of Killingworth, Connecticut, however, was roughly of the same generation as his namesake Franklin. Like Franklin, Gale could boast a lifetime of economic and intellectual achievement, as well as public service. Unlike the Pennsylvanian, he was not in the vanguard of the independence movement, although he endorsed republicanism and feared the damage the Constitution might wreak. A man of considerable eccentricity and idiosyncratic religious convictions, Gale shared with Gerry, Burke, and to a lesser extent Franklin, the alarm against the Cincinnati. In some ways, his deep suspicion about the society even surpassed the others; of all the Cincinnati's critics, Gale subscribed most fully to a conspiratorial interpretation.[41]

Born in 1715 in Jamaica, New York, Gale had deep roots in the American colonies. His grandfather, an illiterate husbandman, had migrated to New York around the middle of the seventeenth century and managed to acquire some property, upon which Benjamin's father expanded. Gale enjoyed access to a higher education at Yale and subsequently moved to Killingworth, where he studied medicine under the tutelage of Jared Eliot, whose daughter he married. During his long life in Killingworth, Gale became respectably wealthy. His medical practice proved profitable, as did his investment

in land and a steel mill. Gale owned a small number of slaves, 200 acres of land, and a mansion. While nowhere near as rich as Gerry, let alone men like John Hancock and Robert Morris, Gerry was clearly a man of substance.[42]

A leading man in his community, Gale served as a town deputy to the General Assembly between 1747 and 1770, and he also held an appointment as justice of the peace for many years. In the tumultuous politics of the Great Awakening, Gale sided with the Old Lights. His own religious background and education was too eclectic for him to fully agree with the traditional Congregationalist leadership, but he opposed the theology of the New Lights and chose his allies accordingly. In the 1750s, Gale led the attack on the New Light leadership of Yale in a series of pamphlets. His bitter personal attacks against college president Thomas Clap started a veritable pamphlet war and helped erode the standards of political decorum in the years to come.[43] The campaign was not without effect; his biographer George Groce commented that "Gale contributed more than any man of his generation toward a public opinion which demanded a college free of denominational restrictions."[44]

An active member of the Atlantic intellectual community, Gale studied and experimented widely. Among his achievements were a dissertation on smallpox inoculation, an essay on the treatment of rattlesnake bite, and the invention of a drill plow. The Royal Society of Arts and Sciences in London published several of Gale's papers and awarded him a gold medal. Gale was also interested in many aspects of scientific agriculture, the making of wine and spirits, and the production of silk. In 1787, the Connecticut Medical Society would have made him its first president; however, the legislature denied a charter to such a society until after his death.

Gale was not an ardent supporter of American independence. Too many of his old New Light opponents became revolutionary activists for his liking, and he quarreled with the Killingworth committee of correspondence. Probably as a result of his skepticism, Gale retired from active politics in 1772. Nevertheless, Gale was no Tory. He insisted he was "firmly attach'd to the cause of Liberty," and on the eve of war wrote to Silas Deane: "There is not public virtue enough in the Nation [England] to save them; they are doomed to remain a kingdom of Tyrants and Asses. But how much

this Country must suffer in the conflict, God only knows." Throughout the 1770s and 1780s, Gale published anonymously in the Connecticut press. One of his recurring topics was criticism against Connecticut's lack of a proper constitution; the state retained the colonial charter until after the turn of the century.[45]

Once the war was over, Gale began to target the society of the Cincinnati as the object of his ire. In later years, he claimed that he had "received a very violent electric shock on the very notice of the foundation of the Order of the Cincinnati before ever I read Judge Burke's observations upon it." Most likely, Gale was involved with the Killingworth resolution condemning the Cincinnati, which preceded Burke's pamphlet by almost two months. Gale never engaged in a public crusade against the society as Burke did, nor did he have a close circle of political friends and allies like Gerry to spread his criticism. But even more than the two principal critics, Gale kept a watchful eye on the society and remembered the controversies surrounding the army and commutation. The doctor certainly agreed with the anti-commutation stance of the Middletown convention and kept his skepticism of all things military alive through the mid-1780s.[46]

More than any other critic of the society, Gale linked his suspicions of the Cincinnati with his incipient Antifederalism. In a letter to Erastus Wolcott on the eve of the federal convention, Gale argued that the call for a new constitution was the work of aristocratic forces, especially the Cincinnati. Gale insisted that plans for a military state had been afoot ever since the "fake" mutiny at Newburgh. The proposed constitution was little more than the newest bid in the Cincinnati's grasp for power and privileges. During the ratification debates, Gale desperately tried to dissuade his fellow citizens from endorsing the constitution. When he could not prevent ratification, Gale blamed the manipulative aspects of the document itself. "The Constitution itself was so Dark, Intricate, Complex, and Mysterious," he complained to Francis Dana, "the Result of much Art, and Studied Obscurity that I would as soon have undertaken to learn a Pig to read Greek, as to make the meeting understand the meaning of it." In Gale's opinion the Constitution was effectively a bloodless coup, with which the "Cincinnati of France and America" had enthroned Washington and secured for themselves positions of money and power. When Washington was indeed elected president, Gale ex-

pressed his respect for the Virginian, but admonished that "military rulers are not in general the best calculated for civil rulers."[47]

Despairing of the political situation in America, Gale turned to millennial hopes and fears. He had long been a student of the biblical Apocalypse. He wrote hundreds of pages of commentary on the Book of Revelations, among them the draft of a pamphlet entitled "Summary View of Divine Revelation." Among other things, Gale interpreted scripture in such a way that he saw papal tyranny in Europe as the beast with seven heads and ten horns. Now that tyranny threatened in America as well, divine retribution would not spare the United States, Gale wrote: "Perhaps the world with me will begin to think, bye and bye, the Day of Trouble is commenced – my Hopes were that would principally be restricted to the old world, but in that I ever have doubted – if we are partaken of their fornications, we doubtless shall be made the subject of their plagues." In the expectation that the Day of Judgment was near, Gale died on 6 May 1790. According to anecdote, he stipulated to be buried in such a way that he would look upon his house when he rose from the dead.[48]

Gerry, Burke, and Gale were not the most prominent of the Cincinnati's critics – that distinction undoubtedly belonged to Jefferson and John Adams. However, Gerry probably merited the distinction of the society's most influential foe, given his extensive network of correspondents among the political elite. Burke was the most vocal accuser. Although his public campaign against the society was brief, *Considerations* was definitely the central document of the conspiracy theory. Gale, while lacking the other two critics' prominence, was one of the earliest, most suspicious and unforgiving opponents of the society. Especially the close link between his Antifederalism and his fear of the Cincinnati made him stand out. Doubly so, because by 1787-89, when Gale wrote his major diatribes, most other critics of the society had moved on to other topics.

All three men were possessed of a certain eccentricity. Gerry's insistence on principle drove him from a Congress he had played an important role in and prompted him to oppose a constitution he had helped create. Moreover, Gerry seemed unpredict-

able to many of his contemporaries; one could never know when Gerry would be willing to compromise and when his stubbornness would prevail. In effect, he oscillated between moderate nationalism and states' rights, anti-party sentiment and partisanship, support for the Hamiltonian program and Jeffersonian Republicanism. To Gerry, and some of his friends, these decisions made perfect sense. To others, they were baffling and infuriating. Even Gerry's position on the militarism and the Cincinnati was ambiguous. The man who had supported the formation of the Continental army and had been among the first to sponsor Washington as its commander-in-chief, soon turned into an implacable foe of a federal military and the veterans organization of Continental officers.

Burke was an equally mercurial character. A committed revolutionary who had served both in the Continental Army and the state militia, he apparently retained a strong emotional attachment only to the local forces. Moreover, though he had suffered as a prisoner of the British, he became his state's leading defender of Loyalists rights, only to later persecute English merchants with the same enthusiasm. Even Burke's condemnation of the Cincinnati was somewhat ambivalent. He predicted their rule of heredity would bring down the republic and create a nation of patricians and plebeians, but at the same time he lauded the officers of the Continental Army for showing Loyalists more mercy than the vindictive elite of South Carolina.

As for Gale, a more contrary man never lived in the state of Connecticut. He picked arguments quickly and never hesitated to drag these quarrels into the open. He held long grudges, especially against the New Lights. He harangued the politicians of his state in endless, rambling letters. And he was quite convinced of his own righteousness; when he failed to convince his hometown to reject the Constitution, he warmly blamed the townspeople's ignorance, not to mention Cincinnati influence. His belief in the approaching apocalypse and the literal inspiration of scripture was not wholly unusual, but his interpretations were idiosyncratic and not in accord with those of any denomination. And surely not many other Antifederalists felt that the passage of the Constitution was a sign that Judgment Day was near. Even contemporaries such as Ezra Stiles felt Gale's apocalyptic conviction made him a "singular character."[49]

Yet despite their eccentricities, and notwithstanding their suspicious conspiracy-mindedness, the three men were a long shot from socially and politically marginalized characters of dubious sanity. Gerry's record placed him firmly among the founding fathers of the United States. Burke was a popular judge in South Carolina and had a large enough constituency to elect him to the legislature and Congress. And Gale was a leading member of his Killingworth community, which entrusted him with their political representation for decades. Furthermore, he was an admired medical practitioner and researcher well beyond the boundaries of Connecticut.

The three men never abused their political influence and persuasiveness for demagoguery; none of them attempted to create an anti-Cincinnati witch hunt. Especially Burke might very well have used the prestige of *Considerations* to grasp for power like an eighteenth-century Joseph McCarthy, yet he did not. Instead, both Gerry and Burke accepted the most difficult lesson of republicanism when they accepted the Constitution and proceeded to work within the new system. Gale, on the other hand, never reconciled himself to the Constitution, but given his advanced age, such inflexibility was perhaps understandable. Remarkably, Gerry and Burke did not take their enmity against the society to the personal level. Burke's correspondence with Greene showed great admiration, and Gerry had no qualms against dealing with Knox. It was clearly the Cincinnati system, its corporate existence that the critics detested, not individual members.

Clearly, Gerry, Burke, and Gale did not spread their accusations against the society out of personal ambition or petty maliciousness. Instead, they acted out of genuine concern and heartfelt republican convictions. They did not pursue the Cincinnati with single-minded fanaticism, and despite their sometimes heated rhetoric, they did not stoop to personal attacks. Nevertheless, these men considered the hereditary, exclusive organization of the society as a threat to the success of the American Republic. Their projections of what the Cincinnati intended to do and were capable of proved to be widely off the mark. But to the critics, the threat seemed very real, and they considered it their duty to speak up against the danger of aristocratic subversion. In a very

real sense, Gerry, Burke, Gale, and the others acted out of a sense of civic duty and considered themselves guardians of the republic.

Fighting the Good Fight: Political Actions and Strategies against the Cincinnati

Denouncing the Society of the Cincinnati as a danger to the American Republic was one thing; doing something about it was quite another. From the beginning, the critics of the society hoped to galvanize public opinion into political action to defeat the former officers' alleged bid for nobility. In *Considerations*, Burke called for spirited resolutions by the state legislatures to expose the society's nefarious plans. In South Carolina, Burke's hopes came to naught, despite governor Guerard's spirited anti-Cincinnati speech of February 1784.[50] Nevertheless, in the months and years following *Considerations*, the Cincinnati's critics repeatedly demanded the dissolution of the society – or, failing that, the disfranchisement of its members.[51]

As early as November 1783, the marquis de Barbé-Marbois, a member of the French legation, expected Americans to punish the society's "presumption in forming an equestrian order by excluding them from their assemblies, offices &c."[52] Half a year later, the Chevalier de La Luzerne also reported a movement to exclude members of the Cincinnati from public office, and voiced his opinion that the fears might be justified.[53] In Connecticut, the Middletown Convention endorsed Burke's *Considerations*, but it did not pass a formal resolution against the society. However, in March 1784, the protest movement against the Cincinnati nearly met with success. A joint committee of the Massachusetts legislature denounced the Cincinnati as "unjustifiable" and "dangerous," and called on the general assembly to take action against the society during its next session.[54]

The society's reforms of 1784, although eventually repudiated, apparently calmed tempers in Massachusetts to the point that the legislature never took up the committee's recommendation. But not everybody was content with the reforms, especially since the Cincinnati had only amended their institution, not dissolved altogether. Almost immediately after the publication of the revised institution, the *Philadelphia Freeman's Journal* printed a scathing condemnation. Its correspondent called upon the

citizens of the United States to enter into associations on the state level "to elect no member of the Cincinnati to any office whatsoever," and to continuously petition the legislatures to condemn the society. Clearly, some critics had not yet given up on excluding the society's members from positions of political power.[55]

The anonymous correspondent pointed to the state of Rhode Island, where the state legislature had allegedly already disenfranchised the Society of the Cincinnati. Indeed, since spring 1784, a very persistent rumor spread far and wide that the smallest American state had exercised exemplary republican vigilance in barring the society from its legislature and government offices.[56] Many critics presumed this rumor to be fact, but it was really not true. The Rhode Island legislature never passed any such law, and Cincinnati members continued to hold office there. However, so persistent was the rumor that Washington himself felt obligated to formally deny it in a letter to Jefferson as late as 1787.[57]

The rumor of one state, however, might have become the reality of another. In November 1784, militia general John Butler presented to the North Carolina legislature a petition of no less than fifty citizens of Orange county to deny the Cincinnati "any Post of Profit or Honour Within the State."[58] Butler followed up the petition with a formal bill proposing to render "all and every person who now is or hereafter may be of or belonging to the Society of the Cincinnati… incapable of having a seat in either house of the General assembly of this state."[59] The bill was never adopted; no record remained of how narrowly it was defeated. Nevertheless, the North Carolina episode represented the most robust attempt by the Cincinnati's critics to keep the society's tendrils from the seats of power.

By 1785, Gerry was convinced that the society would not reform or dissolve itself into harmlessness. The officers had missed their chance "to retract from the unconstitutional and dangerous institution," Gerry wrote to John Adams. "They would have done themselves immortal honor and confirmed the affections of their countrymen by improving the moment; they have not only neglected this, but have pursued this system with a refinement of policy; they must therefore be checked and if in doing this they lose reputation, they may with justice impute the blame to none but themselves."

Throughout the fall of 1785, Gerry repeatedly assured Adams that "their institution will be soon attacked in Congress and I hope abolished." To Samuel Adams, he wrote that "we shall before the adjournment endeavour to fix on the Journals something that may operate to cripple, if not mortally wound that unconstitutional Monster."[60]

John Adams found Gerry's intention laudable, but he feared that his friend would not be able to secure a Congressional censure. He proved to be quite right. Although Gerry undoubtedly attempted to persuade his fellow Congressmen, the national legislature did not take action against the society. Only once did Congress even mention the Cincinnati. One Mr. Barré, a Frenchman, had petitioned the federal legislature for the "Cross of the Cincinnati." In response, the journals stated that "the Cross of the Cincinnati Congress have not a power to grant. The application to them arose, without a doubt, from a mistaken opinion that the Society of the Cincinnati was an Order of Knighthood similar to those Orders instituted by the Sovereigns of Europe." With this resolution Congress distanced itself from the Cincinnati and made clear that the society had no official character whatsoever. Nevertheless, it was hardly the condemnation Gerry sought.[61]

In subsequent years, Congress and the state legislatures turned silent on the topic of the Cincinnati. No new efforts to destroy or disfranchise the society by means of parliamentary resolution materialized; given the slowly fading opposition, such attempts would not likely have stood much of a chance. But those who retained their fear of the Cincinnati did not necessarily give up their hopes of seeing the organization abolished. In 1788, an anonymous author published a long series of articles against the Cincinnati in the *Boston Gazette.* In his denunciation of the society, this writer took on the mantle of the elder Cato and admonished: "It was Roman maxim – That Carthage must be destroyed, or the Republick must perish." That pundit's *ceterum censeo* aimed at the Cincinnati, but unlike his model, he did not manage to initiate a Punic War against the society. [62]

Just because the legislatures and Congress refused to abolish the society did not mean its members escaped political problems. In a number of instances, Cincinnati membership proved to be a significant liability at the polls. For example, William

Heath in 1784 circulated the rumor that he had resigned from the society in order to have a better chance at a seat in the state senate. His ploy worked, although some critics of the society saw through Heath's play. Higginson complained to Gerry that "so industriously was the *Lie* circulated, that he had most of the Votes."[63]

Other aspiring Cincinnati politicians were not to devious and lucky. After quelling Shays' Rebellion, General Lincoln ran for lieutenant governor in Massachusetts. His successful campaign against the insurgents secured him the gratitude of the Boston merchants and the scorn of backcountry farmers, so his bid for office was controversial from the start. Soon, Lincoln's political opponents turned his Cincinnati membership against him. One critic wrote that Lincoln was "of the ORDER of the CINCINNATI – an ORDER of military nobility, which one day (if not check'd in embrio) will reduce these free democratical states to a vassalage the most intolerable – I mean an aristocratical government. Now is such a man suitable for either our first or second magistrate?"[64] In 1787, Lincoln's presidency of the Massachusetts society cost him the election. A year later, he won the office by the barest of majorities. [65]

Lincoln was not alone in his troubles. In 1788, Jonathan Trumbull explained the fact that he had not been elected to the Connecticut ratification convention with his connection to "the cloud of commutation and Cincinnati."[66] Even in 1790, Cincinnati membership remained politically problematic. In Massachusetts, rising anti-lawyer sentiment was sometimes connected to the Cincinnati, to the detriment of both groups. An anonymous gentleman from Bristol reported that "it is agreed her on all sides, to change our federal representative…; and I have no doubt but General *Cobb* would have been the man, but his being on of the order of Cincinnati, who have detached themselves from the people, will I think prevent his being chosen; nor will they choose a Lawyer, as it is our opinion that there are too many of both those orders, for the true interest and safety of the people at large." And so another Cincinnatus was kept from holding office, at least for a while; David Cobb entered Congress as a Federalist in 1793.[67]

The Cincinnati's critics could have fought the society more efficiently had they created an association or party of their own. In late 1783, a friend of Gerry's suggested organizing a "Revolution Society," and even drafted a preamble for that group:

> Whereas the Providence of Almighty God did visibly lead the people of the British American Colonies to Liberty, Sovereignty & Independence by inspiring them with a spirit of unanimity & firmness, a subordination to the civil power & a patient perseverance thro all perils & adversities to the atchievement of a Revolution founded on the principles of perfect freedom. In commemoration of an event so illustrious, in gracious remembrance of the Providence that protected us – to perpetuate the principles of Union Liberty & Virtue which produced it – to do justice to those Citizens who at the hazard of their lives & fortune, administered, during the War, the Civil Government of the United States or any of them – or who conducted the Militia thereof – to preserve inviolate to their latest posterity the sacred fired of freedom, we whose names are hereunto subscribed have agreed to unite & form ourselves into a society under the regulation & on the conditions hereinafter mentioned. First the title of this Union shall be, the Revolution Society. 2dly all meetings of the Society shall be opened with a prayer of thanksgiving to God commemorative of our gratitude for the Signal support he vouchsafed us in the day of our trial. 3dly that every Citizen who between the 29th of April 1775 & the 14th of January 1784 the period of the commencement, continuance and conclusion of the war, shall been President Member &c. &c.[68]

This Revolution Society would have been a direct competition for the Cincinnati. Everybody was invited to join: officials and representatives of Congress and the state governments as well as the officers of the state militias – everybody except the officers of the Continental Army. Gerry's correspondent wished to avoid "mentioning the Cincinnati lest this society should be considered adversial to that," but the purpose was still clear. The Revolution Society was intended to promote the public memory of the achievements of the revolutionary leadership outside the Continental Army. Had it become reality, the organization would have been a fine counterweight to the Cincinnati.

It never happened. The Revolution Society never left the drawing board, and organized resistance against the Cincinnati remained elusive. In all likelihood, the obstacles against organizing a political anti-Cincinnati movement were insurmountable at the time. Political groups that transcended state boundaries did not come into existence

until the ratification struggle, and even then the Antifederalists had a hard time presenting a united front. Gerry's "inner circle" of critics were politically quite influential, but they hailed almost exclusively from Massachusetts and never linked up with Burke or others. Moreover, while many prominent Americans feared the Cincinnati during the critical period, that fear was hardly the only thing on their minds.

Given the heated rhetoric against the former Continental officers, the political fallout of the conspiracy theory remained quite limited. As it turned out, the anti-Cincinnati mentality of the 1780s proved bothersome to some members of the society, and the public outrage was certainly an embarrassment to the former Continental officers. But the conspiracy theory never generated a political party, let alone a witch hunt and persecution. Such developments would not take place in America until a generation later, when the Anti-Masonic Party made a brief but powerful impression on the political landscape. However, the fate of the Cincinnati in France demonstrated that anti-aristocratic sentiment need not always remain so harmless.

Notes

[1] Aedanus Burke, *Considerations on the Society or Order of Cincinnati; Lately Instituted by the Major-Generals, Brigadier-Generals, and Other Officers of the American Army. Proving That It Creates a Race of Hereditary Patricians or Nobility. Interspersed with Remarks on Its Consequences to the Freedom and Happiness of the Republic. Addressed to the People of South Carolina, and Their Representatives.* (Charleston: Timothy, 1783), 15.

[2] "Proceedings of Massachusetts Respecting the Cincinnati," 16 February 1784, Elbridge Gerry Papers, MHi [microfilm]; *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 7 April 1784.

[3] e.g. the Killingworth meeting, see *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 2 September 1783.

[4] Edgar Erskine Hume, ed., *General Washington's Correspondence Concerning the Society of the Cincinnati* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1941), 156.

[5] e.g. *Charleston South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 11 November, 2 Decemer 1783, 10 February, 15 May 1784.

[6] Hume, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 156.

[7] Arthur Lee to John Adams, 14 January 1784, LDC 21: 272-73.

[8] Walter Clark and William Laurence Saunders, eds., *The State Records of North Carolina* (Goldsboro, N.C.: Nash Brothers Printers, 1886), 19: 743.

[9] *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 2 September 1783; *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 3 June 1784; *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 7 April 1784.

[10] Clark and Saunders, *The State Records of North Carolina*, 19: 743; North Carolina General Assembly Records, October-November 1784 (Box 2) House Bills (Oct 26-Nov 11), Nc-Ar.

[11] The only significant exception was Silas Deane, who remained silent on the issue, but he was probably too busy with the allegations of embezzlement that ultimately drove him into English exile.

[12] John Jay to Gouverneur Morris, 7 February 1784, *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay,* ed. Henry P. Johnston (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1890), 3: 111; John Jay to Elbridge Gerry, 19 February 1784, *John Jay: The Winning of the Peace. Unpublished Papers 1780-1784,* ed. Richard B. Morris (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 2: 694-95; Marquis de Lafayette to George Washington, 9 March 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 109.

[13] Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 14 November 1786, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 270; Benjamin Franklin to Sarah Bache, 26 January 1784, *The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin,* ed. John Bigelow (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1887), 10: 273-81.

[14] Burke, *Considerations*, 15.

[15] *Hartford American Mercury*, 4 June 1787; Clark and Saunders, *The State Records of North Carolina*, 19: 743; North Carolina General Assembly Records, October-November 1784 (Box 2) House Bills (Oct 26-Nov 11), Nc-Ar. It is not entirely clear whether the Mr. Butler who introduced the petition and bill actually was the former brigadier general of the state militia John Butler, but it seems likely. See William Stevens Powell and Peter Graham Fish, *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 1: 290-91.

[16] quoted in George Athan Billias, *Elbridge Gerry: Founding Father and Republican Statesman* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 1.

[17] Three major biographical treatises exist on Gerry. James Trecothick Austin, *The Life of Elbridge Gerry with Contemporary Letters. To the Close of the American Revolution* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1828) was written by his son-in-law only fourteen years after his death. Samuel E. Morison, "Elbridge Gerry, Gentleman-Democrat," *New England Quarterly* 2 (1929): 6-33 focuses strongly on Gerry's political oscillations, whereas George Athan Billias, *Elbridge Gerry: Founding Father and Republican Statesman* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976) points out the principal continuities in Gerry's thought and political career. This latter, and newest, biography is by far the most comprehensive and useful, and the basis of much of this brief account. ANB 8: 866-88 contains a succinct summary of Gerry's life. C. Harvey Gardiner, ed., *A Study in Dissent: The Warren-Gerry Correspondence, 1776-1792* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968) collects some of Gerry's most interesting correspondence. Gerry's manuscript papers are deposited at the Library of Congress, which also holds microfilm copies of the the sub-

stantial holdings of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Given Gerry's long tenure in Congress, LDC and DHFFC contain much of his political correspondence.

[18] Billias, *Elbridge Gerry*, 18, 34.

[19] Ibid., 35-98.

[20] Ibid., 72, 83, 102.

[21] Ibid., 56, 123.

[22] Gerry's refusal to sign the Constitution is one of the strongest contradiction of Charles Beard's thesis that the framers consisted primarily of public creditors acting in their own economic interest. Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the American Constitution* (New York: Macmillan, 1913).

[23] Billias, *Elbridge Gerry*, 103-119.

[24] Massachusetts Delegates to James Bowdoin, 3 September 1785, LDC 22: 612.

[25] Billias, *Elbridge Gerry*, 209.

[26] Ibid., 218-44; Elbridge Gerry to John Adams, 25 April 1797, Elbridge Gerry Papers, DLC.

[27] Ibid., 287-307.

[28] Ibid., 308-09.

[29] Henry Knox to Elbridge Gerry, 26 November 1786, Henry Knox Papers, MHi [microfilm].

[30] No personal biography of Burke exists. This fact stems not from a lack of scholarly interest in his person, but from a dearth of sources; Burke ordered his personal papers burnt in his last will and testament. Short biographical sketches exist in Joseph Johnson, *Traditions and Reminiscences, Chiefly of the American Revolution in the South: Including Biographical Sketches, Incidents, and Anecdotes, Few of Which Have Been Published, Particularly of Residents in the Upper Country* (Charleston: Walker & James, 1851), 428-37; Ebenezer Smith Thomas, *Reminiscences of the Last Sixty-Five Years Commencing with the Battle of Lexington; Also, Sketches of His Own Life and Times* (Hartford: The Author, 1840); N. Louise Bailey, *Biographical Directory of the South Carolina House of Representatives* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1974), 105-07; John Belton O'Neall, *Biographical Sketches of the Bench and Bar of South Carolina* (Charleston: S.G. Courtenay & Co., 1859), 35-39; ANB 3: 949-51. By far the most recent comprehensive study is John C. Meleney, *The Public Life of Aedanus Burke: Revolutionary Republican in Post-Revolutionary South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989) which draws on Burke's writings and service record to illustrate his politics and convictions. This brief account is based principally on Meleney's work.

[31] Meleney, *Public Life of Aedanus Burke*, 16-32.

[32] Ibid., 53-61.

[33] Ibid., 64-74; Aedanus Burke, *An Address to the Freemen of the State of South Carolina, Containing Political Observations* (Philadelphia: Robert Bell, 1783); the pamphlet was originally printed and distributed in Charleston in January 1783.

[34] *Charleston South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 10 June 1783; Meleney, *Public Life of Aedanus Burke*, 74.

[35] Aedanus Burke, "To the Public," *Charleston South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 15 May 1784; Burke, *Considerations*.

[36] Ibid., 13-14.

[37] Meleney, *Public Life of Aedanus Burke*, 117-18.

[38] Ibid., 145-48.

[39] see chapter 4.

[40] Meleney, *Public Life of Aedanus Burke*, 163-205; see also chapter 3.

[41] no book-length biography of Gale exists. George C. Groce, "Benjamin Gale," *New England Quarterly* 10 (1937): 697-716 contains a substantial biographical sketch; Franklin Bowditch Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College: With Annals of the College History* (New York: Holt, 1885), 477-80; James Thacher, *American Medical Biography: Or, Memoirs of Eminent Physicians Who Have Flourished in America. To Which Is Prefixed a Succinct History of Medical Science in the United States, from the First Settlement of the Country* (Boston: Richardson & Lord and Cotton & Barnard, 1828), 267-68, and DAB 7: 97-99 contain shorter accounts. The most recent treatise is ANB 8: 628-30. Philip H. Jordan, "Connecticut Anti-Federalism on the Eve of the Constitutional Convention," *Connecticut Historical Society* 28, no. 1 (1963): 14-21 contains an important letter on the Cincinnati from Gale to Erastus Wolcott, along with a biographical introduction. Gale's papers are deposited in the Beinecke library at Yale.

[42] Groce, "Benjamin Gale," 697-99.

[43] ANB 8: 629.

[44] Groce, "Benjamin Gale," 703-704.

[45] ANB 8: 629; Jordan, "Connecticut Anti-Federalism on the Eve of the Constitutional Convention," 15.

[46] Benjamin Gale to Benjamin Huntington, 14 May 1789, Gale Papers, CtY-B; *Hartford Connecticut Courant*, 2 September 1783.

[47] Jordan, "Connecticut Anti-Federalism on the Eve of the Constitutional Convention"; Benjamin Gale to Francis Dana, 20 June 1789; Benjamin Gale to Benjamin Huntington, 14 May 1789; Benjamin Gale, "Speech at the Killingworth town meeting," 12 November 1787, Gale Papers, CtY-B; see also DHRoC 3: 420-29

[48] Benjamin Gale, "Summary View of Divine Revelation"; Benjamin Gale to Francis Dana, 20 June 1789, Gale Papers, CtY-B.

[49] Dexter, *Graduates of Yale College*, 478.

[50] *Charleston South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 10 February 1784.

[51] Burke, *Considerations*, 14; *Charleston South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, 10 February 1784.

[52] François, Marquis de Barbé-Marbois to Robert R. Livingston, 10 November 1783, Robert R. Livingston Papers, NHi [microfilm].

[53] Chevalier de La Luzerne to Count de Vergennes, 12 April 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 133-34.

[54] *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 25 March 1784; the committee largely followed Gerry's fear that the Cincinnati might usurp the legitimate government structure of the state and union. Gerry himself did not sit on the committee, but his close ally Rufus King did.

[55] *Philadelphia Freeman's Journal*, 2 June 1784.

[56] for reports regarding the Rhode Island disenfranchisement, see *Portsmouth New Hampshire Gazette*, 19 June 1784; *Philadelphia Freeman's Journal*, 28 April 1784; *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Packet*, 29 April 1784, *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 16 April 1784. See also Wallace Evans Davies, "The Society of the Cincinnati in New England 1783-1800," *William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 5 (1948): 8.

[57] George Washington to Thomas Jefferson, 30 May 1787, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 311-13.

[58] Clark and Saunders, eds, *The State Records of North Carolina*, 19: 743; North Carolina General Assembly Records, October-November 1784 (Box 2) House Bills (Oct 26-Nov 11), Nc-Ar.

[59] North Carolina General Assembly Records, October-November 1784 (Box 2) House Bills (Oct 26-Nov 11), Nc-Ar.

[60] Elbridge Gerry to John Adams, 3 August 1785; Elbridge Gerry to John Adams, 8 November 1785, Elbridge Gerry Papers, DLC; Elbridge Gerry to Samuel Adams, 30 September 1785, LDC 22: 651.

[61] John Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 19 September 1785, Elbridge Gerry Papers, DLC; Worthington Chauncey Ford and others, eds., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* (Washington: U.S. Govt. print off., 1904), 29: 701.

[62] *Boston Gazette*, 2 June 1788.

[63] Stephen Higginson to Elbridge Gerry, 28 April 1784, quoted in Davies, "The Society of the Cincinnati in New England 1783-1800," 14.

[64] *Boston Gazette*, 2 April 1787.

[65] actually, the legislature elected him. Lincoln had garnered 47 percent of the vote, more than any other candidate, but not a popular majority. DHRoC 6: 1729-32

[66] Jonathan Trumbull, Jr. to George Washington, 10 January 1788, DHRoC 3: 568.

[67] *New York Public Advertiser*, 1 Oct 1790; *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 2 Sept 1790, 9 Sept 1790; *Philadelphia Independent Gazeteer*, 9 October 1790.

[68] "Observations on the Columbia Plan," 1783, Elbridge Gerry Papers, MHi [microfilm].

Chapter Eight

Between two Revolutions:

The "Order of the Cincinnati" in France

> *There are more wishes in France for the order of the Cincinnati than for that of St. Louis.*
>
> *Pierre L'Enfant[1]*

A French Connection

It was the declared intention of the Society of the Cincinnati to preserve the friendships with the French officers who served in the American Revolution. The reason was obvious. Some revolutionaries criticized the French alliance because the *ancien regime* was undoubtedly even less agreeable than the English system, yet in military terms the alliance was invaluable. Without the support of the French army and navy and the experience of some French officers who served with American commissions, the revolutionary war might have been lost. No one was more aware of this fact than the officers of the Continental Army. Their gratitude to and respect for the French officers was genuine, and honoring the allies was one of the principal motives for forming the society.

The original institution of the Cincinnati named the French ministers plenipotentiary and the principal generals and admirals who had served in America as members of the society. It also specified that the society considered as members the generals and colonels of the French expeditionary army. Except for the Chevalier de la Luzerne, these men had returned to the old world by the time the society was organized; no French officer was involved in drafting and adopting the original institution. In late 1783, Pierre L'Enfant traveled to France in order to commission master craftsmen to produce eagles for the American officers. L'Enfant also carried a letter of introduction from Washington along with the membership certificates for the French members

mentioned in the institution. Effectively, L'Enfant became the envoy who carried the invitation of the society to the French allies.[2]

L'Enfant met with more enthusiasm than anyone had envisioned. After only three weeks, he reported back to Washington on "how highly honourable the French nation in general, think this distinguishing mark conferred by the American army."[3] The only obstacle lay not in the willingness of the French officers to join, but in the question of whether they could legally do so. Self-creation had been controversial enough in America; in France it was out of the question. An officer simply could not join a foreign military society or wear its decoration without royal approval.

Louis XVI granted this approval and even went one step further. The king appointed himself patron of the society, a role he also played in the Order of St. Louis. Accordingly, the Cincinnati eagle became one of only two foreign decorations French officers were allowed to wear.[4] Enthused, Lafayette wrote to Washington that "our badge is highly wished and warmly contended for by all those who hope they have some claim to it. The Nation has been very much pleased with the attention our Society has paid to the alliance and have found there is something very interesting in the brotherly affiliation."[5] Indeed it was not surprising that the government endorsed the society; after all, no group of influential persons in the United States was more committed to the French alliance than the Cincinnati. Although the king and his ministers had not secretly created the American society to influence the United States, they recognized a potential ally when they saw one.

In the following months, what had been originally intended as an honor to a few select French officers coalesced into the equivalent of a state society. A preliminary meeting convened on 7 January 1784, and a week later the new organization was taking shape. Membership criteria posed the biggest problem for the French Cincinnati. All French officers who had served under American commissions were eligible for membership, regardless of rank; Lafayette effectively became the leader of this group. As for officers in the French army, only colonels and generals could join, according to the original institution. Some controversy arose over the question of naval officers.[6] Admiral Count de Barras wrote to Washington in late January, urging that naval cap-

tains be admitted to the society. More questions arose over officers who had not held the rank of colonel during the war, but had been promoted since. The confusion over membership, along with the massive popularity of the Cincinnati in France resulted in a deluge of letters to Washington in which French officers urged, begged, or demanded their admission to the society.[7]

No delegates of the French society took part in the general meeting of 1784. Several French officers were in America at the time, and the Marquis de La Rouerie informed Washington that he and others were ready to serve as delegates. However, the French society had not formally organized at this point and had not elected any delegates to the general meeting. Washington turned the marquis down on these grounds. However, Washington's true motivation at this point was probably the controversy about the Cincinnati, which was then in full swing. Too many critics denounced the society as the tool of French influence, and Washington probably hoped to avoid further accusations by not admitting the French to the general meeting.[8]

Nevertheless, the general meeting did concern itself with the growing French society. On the one hand, the delegates helped clarify the eligibility question. The revised institution specified that all colonels and generals in the French land forces and all admirals and naval captains ranking as colonels who had served in the war could join. On the other hand, the revised institution put some distance between the American and French organizations. The document forbade any financial contribution from non-Americans; this act effectively turned down a donation of 60,000 livres the French had collected for the benefit of the charitable fund in America. Moreover, the institution granted the French members autonomy with respect to regulations and meetings. This was a two-sided act. It effectively recognized the existence of a French state society, but it also made clear that the allied officers would have to regulate themselves. Surely, Washington hoped that these measures would stop the endless applications he kept receiving. Finally, the French society played an extremely strong implicit role at the general meeting. The massive popularity of the Cincinnati in France made it effectively impossible for the American society to conform to public pressure and dissolve.

Washington later claimed that had it not been for the French, he would have liked to see the Cincinnati disbanded.[9]

On 4 July 1784, the French society held its first official meeting, elected Lafayette president of the society *in absentia*, and also chose other officers. The structure of the French organization differed considerably from American state societies. Among other things, the president was to hold office for life and there were to be two vice-presidents and two secretaries. The meeting also ratified the revised institution but proposed several changes of their own.[10] Most startling among these was the French proposal to admit women to the society in honor of the achievements of their fathers or husbands. And while the general meeting had spurned the French donation to the American charitable fund, the officers now decided to establish a fund of their own to benefit French or visiting American Cincinnati in need.

Endorsement of the revised institution did not come lightly for the French Cincinnati because it abolished heredity. Among the alterations the French proposed was not only the resumption of heredity, but an expansion of that principle. The French argued that especially prominent members should be allowed to bequeath membership not only to one but all of their heirs; furthermore, the children of the highest-ranking Cincinnati should be allowed to wear the eagle even while the original member was still alive. Needless to say, the general society never endorsed, or even considered, such radical changes. Still, the strong pro-heredity sentiment among the French Cincinnati had possibly one grave consequence: Lafayette did not accept the presidency. The marquis had repeatedly expressed his opposition to the hereditary feature, especially in his correspondence with John Adams. Moreover, Lafayette traveled the United States in 1784 and must have realized the extent of anti-Cincinnati sentiment in America. At any rate, it was the Count d'Estaing, not Lafayette, who became the French Cincinnati's first president. He held the post until the effective dissolution of the order 1792.[11]

The French Cincinnati were hardly alone in their desire to retain heredity, but there was one major difference between the French and American societies. In the United States, the society was a veterans organization with some aristocratic trappings. In France, the Cincinnati considered themselves a knightly order. There was a wide-

spread but incorrect misconception among the French officers that the Cincinnati eagle was an official decoration, and that the society had the blessing of Congress. Moreover, for all practical purposes, the French Cincinnati really was a knightly order. It had the patronage of a sovereign monarch, its members came from the hereditary nobility of France, and the society's eagle brought considerable prestige to its wearer. It was hardly surprising that the French Cincinnati wished for distinctions within the society; they came from a culture with clear hierarchies based mostly on birth and only partly on merit. In America, only those who feared the society as a subversive conspiracy referred to it as an "order." But in France, "Order of the Cincinnati" was the official name.

A Threat to Republicanism or to Monarchy?

Despite its great popularity and initial endorsement by the King, the Cincinnati also generated considerable controversy in France. In some cases, public criticism stemmed from misunderstanding and was quite humorous, as in one episode Horace Walpole narrated to the Countess of Upper Ossory. When news of the French society spread in Paris, Walpole wrote, it produced quite an uproar, because "as the *noblesse* spell only by ear, they took it for the order of St. Senatus. They had recourse to the calendar, and finding no such saint in heaven's almanac, they concluded it was a new canonization at Boston, and were enraged that Washington should encroach on the papacy as well as the diadem."[12]

Other accusations were much more serious. Foremost amongst these was the publication of Mirabeau's version of *Considerations on the Order of Cincinnatus*. Comte Mirabeau came from a family of French nobility but had often quarreled with his father and criticized the *ancien regime*; he had also spent time in prison and was habitually in financial difficulties. He received a copy of Burke's *Considerations* from Franklin while in Paris and soon began working on a French version of the pamphlet. Legal battles forced Mirabeau to flee to England, where he came in touch with Whig political circles. There, he finished his version of *Considerations*, which became avail-

able in France in the fall of 1784. The pamphlet was subsequently translated into German and English and found its way back to the United States sometime in 1785.[13]

Although Mirabeau copied whole passages from Burke's pamphlet, the French *Considerations* differed considerably from the American version. Mirabeau updated and expanded the booklet. He included elements from Franklin's letter to Sarah Bache, especially the argument about how quickly the genetic heritage of the original Cincinnati would be lost in future generations. Mirabeau also reprinted the Massachusetts legislature's condemnation of the Cincinnati and reported on Governor Guerard's speech in South Carolina. In some cases, Mirabeau repeated unsubstantiated rumors, such as the one that Rhode Island had disfranchised the society. Yet he also corrected some of Burke's mistakes, for example when he pointed out that Washington, not Steuben, was the president of the society. Stylistically, Mirabeau proved he was a better writer than Burke. The prose of the French version was more straightforward than Burke's, and the argument had fewer of the inconsistencies which had plagued the earlier edition. Together with the updates and additions, Mirabeau's *Considerations* constituted a much more cogent version of the conspiracy theory; the pamphlet had the potential to do much damage to the society.[14]

Burke himself, far from pleased at his ideas being spread internationally, addressed the Mirabeau in an open letter in the *Charleston Columbian Herald*, and accused the Frenchman of copyright violation. "Your book consists of little else," the American wrote, "but whole pages, paragraphs and sentences, which you took out of mine…and claiming the whole as your own without once pointing out to the reader, what part belonged to me, when so very little of it was yours."[15] Burke certainly had a point, but his accusations were not completely fair. Mirabeau clearly gave Burke credit as the original author, and his additions, let alone the translation, were substantial enough to justify a new edition. But there was also money involved. Quite possibly, Mirabeau published his pamphlet primarily to earn some desperately needed cash, and he did not share his earnings with the South Carolinian.

For the most part, Mirabeau followed Burke's argument against the society. By organizing themselves as the Cincinnati, Mirabeau accused, the Continental officers

had distinguished themselves from the people. Hereditary succession would lead to a full-scale nobility, which would permanently divide Americans into patricians and plebeians. In fact, Mirabeau was even more alarmist than Burke in many respects. He presented the combination of social distinction and military background as positively apocalyptic. "If the solitary body of men, who dare thus distinguish themselves from their fellow-citizens, be a body of soldiers," the Frenchman wrote, "all is lost. Liberty will not linger long in climates disgraced by such distinctions." Mirabeau insisted that even if the Cincinnati's founders did not necessarily wish to crush the republic, the dynamics of such a powerful organization would almost inevitably spell the doom of freedom. "Such is the secret force of institutions, which nothing can check, and which advance unseen, but with a certain progress, towards an end which is inevitable, and which is often unperceived even to their founders. It is this all-powerful force, which, in the present institution of the Cincinnati … prepares for us a patriciate, an hereditary, or a perpetual nobility; or in other words, the total subversion of our constitution, and our laws."[16]

In one more aspect did Mirabeau surpass the venom of Burke's accusations. While the South Carolinian had only subtly chided Washington for not putting a stop to the society, Mirabeau viewed it as the great general's fall from grace. "On the very day when the adoption of honorary members was voted," Mirabeau pointed out, "Washington, who had appeared so great, declaring that he would become again a private individual; Washington, the first citizen of the republic, and the deliverer of the people, was ambitious of being distinguished from the people. Was it possible that he should not feel how much his name was superior to all distinction? The hero of the revolution, which broke the chains of half the world, was it possible that he should not scorn the guilty, dangerous, und vulgar honour, of being the hero of a party?" It was a rhetorical question; Mirabeau left no doubt in the reader's mind that even Washington had fallen to the temptations of pride and ambition.[17]

Mirabeau saw some sort of Cincinnati takeover as imminent, possibly in conjunction with enlarged Congressional power. "If the Congress itself," the comte asked, "under political circumstances, which it is not barely possible, but easy to foresee, shall

come to have a revenue, a fleet, and an army at its disposal, and shall make an attempt on our liberties, will the Cincinnati pursue any other line of conduct than that which will best suit their own armed order?" With or without congressional support, the society was a threat, its members "numerous, warlike, taught by actual service every advantage or disadvantage of their country, for attack or defence, and even the personal characters of all their fellow-soldiers whom they have commanded." The Cincinnati deemed themselves "superior even to the laws, which their very existence insults." Such men, would not – and need not – entertain scruples, Mirabeau warned. By establishing themselves as a nobility despite a specific prohibition in the Articles of Confederation, Mirabeau argued the society "declares war against its country."[18]

Mirabeau's pamphlet was not utterly devoid of nuance. He did acknowledge the heroism of the Continental officers and their gallantry to defeated Loyalists. The comte also reported that the society had abolished heredity at its general meeting, although like other critics he did not think that would stop the Cincinnati from subverting the republic. He reprinted Washington's circular letter explaining the revised institution, but not without a number of malicious interpretations. More than perhaps any other critics' publications, Mirabeau's pamphlet resembled the conspiracy narratives of later centuries. His prose was rife with such phrases as "it cannot be doubted" and "I have proved" when all he did was assert largely unfounded accusations. And Mirabeau was also one of the first authors to explicitly denounce the Cincinnati as a "conspiracy." To the cause of liberty, Mirabeau stated bluntly, the society was "the most formidable of enemies."[19]

Whom did Mirabeau address? The language of the pamphlet's initial publication clearly indicated a French audience, although the comte certainly did not mind the sales that the German and English versions raked in. However, throughout the pamphlet, Mirabeau wrote from the point of view of an American citizen warning against the subversion of the new republic. The comte deleted Burke's references to American state politics, but he also did not specifically target the French branch of the Cincinnati. Most likely, Mirabeau intended his pamphlet as an indictment of the evils of hereditary nobility in general and focused on an American controversy primarily to

veil an implied attack against the *ancien regime.* Later in life, Mirabeau displayed similar convictions as a great orator and moderate republican during the French Revolution. Finally, personal reasons might have played a role in the comte's choice of subject matter. His younger brother had served in America and became a member of the French Order of the Cincinnati. Given Mirabeau's highly problematic relationship with his family, he was not above a little fraternal feuding.

Whatever Mirabeau's intention, the pamphlet fanned the controversy about the society. In September 1784, the royal government, which had formerly endorsed the French order, suddenly reversed course and prohibited the admission of new members. The Marquis de Ségur, as minister of war, even stated that Louis XVI felt it was "not convenient that this association be perpetuated in this Kingdom." While his Majesty presumably did not care that the society might be a threat to American republicanism, the order had become something of a hot potato and potential source of embarrassment. The prohibition on new members was never strictly enforced, but the edict was renewed in 1785. Still, losing the royal favor did not effectively stop the Cincinnati, and by 1788 the society was again admitting new members, although not on a hereditary basis.[20]

Another explanation for the sudden skepticism against the Cincinnati in royal circles was that the society consisted, after all, of officers who had fought in rebellion against a sovereign monarch. The French position was unclear, but in Sweden and Poland the republican achievements of the Cincinnati earned them distrust and skepticism. Gustavus III of Sweden prohibited his officers from wearing the order, specifically because the Cincinnati eagle was "a public mark of the success of a revolution against their legitimate sovereign." In Poland, King Stanislaus Poniatowski publicly scolded Thaddeus Kosciusko for wearing the eagle. Admittedly, only a handful of these monarchs' officers had served in America and were eligible for membership, and the sovereigns of Prussia and Russia had nothing against the society. Still, it was deeply ironic that the Cincinnati should be accused of endangering both republicanism and monarchy. Such were the differences in the political cultures of America and Europe.[21]

Jacobins and Cincinnati

As the 1780s drew to a close, the political culture and reality of France changed forever, and the anti-Cincinnati writings of 1784 played a small role in the process. Mirabeau's pamphlet helped stir anti-aristocratic sentiment in France, but there was also another critic of the society whose legacy and writings helped shape the French Revolution: Benjamin Franklin. His letter to Sarah Bache, written in January 1784, was not as private as one might think. Franklin commissioned his friend Abbé Morellet to translate an abbreviated version of the letter, and proceeded to circulate the essay privately among his friends in Paris. He might have opted for publication as early as 1784, but Morellet warned him of the political explosion Franklin might set off by publishing such a subversive piece. Not wishing to endanger the alliance between America and France, Franklin relented and stipulated that the letter "will probably not appear till after my decease, if it does then."[22]

Like Burke's and Mirabeau's pamphlets, Franklin's letter was an attack against the Cincinnati, although without the apocalyptic alarm of *Considerations*. Yet more clearly than any other critic, Franklin intended an attack on all forms of hereditary distinction, in Europe as well as America. To Franklin, the Cincinnati were just the most recent example of an ancient evil. "The *descending honor*," he wrote, "to a posterity who could have no share in obtaining it, is not only groundless and absurd, but often hurtful to that posterity, since it is apt to make them proud, disdaining to be employed in useful arts, and thence falling into poverty, and all the meanness, servility, and wretchedness attending it; which is the present case with much of what is called the *noblesse* in Europe." Franklin did not specifically attack the French nobility, but he asserted that primogeniture among the landed aristocracy had produced "the odious mixture of pride and beggary, and idleness, that have half depopulated and *decultivated* Spain."[23] Undoubtedly, Franklin's observations would not have endeared him to the court at Versailles, so it was just as well that he did not publish his letter in 1784.

By the time the Bastille fell, Franklin was in the last year of his life. He approved of the republican spirit that had taken hold of France, but expressed distress at the violence and disorder of even this early phase of the revolution. At the end of the

1780s, Franklin had also revised his opinion of the Cincinnati, and he accepted an honorary membership in 1789. Yet while he had apparently concluded that the Cincinnati were harmless enough, nothing indicated that he changed his mind on the evils of hereditary nobility in general. Nevertheless, the man who had charmed Paris society with his sharp mind and rustic outfit undoubtedly would have been horrified at the bloody toll of the *terreur*. His death in 1790 spared him from having to witness a republican revolution turned murderous.[24]

Moderate French revolutionaries remembered Franklin's anti-aristocratic stance fondly. Only a month after news of the American's death arrived in Paris, Phillipe Antoine Grouvelle contributed the French version of Franklin's letter to the *Journal de la Societé de 1789*, a liberal publication in Paris. Grouvelle acknowledged that the text was old, but also wrote that it was but little known and had fresh relevance even for those who had read it before. Indeed, to the moderate liberals of the French Revolution, Franklin himself was personal symbol of equality, a man of humble origins who had risen to international prominence through his keen intellect and strength of character. His observations on the imbecility of hereditary distinctions, as expressed in the letter, rang true to many who wished to transform French society into one of liberty, equality, and brotherhood.[25]

Among the members of the revolutionary *Societé de 1789* were Mirabeau, but also Lafayette, a member of the French Cincinnati. The marquis had himself criticized the hereditary feature of the society in 1784, and had long argued in favor of constitutional government, so his presence among the moderate liberals of the early French Revolution was not surprising. Lafayette was certainly the most prominent Cincinnatus and veteran of the American war to play a role in the political transformation of France, but he was far from alone. A number of French Cincinnati supported the French Revolution in its early, moderate phase even though they all were members of the old aristocracy.

Several members of the society sat in the Estates General, mostly for the nobility, but they were hardly a bulwark for aristocratic privileges. Vice Admiral Bailli de Suffren, the Duke de Lauzen and Biron, the Count Custine-Sarreck, Count Charles de

Lameth, Count Alexandre de Lameth, and of course Lafayette all demanded that the first and second estates should join with the third to form a National Assembly. The Marquis de La Rouerie was among the first to call for the end of the nobility's taxation privileges. The Vicomte de Noailles formally proposed to the National Constituent Assembly in 1789 that taxes should be levied equally, that all persons should have equal rights before the law and equal access to post and place, that seigniorial dues should cease and all forms of personal servitude be abolished. And the Count de Rochambeau publicly pledged his zeal, his fidelity, and his "entire submission to the decrees of the Assembly."[26]

In this early phase of the revolution, the Cincinnati's commitment to American independence made them a symbol for the cause of liberty. On 12 July 1789, as news of Necker's dismissal spread in Paris, Camille Desmoulins leapt on a table at the garden of the Palais Royal and called on the crowd to decide on the colors of a cockade. "What colour shall it be?" Desmoulins exclaimed. "Shall it be green, the colour of hope? Or shall it be blue, the colour of the Cincinnati and American independence?" Eventually, of course, the colors of the revolution were the red, white, and blue of the *tricolore*, and thus neither of the choices Desmoulins proposed on that day. Yet even the very idea that the colour of the Cincinnati might properly adorn the hats of French revolutionaries showed that in the early days of the great upheaval, the society's republican credentials outweighed their aristocratic trappings.[27]

However, the political tide soon turned against badges, orders, and all legal and physical trappings of nobility. On 19 June 1790, the Assembly abolished titles of nobility, liveries, and armorial bearings; a year later it outlawed those orders which were based on distinctions of birth. So far, the Cincinnati squeezed by the prohibitions because they were an order of merit, not nobility, and presumably also because their endorsement of the revised institution had eliminated heredity. In fact, the order was still expanding. Noailles petitioned Washington to extend membership in the French society beyond colonels and generals to include all officer ranks. While that change never took place, in early 1792 the society admitted twenty-seven new members with royal approval. Despite the fact that the Cincinnati had so far escaped the public wrath,

however, some members decided turn their backs on France. Boniface Riquetti, vicomte de Mirabeau, the pamphleteer's brother, became an early *emigré* in 1790. He was not the last.[28]

The admissions of 1792 were the swansong of the French society. The storming of the Tuileries on 10 August 1792 was the deathknell of the monarchy. A few months later, the order's patron Louis XVI went to the guillotine, and the beginning of the *terreur* dispersed the Cincinnati and precluded further meetings. In November 1793, the Convention outlawed the Cross of St. Louis and all similar decorations; this time, the Cincinnati were by no means exempt. There was no specific persecution of the society as such, but many members found themselves on the receiving end of "public safety." To be sure, the members of the Cincinnati were also former nobility, and that contributed to their downfall more than anything. Furthermore, the moderate liberalism of many Cincinnati now became a political liability. But membership in the society was also a problem in itself. Camille Desmoulins, who had earlier seen the blue of the Cincinnati as potential symbol of liberty, counted membership in the Cincinnati among Lafayette's crimes when he denounced the general. In the course of the *terreur*, Rochambeau and Lafayette were imprisoned, and at least eleven Cincinnati went to the guilloutine. Chief among these was the the Comte d'Estaing, president of the French order. On one occasion, a revolutionary zealot dangled a collar made of Crosses of St. Louis and Cincinnati eagles from the neck of his horse as he paraded the streets of Paris, trophies taken from dead victims. Most surviving members emigrated, and a number took up arms in the cause of reestablishing the monarchy. Thus, the French society was by far the most short-lived branch of the Cincinnati, existing only from 1784 to 1792; it was not until 1922 that the organization revived.[29]

The growing opposition in France against orders and distinctions had one curious consequence in the United States. In late 1792, General Dumouriez publicly renounced his own Cross of St. Louis to stress his commitment to the equality of all citizens. When news of this act reached America, William Heath of the Massachusetts society decided: "If the *Cross of St. Louis*, long worn in France as an emblem of the distinguished merit of the wearer, is judged by this great man as improper to be worn in a

Republick, how can I, a *citizen* of the *renowned American Republick*, allow my name to stand affixed to an *institution*, or to wear a *device* which is construed by many of our fellow citizens the indication of an *order* and *distinction* in society." Years before, Heath had circulated false rumors that he had renounced his membership in the society, but this time he was serious. He addressed his decision to none other than Henry Knox, instructing the society's long-time secretary to strike his name from the membership rolls.[30]

Most other American Cincinnati, however, hardly cheered the radicalization of the revolution and the fate of their brethren in France. Those *emigrés* who made it to America could usually count on the support of their fellow Cincinnati. One example of such solidarity ocurred when Philip Schuyler helped the Marquis de La Tour du Pin and his family to establish themselves in New York.[31]

While the Cincinnati were never the focus of republican suspicion in France the way they were in America, the French revolution surpassed even the American when it came to the fear of conspiracy in general. The left, especially the radical left, lived in constant fear of reactionary subversion, and a good portion of the *terreur* represented an effort to weed out secret enemies of the revolution. All too often, the victims of these efforts to preserve the "public safety" had sterling revolutionary credentials, and were manifestly innoccent of any plotting. On the right, critics were liable to see the upheaval of France's social and political order as a vast conspiracy engineered by Freemasons, *philosophes*, and the Illuminati. As historian Gordon Wood described it, "the French Revolution was born in an atmosphere of conspiratorial fears. There were plots by the ministers, by the queen, by the aristocracy, by the clergy; everywhere there were secret managers behind the scenes pulling the strings of the great events of the Revolution." Obviously, most of these plots were imaginary, and many were mutually exlcusive.[32]

The best-remembered of these conspiratorial explanations was the right-wing assertion that Illuminati conspirators within Parisian Freemason circles had planned and brought about the revolution, including the bloodbath of the *terreur*. The most

eloquent proponent of this ideas was Abbé Baruel, whose *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* became the archetype of modern conspiracy theories and whose ideas are persisted to the present day. Together with John Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe*, Barruel's ideas eventually crossed the Atlantic. In New England, the Federalist clergy turned them into a venomous attack on the nascent Republican party, which had allegedly been subverted by Jacobin agitators into the tools of anarchy and terror. And in France, even modern historiography struggled for a long while with the various left-wing and right-wing interpretations of deliberate subversion and conspiracy.[33]

However, the radical left-wing suspicion that aristocratic subversion threatened the revolution at every step caused much more damage in terms of human lives than Barruel's and Robison's Illuminati hysteria. To be sure, there were reactionary efforts to restore the monarchy (usually of an overt military nature), but the radicalized Jacobins lived in a world where every mishap, every failure was proof of counterrevolutionary treason and conspiracy. All too many innocents fell victim to this atmosphere of suspicion and fear. Among them were men who had helped Americans win their liberty from England, and in Lafayette at least one man who could rightly be called a hero of two revolutions. And, as a final irony, the excesses of the French Revolution eventually ushered in precisely the sort of military dictatorship and the creation of a new nepotistic nobility that the critics of the Cincinnati had feared would happen in America – the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte.

From this point of view, the French Revolution was a distorted, darker mirror of the American one, almost a dystopian vision of what might have happened on the other side of the Atlantic. It would be folly to take such comparisons too far; too different were the social, political, and cultural parameters of France and America. Nevertheless, as seen earlier, the fledgling United States had its own share of conspiracy theory and fear of aristocratic and military subversion, which found their sharpest expression in the anti-Cincinnati sentiment of the 1780s. And yet there were no guillotines in America for alleged aristocratic plotters, and no military takeover destroyed the achievements of the revolution. The development of nationhood in America followed

its own specific dynamic, and so did the country's nightmares of republican subversion. In this respect, it is crucial to take a closer look at the political and ideological context that gave birth to the conspiracy theory against the Society of the Cincinnati.

Notes

[1] Pierre L'Enfant to Friedrich von Steuben, 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence Concerning the Society of the Cincinnati,* ed. Edgar Erskine Hume (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1941), 150.

[2] The principal accounts of the French society are Asa Bird Gardiner, *The Order of the Cincinnati in France ("Lórdre De Cincinnatus.") Its Organization and History: With the Military or Naval Records of the French Members Who Became Such by Reason of Qualifying Service in the Army or Navy of France or of the United States in the War of Revolution for American Independence* (Providence: The Rhode Island State Society of Cincinnati, 1905); Minor Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983), 145-76, and to a lesser extent Edgar Erskine Hume, *Lafayette and the Society of the Cincinnati* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1934).

[3] Pierre L'Enfant to George Washington, 25 December 1783, *The Order of the Cincinnati in France*, 12.

[4] The other foreign order admitted was the Order of the Golden Fleece.

[5] Marquis de Lafayette to George Washington, 25 December 1783, Gardiner, *The Order of the Cincinnati in France*, 13.

[6] the French admirals who had served in the revolutionary war were specifically mentioned in the institution.

[7] Count de Barras to George Washington, 23 January 1784, *The Order of the Cincinnati in France*, 17; Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 148-52.

[8] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 153.

[9] "The Institution of the Society of the Cincinnati as Altered and Amended at their First General Meeting," *General Washington's Correspondence*, 160-64. See also chapter 5.

[10] Henry Knox and the Count d'Estaing had been in correspondence over the revised institution. It appears that d'Estaing approved of the changes. Count d'Estaing to Henry Knox, 3 July 1784, Henry Knox Papers, MHi [microfilm].

[11] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 155-57.

[12] Horace Walpole to Countess of Upper Ossory, 30 December 1783, *Horace Walpole's Correspondence with the Countess of Upper Ossory*, eds. Alva Dayle Wallace and Edwine M. Martz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 2: 431.

[13] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 154.

[14] Gabriel-Honoré de Riquetti Mirabeau, *Considerations on the Order of Cincinnatus. To Which Are Added Several Original Papers Relative to That Institution. Translated from the French of the Count De Mirabeau* (Philadelphia: T. Seddon and W. Spotswood, 1786). All quotations are taken from this American-printed English language version of Mirabeau's pamphlet.

[15] *Charleston The Columbian Herald or the Independent Courier of North America*, 12 December 1785.

[16] Mirabeau, *Considerations on the Order of Cincinnatus*, 13, 15.

[17] Ibid., 4.

[18] Ibid., 20, 23.

[19] Ibid., 14, 18.

[20] Comte de Rochambeau to George Washington, 9 September 1784; Marquis de Ségur to Comte de Rochambeau, 28 August 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 206-07; Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 153, 158.

[21] Count de Rochambeau to George Washington, 16 June 1784, *General Washington's Correspondence*, 199; Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 160-61.

[22] Durand Echeverria, "Franklin's Lost Letter on the Cincinnati," *Bulletin de L'Institut Francais de Washington* nouvelle serié, no. 3 (1953): 199-26.

[23] Quotations are taken from the English version of the letter, Benjamin Franklin to Sarah Bache, 26 January 1784, *The Complete Works of Benjamin Franklin,* John Bigelow, ed. (New York: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1887), 10: 273-81. A complete transcript of Morellet's translation can be found in Echeverria, "Franklin's Lost Letter on the Cincinnati," 122-26. Only those excerpts that appear in both versions are used.

[24] Echeverria, "Franklin's Lost Letter on the Cincinnati," 119; Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 139.

[25] Echeverria, "Franklin's Lost Letter on the Cincinnati," 121-22.

[26] Gardiner, *The Order of the Cincinnati in France*, 45-47.

[27] Edgar Erskine Hume, *Early Opposition to the Cincinnati* (Providence: Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Rhode Island and Providenve Plantation, 1936), 631; Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 164.

[28] Gardiner, *The Order of the Cincinnati in France*, 57; Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 162, 165.

[29] Gardiner, *The Order of the Cincinnati in France*, 57; Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 166-167; Richard Frank jr. Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati" (PhD dissertation, University of Georgia, 1969), 232; Hume, *Lafayette and the Society of the Cincinnati*.

[30] William Heath to Henry Knox, 18 January 1793, *Memorials of the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati,* ed. James M. Bugbee (Boston: Printed for the Society, 1890), 239-40; Wallace Evans Davies, "The Society of the Cincinnati in New England 1783-1800," *William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 5 (1948): 19.

[31] Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy*, 168.

[32] Gordon Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 39, no. 3 (1982): 408.

[33] Abbé Barruel, *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, trans. Robert Clifford (London: T. Burton, 1798); John Robison, *Proofs of a Conspiracy against All the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies* (Philadelphia: T. Dodson, 1798); Vernon Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati* (New York,: The Columbia University Press, 1918); for a discussion on how various conspiratorial interpretations impacted French historiography, see François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 164-75.

Chapter Nine

Republican Fears and Confusions:

The Context of Conspiracy Theory in the Critical Period

It is necessary to guard against the Infirmities of the best as well as the Wickedness of the worst of Men..

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Samuel Adams[1]

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On its face, the conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati seemed more than a little preposterous. The critics accused the former officers of the Continental Army of every sort of subversion against the new American republic. Allegedly, the Cincinnati strove for a hereditary nobility and possibly a monarchy; they erected an insidious political machine to dominate the legitimate governments; and they instigated a constitutional reform detrimental to the liberty of the people, but very conducive to their own ambition. These alarmed denunciations flew in the face of a very simple fact: the Cincinnati were men who had struggled valiantly for American independence, and had literally risked their lives to protect the very liberty they supposedly yearned to destroy. The organization included men that were bulwarks of the American Republic, not its sappers: Washington, Knox, Dickinson, Monroe, and many others. Yet the critics of the society came with equally sterling credentials; men like Gerry, Jefferson and the Adamses were hardly crackpots and loons. How could such an obvious disparity between perception and reality, between rhetoric and fact come to pass? Why did one group of the United States' founding fathers so vehemently accuse another of mischief, subversion, even treason?

Then as now, conspiracy theories did not appear out of thin air, and the accusations against the Cincinnati were no exception. Only a specific cultural and political context permitted the largely groundless outcries against the society to gain and retain currency in the realm of political debate. Several aspects of American political culture and revolutionary ideology helped create an environment in which the conspiracy theory against the society could thrive. The American revolutionaries, influenced as they

were by the radical Whig ideology of eighteenth-century England, traditionally feared standing armies and the corrupting nature of power. Also, the revolution carried within itself a strongly idealistic yearning for equality. These fears and beliefs worked directly against the Cincinnati with their military background, federal organization, and hereditary membership. Furthermore, ideological convictions often clashed with the realities of the revolutionary war and early republican society; radical Whiggery did not hold all the answers to the challenges of the American polity. Especially in the mid-1780s, the young republic seemed on the verge of failure in a number of ways. The internal contradictions of revolutionary ideology and the general sense of crisis in the aftermath of the war helped create fault lines in the structure of the fledgling American republic. And it was in these fault lines that the conspiracy theory against the Society of the Cincinnati could take hold, and for a brief time flourish.

The Fear of a Standing Army

One of the basic tenets of American republicanism and revolutionary ideology was the rejection of standing armies, especially in peacetime. A standing army consisted of permanently established, professional regulars and an equally professional officer corps. However effective such a force proved to be in combat, Americans feared its potential as a source of oppression and tyranny. Obviously, military power was a double-edged sword in any political system, but for Americans who believed in a republic based on liberty and equality, a standing army represented one of the gravest dangers imaginable, whether it was controlled by the enemy or created for the nation's own protection.

This fear of standing armies stemmed from the radical or "real" Whig ideology that took shape in England during the seventeenth an eighteenth centuries. The history of the English Civil War had taught Britons that control over professional armed forces, whether in the hands of the Stuarts or the Lord Protector, was a dangerous thing. A widespread and popular anti-army ideology developed, especially in opposition to the restored Stuart monarchy of Charles II and James II. However, in the course of the Glorious Revolution, Parliament secured control over the military by means of its fiscal

authority and the annual Mutiny Act. Subsequently, Parliament created the professional armed forces that would fight the imperial wars of the eighteenth century. As the constitutional monarchy of the Hanoverians stabilized, moderate thinkers began to turn away from the mental reflexes against standing armies; Daniel Defoe and Adam Smith even wrote cautious endorsements of military specialization and professionalism as necessary and effective.[2]

Yet while the politically dominant moderate Whigs had come to terms with a standing professional military, the radical or "real" Whigs had not. Drawing on the teachings and interpretations of classical republicanism, a number of English authors attacked standing armies in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution. In the 1720s, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon published a series of pamphlets entitled *Cato's Letters*; numbers 94 and 95 vehemently attacked the practice of keeping a standing army. Other influential authors such as James Burgh followed the same approach, as did some other writers who were not associated with the radical Whigs, such as Lord Bolingbroke and William Blackstone. Anti-standing army rhetoric was common among the followers of John Wilkes and generally a position among the English critics of George III. Fear of professional military power was a hallmark of opposition throughout eighteenth century England.[3]

In England, the writings of the radical Whigs had only limited influence, and Parliament continued to maintain and finance a peacetime army. In the American colonies, however, the influence of radical Whig opinions was much more widespread. Opposition writings found their way into a large number of American libraries and helped shape the political ideology of the revolutionary generation. Especially *Cato's Letters* were among the most widely read treatises in the colonies, with bound editions being present in as many as forty percent of American collections. In contrast, the moderate endorsements of a professional military found their way to American readers much more rarely (with the exception of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* after 1776). On the whole, the alarm about standing armies fell on much more fertile soil in the colonies than it did in the mother country.[4]

What precisely did the critics of standing armies fear so much? For one thing, a permanent, professional military force was a massive and potentially uncontrollable power. In the hands of an ambitious executive, it could easily turn into a force of oppression. Professional soldiers might quash insurrections, arrest opposition leaders, and even prevent lawfully elected legislatures from convening. The harsh discipline, iron-clad hierarchy, and ingrained obedience that made a standing army so effective in battle could all too easily become the mechanism of tyranny. In fact, in the opinion of radical Whigs, these characteristics made professional soldiers all the more likely to become the enemies of the people. After all, they were isolated from society, used to following orders without question, and unable to think for themselves. To the opponents of standing armies, the professional soldier was the very antithesis of the virtuous citizen. Liberty could not long exist in a country that tolerated a standing army.[5]

Beyond the direct threat of military oppression, critics of standing armies feared the social and political impact of professional armed forces. It was a common perception that standing armies consisted of ambitious, corrupt, glory-hound aristocratic officers at the top, and the brutal, vice-ridden, ungodly rank and file at the bottom. There was some justification to this point of view. Commissions were commonly bought and sold in England, and the path to the top involved all sorts of patronage games. And, as historian Richard Kohn described it, most enlisted men "were the scum of society, sold or shanghaied into service, rootless, lacking any class or national loyalties." More recent studies found that the rank and file were not always the dregs of society, that they included many men who were just temporarily dependent or without status. Nevertheless, the perception of the radical Whigs was that standing armies represented not only a direct military threat to civilian liberty, but were also a symptom of the corruption of society.[6]

Despite the impact of anti-army rhetoric in the colonies, Americans did not necessarily revile the British army on the eve of the revolution. Americans appreciated the army for the economic boost they provided and their role in protecting the colonists from Indians and rival Europeans. But then, the problematic relationship between colonial forces and the regular army during the French and Indian War left a legacy of

misgivings. And in the decade between the Stamp Act and the outbreak of the revolutionary war, any colonial approval of the army evaporated completely. American revolutionaries – who often called themselves Whigs – fully endorsed the anti-standing army rhetoric of the English opposition. After the French and Indian War, Parliament for the first time stationed several thousand peacetime troops in the American colonies. This army soon became the most visible and concrete symbol of arbitrary power to the increasingly disgruntled colonials.[7]

Nowhere was this conflict sharper than in Boston. Redcoats assisted in the enforcement of the Townshend duties. Those stationed in the city were quickly seen as an occupying force. The so-called Boston massacre convinced many that the British army consisted of murderous thugs, even though the image of disciplined troops firing into an unarmed crowd (as immortalized by Paul Revere's engraving) was grossly distorted. And when Parliament passed the Coercive Acts to punish Massachusetts for the Boston Tea Party, colonials felt that the "Intolerable Acts" would allow soldiers to quarter freely in private homes and kill political dissidents at will. Most importantly, the colonial legislature had no control over the soldiers at all. Small wonder that the Massachusetts House of Representatives protested as early as 1769 that "establishing a Standing Army … without the consent of the General Assembly … is an Invasion of the natural Rights of the People."[8] And when the colonies finally declared their Independence in 1776, one of the charges against George III was that "He has kept among us, in Times of Peace, Standing Armies, without the consent of our Legislatures."

The American revolutionaries turned to the same institution the English radical Whigs endorsed as the cure for the evils of a standing army: the militia. Ostensibly, the militia consisted of all able-bodied adult males who trained regularly and were ready to take up arms in defense of their community and country. The members of the militia did not make their living by bearing arms. They were unlikely to follow the commands of an unscrupulous and ambitious executive. And they were under the control of the legislature. In this republican ideology, which went back as far as the classics and Machiavelli, the militia *were* the people, and thus the best protection against the destruction of liberties from without or within. Especially in the early years of the revolution-

ary crisis, American rhetoric was full of ringing endorsements of the militia. For example, the Virginia Declaration of Rights declared "that a well-regulated militia, composed of the body of the people trained to arms, is the proper, natural and safe defence of a free state." And John Hancock stated in 1774 that "from a well regulated militia we have nothing to fear; their interest is the same with that of the state. ... They do not jeopard(ize) their lives for a master who considers them only as the instruments of his ambition."9

Furthermore, both radical Whig tradition and American revolutionary ideology considered the militia not only a safeguard against tyranny, but also an active promoter of civic virtue. Militia training and service would stress discipline, sacrifice, and duty to the public – prime qualities for the citizens of a republic. The willingness of a state's freemen and gentry to risk life and limb in defense of their community was the best proof against the corruption, patronage, and ambition that made standing armies such an insidious threat to society. In short, the experience of service as a soldier would imbue the members of the militia with the qualities that made them good citizens. Military service and civic virtue were mutually reinforcing propositions in the anti-standing army, pro-militia ideology of the American revolution.10

Unfortunately, this glorification of the militia quickly clashed with the realities of the revolutionary war. Militia organization in America had been in decline for decades as the colonies increasingly relied on long-term volunteers (and, of course, the British army) in the various wars of the eighteenth century. By the time of the revolution, only Massachusetts and New Jersey retained a relatively well-organized militia structure. The other colonies had never abandoned the institution, but their relatively haphazard militias were hardly the battle-ready guardians of liberty that ideology made them out to be. The outbreak of hostilities did bring forth the spirit of citizen-soldiers in the early years of the war, as the country was gripped by a *rage militaire* that brought patriots to the front. Massachusetts militia was victorious as Lexington and Concord, and fought with valor and distinction at Bunker and Breeds Hill. However, it soon became obvious that the war would not be the short affair many revolutionaries had expected. In the long run, semi-trained militia was no match for Redcoats. Conse-

quently, Congress soon faced the necessity of creating that most dangerous of military institutions: a professional, standing army.[11]

The Continental Army became that body of soldiers, although this outcome was hardly preordained. Among the original major generals commissioned by Congress, Charles Lee opposed the professionalization that Washington and others envisioned. Lee stressed that "a Militia, by confining themselves to essentials, may become, in a very few months, a most formidable infantry." He imagined a sort of *levée en masse* that would quickly raise a hundred thousand patriots to swamp the British. But the realities of war were different. The army that Washington, Steuben, Greene and the other Continental generals formed was, as military historian James Scudieri pointed out, "in every sense of the term a true eighteenth-century regular army."[12]

The Continental Army was very similar to its European counterparts in terms of organization, recruitment, and *esprit de corps*; it also shared many of the same problems, such as high desertion rates. Of course, there were differences as well. For example, the Continental Army did not engage in the practice of buying and selling commissions. As with their European counterparts, the Continentals' socio-economic makeup had the gentry at the top and the rabble at the bottom of the command chain, but middle-class involvement was much more pronounced than elsewhere. Furthermore, militia continued to play an important role as auxiliary troops and reinforcements. But on the bottom line, it was the Continental Army that bore the brunt of the fighting, the institution the states turned to when war came to their doorstep, and it was as much a professional standing army as the enemy Redcoats.

The somewhat disappointing performance of the militia was only part of the fault line that ruptured American revolutionary ideology. Even worse was the fact that after the initial military fervor settled, military recruitment became increasingly difficult. States competed with the Continental Army and among one another for recruits in an escalating "bounty war." And as the war ground on, property-owning freeholders were less and less attracted to military service. Less well-respected members of society took their place, often as paid substitutes where there was a draft. Historian Charles Royster pointed out that patriotism continued to play a significant role for Americans

in arms. But no sane individual could afford to ignore the economic significance of serving in the military, especially with all the financial problems the states and Congress faced in keeping their troops equipped, fed, and sheltered. The decline of volunteers after 1776 and the increasing tendency of the propertied middle and upper classes to avoid military service clashed with the ideological expectations of the revolution. To the radical Whig revolutionaries, the very fact that the country needed a standing army and that citizens were reluctant to volunteer indicated that the fledgling republic already carried in itself the seeds of corruption.[13]

Then there was the problem of the Continental Army itself. Some revolutionaries disapproved of a standing army even in wartime, although that was a minority position. Even such critical minds as Gerry accepted that a professional force was needed to defeat the British. Yet even when the war was still in full swing, critics worried about what would happen when peace arrived. Radical Whig ideology insisted that standing armies in peacetime were the ultimate political sin, and many revolutionary leaders intended to apply that wisdom not only to the British monarchy, but also to the American republic. As early as 1778, when Congress debated the Articles of Confederation, some states insisted on safeguards against tyranny from within. New Jersey asserted that "a standing Army, a Military Establishment and every Appendage thereof in Time of Peace, is totally abhorrent from the Ideas and Principles of this State." Similarly, Connecticut demanded a prohibition on a peacetime land army, as well as military pensions of any sort. Neither proposition made it into the Articles, which remained ambiguous on the topic, but the controversy definitely existed. Having embraced the idea that standing armies were the bane of liberty, many revolutionaries were already guarding against home-grown oppression.[14]

The rejection of peacetime standing armies remained a dominant point of view after the successful conclusion of the war. Congress rapidly disbanded the Continental Army not only to rid itself of a major fiscal liability, but also because it feared a professional army in times of peace, especially after the problematic incidents in Newburgh and Philadelphia. However, not everybody continued to subscribe to the anti-standing army ideology after the experience of wartime. Like the moderate Whigs after the Glo-

rious Revolution, the principal leaders of the Continental Army concluded that the need for national defense justified some sort of peacetime standing army, if properly controlled and supervised by Congress. Washington, Hamilton, Steuben, and Knox all argued in favor of a professionalization of the United States military in the immediate aftermath of the revolutionary war.[15]

In the spring of 1783, Washington and his principal military advisors (among them Knox, Steuben, Pickering, and Clinton) prepared a plan for a peacetime military establishment at the behest of a Congressional committee chaired by Hamilton. Mindful of the radical Whig ideology prevalent in Congress and the states, Washington's plan included only a small regular force of roughly 2,600 men and officers. For the rest of its security needs, the country should rely on militia, albeit a radically altered one. Washington proposed a greatly professionalized militia, built around a core of 18 to 25 year old men. This "Continental Militia" was to receive standardized equipment, training, and discipline; furthermore, Washington hoped that veteran Continental officers would provide a strong backbone of professionalism. Military academies would keep alive the knowledge of mathematics and engineering necessary for warfare. The idea was to create a peacetime militia which really could serve as the core of a wartime army; the plan represented a compromise between the needs of national security and revolutionary ideological convictions.[16]

The plan that Hamilton actually laid before Congress proposed a larger regular force, as well as professionalized volunteer units under Congressional control; the state militia played a much smaller role. Just after Congress received Hamilton's plan, the Philadelphia mutiny prompted the move to Princeton, and anti-standing army sentiment carried the day. Men like Gerry and Arthur Lee successfully opposed Hamilton's plan, and subsequent efforts to create a standing army or a professionalized federal militia failed. Steuben argued in favor of partly professional, partly militia-based "legions" throughout the mid-1780s[17], and Knox proposed a detailed plan for national defense in 1786, all to no avail. It was not until the ratification of the Constitution that Congress received the unequivocal authority to create a peacetime standing army and control and regulate the state militias. As described earlier, anti-standing army arguments

played a large role in the Antifederalist effort to defeat the Constitution; the critics could draw on decades of ideological tradition. Even after ratification, it took Congress years to implement army and militia reforms. Knox' 1786 plan served as a blueprint but was watered down almost beyond recognition. It was not until the mid-1790s that the United States created sizeable professional peacetime military forces, and even then the military remained a bone of contention between Federalists and Republicans.[18]

As a result of this anti-army ideology, Americans relied on a single regular regiment and often ill-organized state militia for their military security throughout the 1780s. The problem was that, even though the revolutionary war was over, many threats remained. The English retained Canada in the North, as well as a number of forts on what was ostensibly American territory. Indians fought against displacement on the Western frontier and in the Northwest territories, leading to repeated clashes and embarrassing defeats for the American forces. To the South, Spanish possessions and forts held potential for trouble. And as if external threats were not enough, Shays' Rebellion clearly demonstrated that domestic stability could not be taken for granted in the fledgling republic – and that the present military establishment was unable to guarantee it. Shaysite potential existed throughout New England, and domestic insurrections were far from unthinkable in other states as well. While the young republic was perhaps not on the verge of collapse, its existing armed forces were clearly inadequate to guarantee the national sovereignty that was just as much a basis of the United States as the country's commitment to liberty.

All of this meant that throughout the revolutionary era, the young republic repeatedly faced a clash of ideology and necessity, of rhetoric and reality. Revolutionary convictions, strongly influenced by the radical Whig tradition, held that standing armies were both dangerous and a symptom of corruption, whereas the militia was the guarantor of liberty and a school of civic virtue. Reality, however, indicated that only a professional standing army could defend the liberty Americans craved, whereas the militia did not fulfill its ideological promise of military success and patriotic inspiration. Coming to terms with this ideological rift was not easy. The leaders of the Continental Army were logically the first to embrace a compromise of a professionalized

militia and a small but significant peacetime standing army; Washington and the others relied on republican political supremacy to stave off the dangers of oppression. But for a large number of revolutionaries, it proved far more difficult to overcome the obvious contradiction. From the uneasy assent to the creation of the Continental Army to the alarmed outcries of the Antifederalists, the question of professional military power remained one of the most divisive issues of the early republic. It even produced some curious mental gymnastics among those political leaders who most strongly feared the oppressive potential of the military. In a 1784 letter to James Monroe, Richard Henry Lee commented: "the Indians may be considered as a useful people, as it is surely fortunate for a free community to be under some necessity of keeping the whole body acquainted with the use of arms." Without this sort of threat, the people would lose their fighting capability, and eventually make necessary "the Curse of a standing army."[19]

The controversy about the Cincinnati was tied into this ideological debate in a number of ways. By itself, the society was definitely not a standing army, despite its membership of about 2,000 officers. Yet it was by far the largest and best organized remnant of the Continental Army, and it represented the highest concentration of military expertise in the country. Furthermore, the most prominent champions of a professionalized militia or peacetime standing army were also leading members of the society. It was inevitable that some of the misgivings against standing armies would also be directed against the Cincinnati, because the society was clearly part of the same complex of problems. Burke even commented on the dangerous military potential of the society itself. "The number of the peers of the order ... cannot be far short of ten thousand;" the South Carolinian wrote, "and as they will be the principal men in America, to suppose that each can, by his influence, procure two or three followers, which will adhere to his interest and service, is a reasonable calculation. Here is a body of 20 or 30,000 men immediately; and every generation will be adding to the number."[20]

The debate about military pensions also connected the society to the fears of a peacetime standing army. Washington had originally proposed half-pay pensions as a deferred means of satisfying the officers' financial demands. In England, however, half-

pay was also a system which allowed the army to keep supernumerary or otherwise inactive officers "in reserve," ready to resume active duty when needed. Since the Cincinnati consisted of half-pay recipients, it was only logical to assume they were ready to form the nucleus of a standing army at any time. Commutation should have mitigated such fears somewhat, as a single lump sum did not create the same dependence as a lifetime of small payments. However, the political complications of commutation prevented any such effect. Tying the former officers' interest to the national treasury simply smacked too much of combining the power of the sword with the power of the purse. Finally, the very fact that the officers insisted on pensions – however economically justified – flew in the face of revolutionary convictions. Just like the freeholders of the country were supposed to take up arms in defense of their liberty, the upper class was supposed to provide military leadership as a matter of course. Patriotism, not economic interest should have been the basis of military service. Like the bounties for enlisted men, officers' pensions violated that conviction, and the Cincinnati were the most visible, most assailable symbol of that contradiction.[21]

Beyond these direct connections between the fear of a standing army and the conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati, the two controversies grew out of the same ideological fault line. Radical Whig theory postulated that a professional military was dangerous; revolutionary reality had shown that it was necessary. Still, the ideological imperative to look out for military subversion was strong. American experiences with the British army reinforced these convictions, as did the Newburgh crisis and the Philadelphia mutiny. Looking for the familiar threat pattern of a standing army, the critics found the Society of the Cincinnati instead. Many aspects of the society resembled a standing army, and its members' advocacy of a professionalized military made the organization all the more suspicious. The former officers' insistence on pensions made them handy examples of unpatriotic corruption and further reinforced the feeling that the society resembled the mercenary, patronage-ridden characteristics of a peacetime standing army. Any aspects that did not fit the pattern, such as the Cincinnati's complete lack of military organization, let alone manpower, could be made to fit, as Burke's remark about a "body of 20 or 30,000 men" showed. Rather than accepting

that the success of the revolution and the republican nature of the United States had made some of the radical Whig fears obsolete, the adherents of an anti-standing army ideology continued to pursue the dangers of militarism in the guise of the Cincinnati.

The Jealousy of Power

The fear of standing armies was only one particularly prominent aspect of a larger suspicion of power in the political culture of eighteenth century England and America. Radical Whigs in England, in the writings of Trenchard, Gordon, Burgh, Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, and others, had long warned of power as at best a necessary evil of government, at worst the bane of liberty and the tool of tyranny. This opposition ideology grounded its thought in a certain pessimism regarding human nature and a bleak reading of European history. To Whig thinkers, power – the coercive aspect of government and the human control of human life – was an ever encroaching force in political reality, and never to be trusted. Indeed, unless checked consistently and vigilantly, power could be expected to bring forth ministerial corruption, constitutional decay, and deliberate conspiracy against the liberties of a free people.[22]

The English critics started out with the premise that the ancient "Gothic constitutions" of medieval Europe had protected the liberty and property of the people in a proper balance between the estates of society. But like the earlier decay of the Roman republic, the concentration and abuse of power in the hands of a corrupt ministry, ambitious aristocrats or a despotic monarch had imposed arbitrary rule over most of the continent. According to *Cato's Letters*, "new tyrannies have sprung up, like so many new plagues, within the memory of man," engrossing "almost the whole earth." France, Prussia, Poland, Spain, Russia, Sweden, and Denmark had all fallen to despotism. Only few countries had resisted absolutism or other arbitrary oppression: the rugged folk of Switzerland, the Dutch who had thrown off the Spanish yoke, and most of all England. Despite the various assaults of the Norman conquest or the Stuart dynasty, Englishmen had successfully defended their rights, most recently in the Glorious Revolution. The mixed constitution of England, with its careful balance between Crown, Lords, and Commons, had effectively weathered the insidious effects of ambition and corruption.

Consequently, Englishmen routinely celebrated their form of government as the best in the world.[23]

The mainstream of political commentators was, for the most part, content in its pride of the constitutional quality of late eighteenth-century England. But opposition authors were unwilling to concede that the "King in Parliament" construction of sovereignty was sufficient insurance against the temptations of power. These radical Whig critics saw signs of corruption already at work in England, such as in the existence of the rotten boroughs or the practice of vote and office buying. Cato lamented that "public corruptions have grown around us; fees in most, if not all, offices, are immediately increased; places and employments, which ought not to be sold at all, are sold for treble value…salaries have been augmented and pensions multiplied." Patronage, honors, titles, and pensions were the tools of corruption available to the ministerial executive; it was all too easy to build a powerful covert faction which could bend the law to the will of a few ambitious men. It lay in the nature of power to pose a danger to liberty, even at a time when government seemed relatively harmless.[24]

Human nature, according to this English tradition of opposition, lay at the heart of the problem. Man was susceptible to corruption, ambition, and self-aggrandizement. As a species, mankind was incapable of resisting the temptations of power. According to Burgh, "the love of power is natural, it is insatiable; it is whetted, not cloyed, by possession." The powers of public office could turn even a good man into a tyrant; neither reason nor religion could guarantee otherwise. Civic virtue was certainly possible, and good government depended on it; but at the same time, liberty could only be protected through the vigilance of the people. Safeguarding liberty was the duty of the governed, for those in power could never be fully trusted. Power and liberty, in the minds of the radical Whig opposition, were forever antagonistic forces that existed in a state of tension and conflict with one another.[25]

Like the outcry against standing armies, these arguments fell on a more fertile soil in America than in England. Americans, with their peripheral position in the empire and increasingly different society and politics, related to the radical Whig fears easily and strongly over the course of the eighteenth century. The colonists had devel-

oped a highly idealized understanding of the English constitution and the protection of English liberties, and were often dismayed to find that the reality of politics in England did not live up to their expectations. John Dickinson, for example, who visited England in 1754, commented on the election proceedings of that year: "It is astonishing to think what impudence and villainy are practiced on this occasion. …The oath of their not being bribed is as strict and solemn as language can form it, but is so little regarded that few people can refrain from laughing while they take it. …Bribery is so common that it is thought there is not a borough in England where it is not practiced." Americans eagerly followed the career of the English opposition politician John Wilkes who accused the ministry of such corruption. When Wilkes was denied his seat in Parliament, jailed, and a demonstration of his followers fired upon, colonial critics saw it as proof that England was on its way to the extinction of liberty.[26]

Thus, when a series of political conflicts between the colonies and parliamentary policy ensued in the 1760s and 1770s, critical Americans increasingly interpreted the alarming events as proof of a deliberate effort to stamp out the rights of Englishmen in America. The stationing of troops in America, the efforts to introduce taxation without representation, the arbitrary nature of the writs of assistance and the new admiralty courts all pointed in one direction. Somewhere, the holders of power had been corrupted by their might and sought to expand and enlarge their dominion at the expense of the colonials' liberties. In the minds of the revolutionary generation, accident, misunderstanding, or even a bona fide conflict of interest could not adequately explain the sudden assault on the state of affairs American had enjoyed during the era of salutary neglect. Moreover, as the English government insisted that its policies were legitimate and beneficial, critical colonists became increasingly convinced that "they lived in a conspiratorial world in which what the highest officials professed was not what they in fact intended, and that their words masked a malevolent design." The lust for power, American Whigs deduced, had produced a conspiracy to destroy the rights of Englishmen in America.[27]

Initially, colonial leaders such as Josiah Quincy pointed at royal officeholders, such as Francis Barnard and Thomas Hutchinson, as the culprits who had conspired to

bring Americans to their knees. However, as the crisis progressed, critics more commonly claimed that such local opponents were merely small fry, cogs in a greater machine of corruption that had come to dominate the English ministry. One popular explanation blamed John Stuart, Earl of Bute, prime minister from 1762-63, the former tutor of young George III and the alleged lover of the dowager Princess Augusta. This theory argued that Bute, even though he had to leave office in 1763 under public pressure, had used his influence on the king to form a secret party that in reality controlled appointments to office as well as the general policy of Great Britain; he had also used his power to get even with his old enemy John Wilkes. But whoever the specific culprits, by 1774 the nascent revolutionaries of America agreed with Jefferson that there was a plan, "*systematically* laid, and pursued by the British *ministry*, near twelve years, for enslaving America."[28]

Such convictions of conspiracy and the abuse of power provided a powerful justification for the revolution against English control. According to radical Whig ideology resistance to encroaching tyranny was not merely a right, but the duty of a free people. The same train of thought also assigned Americans a great responsibility once they had won their independence. English opinion had long held that Britain was the last major bastion of liberty in a vast sea of despotism. Now that it seemed the English people had finally failed in their vigilance, it fell to America to preserve the flame of liberty against the darkness of oppression. Much like John Winthrop's call a century and a half earlier to build a "city upon a hill" of Christian righteousness in Massachusetts, revolutionary ideology now charged Americans with building a polity that would prevent the corrupting influences of power from endangering freedom once more. This fear of power, and the responsibility for liberty introduced a strong sense of exceptionalism to American political culture, which continued throughout the history of the United States.

This imperative shaped much of the political history of the early republic, as well as a number of its problems. Just as the English radical Whigs had not been convinced that the Glorious Revolution had secured liberty in the island realm, many American revolutionaries did not trust their new political system to prevent harmful

concentrations and abuses of power. Thus, they embraced an attitude of vigilance and suspicion against the ravages of power which historian James Hutson aptly described as "jealousy."[29] Jealousy had prompted the revolutionaries to resist English efforts to control the colonies; now they turned their vigilance against threats from within. "The time is now past when the least danger is to be apprehended to our liberties from the power of Britain," Benjamin Rush commented in 1778; "Tyranny can now enter our country only in the shape of a Whig. All our jealousy should be of ourselves." Consequently, any use or concentration of power in the newly independent states, as well as on the federal level, came under close scrutiny. English and American observers alike often commented on how central the jealousy of power had become to the political culture of the United States.[30]

Distrust and suspicion of power played a central role in the debates of the critical period. Some Americans, like Thomas Cushing of North Carolina, felt that Congress should be "an object of very jealous apprehension, unchecked and unlimited as it is." And Samuel Adams wrote to Arthur Lee in 1782 that "jealousy is a necessary political virtue, especially in times like these." Critical Americans watched Congress closely, despite its obvious limitations of power, because they felt that the remoter a body of government was from the people, the more likely it would slide towards tyranny. These guardians of liberty were also perennially on the lookout for cabals, juntos, or factions, meaning groups of power-hungry men who conspired to seize dominion over the fledgling republic.[31] Attempts to reform the political system in favor of executive or federal power came under suspicion almost immediately, such as the efforts to assign greater powers to the governors or granting Congress an independent income by means of an impost.[32]

As the political and economic problems of the 1780s mounted, some voices began to doubt the wisdom of too pronounced a distrust of power. Hamilton was one of the most outspoken of these centralists or nationalists, and he warmly blamed an excess of jealousy for the political deadlock of the critical period. As early as 1781, Hamilton bemoaned the "extreme jealousy of power" which lay at the heart of "many of the fatal mistakes, which have so deeply endangered the common cause; particularly … A WANT

OF POWER IN CONGRESS."[33] Hamilton was not alone in his criticism. While most former revolutionaries endorsed a certain level of jealousy as properly befitting a republic, there was a widespread sentiment that there had been too much of a good thing. Public finances were on the brink of collapse, yet the states granted Congress neither an impost nor adequate requisitions for fear those funds might be abused for patronage and personal aggrandizement. As with the troublesome topic of standing armies, the American Revolution had run an internal contradiction. Revolutionary ideology mandated that only ceaseless vigilance against the dangers of power could preserve republican liberty, but a lack of effective government deprived the fledgling republic of its ability to function properly.

Eventually, the answer to this contradiction was the Constitution of 1787. Unsurprisingly, the ratification debates encompassed a struggle between the revolutionary commitment to the watchful preservation of liberty and the need to provide efficient government for the young republic. The fear of power, corruption, and despotism – drawing directly from the radical Whig tradition – became a prominent part of the Antifederalist critique of the Constitution. In contrast, the principal advocates of the Constitution argued that the new system included sufficient safeguards against the abuse of power, while providing the energetic government needed to resolve the crises of the 1780s and thus secure the revolutionary achievement. Madison in Federalist 10 even offered a new perspective on safeguarding liberty in a republic as large as the United States. Whereas in a smaller polity a single power-hungry individual or an ambitious faction might corrupt the system, in a large republic such factions and individuals would cancel each other out, allowing virtuous men to govern responsibly.[34]

In many ways, the ratification of the Constitution represented a turning point in the debate on power, liberty, and jealousy. Power, in the interpretation of the Federalists, could be an active force for the preservation of republican freedoms, if properly checked and in the hands of responsible leaders. Nevertheless, the older insistence on distrust and jealousy also persisted. Antifederalists continued to clamor for a Bill of Rights and were partially successful in 1791. The revolutionary conviction that power threatened liberty continued in the political positions of the Jeffersonian Republicans,

especially in their opposition to the Alien and Sedition Acts. The radical Whig, revolutionary, and Antifederalist distrust of power and fear of tyranny continued to be an important strain of American political culture into the nineteenth century and beyond; it remains evident in many parts of the political spectrum even today, from the liberal commitment to privacy to the conservative call for increased states' rights against the federal government.[35]

The jealousy of power contributed greatly to the conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati. As the war came to its conclusion, the critics of the society looked for domestic threats to liberty, just as revolutionary ideology mandated. From their perspective, the former officers looked far from innocuous. While the Cincinnati did not hold formal political power, they included men of great prestige and influence. In the eyes of its critics, the society held the potential for power and intrigue, as was evident in the report of the Massachusetts committee, which stated: "Ambition and a lust of domination are ruling passions of the human mind, most dangerous to civil Society and Government; and past experience has abundantly convinced the world that hereditary distinctions and ostentatious orders, strike the minds of unthinking multitudes and favor the views and designs of ambitious men."[36]

In the aftermath of the war, critical Americans actively looked for the seeds of corruption in their own society, especially in the form of factions, juntos or cabals. The Cincinnati seemingly fit that description too well to escape notice. With an organization that spanned the thirteen states, the Cincinnati appeared better equipped than any other group to gather and concentrate power in their own hands. Furthermore, through their interest in commutation, the Cincinnati were connected to the effort to give Congress the power to tax, and the idea of taxpayer-financed pensions immediately drew the ire of those who feared the corruption of the republican constitution. Finally, the society counted among its members those who increasingly and openly advocated granting more power to Congress – most importantly Hamilton, but to a somewhat lesser degree also Knox, Washington, and others. In short, the Cincinnati seemed to fit the template of a selfish, power-hungry faction bent on securing privi-

leges for themselves and abusing the power of government to their own aggrandizement at the expense of popular liberty. Revolutionary ideology mandated opposition to such an insidious plot; as Burke phrased it, the Cincinnati were bound to "draw upon them the well-merited suspicion and jealousy of every man of any thought on the continent."[37]

Nevertheless, the wartime of achievement of the Continental officers might have insulated them from charges of corruption or at least given the benefit of the doubt. After all, these men had defeated British tyranny and thus made the new republican order possible in the first place. Moreover, individual Cincinnati such as Washington, Greene, and others enjoyed a widespread and justly deserved reputation for integrity. Yet at this point, the radical Whig philosophy of power and human nature kicked in. Achievement and character, in the eyes of the critics, did not make a man proof against the temptations of power. In a somewhat perverse way of thinking, quality and greatness only increased the danger because great men could abuse the trust placed in them. No one summed up the dilemma better than Samuel Adams, who wrote: "I would never inculcate a mean & envious Suspicion of any Man especially of those who have rendered signal Services to their Country. But there is a Degree of Watchfulness over all Men possesd of Power or Influence upon which the Liberties of Mankind much depend. It is necessary to guard against the Infirmities of the best as well as the Wickedness of the worst of Men. Such is the Weakness of human Nature that Tyranny has oftner sprang from that than any other Source. It is this that unravels the Mystery of Millions being enslaved by a few." Thus, the jealousy of power created the mindset that prompted a portion of American public opinion to turn upon its erstwhile champions in the wake of the revolutionary war.[38]

The Problem of Equality

"We hold these truths, to be self-evident," Jefferson's undying words stated in the Declaration of Independence, "that all Men are created equal…" More than perhaps any other aspect of revolutionary ideology, equality eventually became the defining ideal of the American republic. But before the widespread celebration of equality in

Jacksonian America, the concept of equality proved to be greatly problematic in the years following the revolutionary war. Obviously, there were the massive contradictions inherent in the existence of slavery and the legal subjugation of women. Yet even among free white men, the question of what equality meant and how much of it was needed was hotly contested ground in the early republic. Americans were no strangers to social hierarchy and distinction, and in some ways the uproar about the Cincinnati was only part of a larger and much more complicated debate.

Englishmen of the eighteenth century lived in a multi-tiered hierarchical society. At the top of the social order was, of course, the king, who held paternal dominion over the entire nation. Then there were peers of the realm, the gentry, artisans, yeomen, tenant farmers, wage laborers, and servants, all the way down to vagrants and beggars. And these social groups were internally stratified, as well. Inequality was a natural state of society; the great chain of being necessitated that some would always be great, rich, and exalted, while others were mean, ignorant, and poor. Knowing one's place in society was as natural as breathing; people expected deference from those beneath them and gave respect to those above.[39]

And yet, compared to other European countries, English society seemed almost egalitarian. Englishmen knew geographic and social mobility to a much greater extent than their French counterparts. Foreign observers frequently commented on the way the classes mingled and how workingmen strove to emulate their betters in dress and behavior. Sumptuary laws expressed a strong legal disapproval of such behavior, but had only limited effect. English political culture celebrated liberty and the rights of free-born Englishmen and hooted at the absolute monarchy of France and other nations. And although England had driven large numbers of religious dissenters into exile in the seventeenth century, by the mid-eighteenth century the country had a reputation for religious toleration and sported a variety of denominations.

A similar situation existed in Britain's North American colonies. Societies from New England to Georgia were highly hierarchical and stratified. Wealth and family lineage divided Americans into gentlemen, freeholders, and servants, with many shades of prestige and status in-between – not to mention the role of women or the half mil-

lion African-American slaves. Titles such as "Esq.," "Mr.," and military ranks were in common usage to mark the dividing lines of society. Gentlemen strove to underscore their social eminence through dress (such as the wearing of periwigs), fine houses, and the consumption of luxury goods. Everywhere, there were prominent families who owned large tracts of land or other forms of property, and thus dominated the local economy. Gentlemen had access to higher education and expected (and usually received) political office as a matter of course. Hierarchy and deference were a reality of American colonial life to an extent far beyond the experience of later generations.[40]

At the same time, compared to just about anywhere else in the Western world, the American colonies were a bastion of economic, political, and social equality. American society was truncated by European standards. With very few exceptions, there was no formal hereditary nobility, nor did the colonies have the large masses of urban poor of London or Paris. Widespread landownership provided for a property distribution that was more equal than anywhere else. As a result, a much larger proportion of white males held the right to vote than even in England. Furthermore, the massive demographic dynamics of the colonies put enormous pressure on any social hierarchy. The American population doubled every twenty-five years, which resulted in a young age structure and an unprecedented geographic mobility. And if England had come to accept a high degree of religious diversity, the situation in America was even more pronounced, especially in the wake of the Great Awakening.

Already on the eve of the American Revolution, social, economic, and political distinctions were coming under attack. In the 1750s, New York tenant farmers rebelled against the quasi-feudal rents levied by patroon landowners. The 1760s saw the regulator movement in backcountry Carolina against the domination of the coastal elite. Furthermore, the colonial gentry was never as wealthy and genteel as it would have liked. Few could afford the leisured idleness that was the hallmark of aristocracy in England. Landownership was profitable, but agricultural and rental income alone often could not sustain the financial independence elevated social rank required. Many members of the colonial elites engaged in commerce or the professions. Even political dominance could not be taken for granted. In Virginia, for example, the number of contested elec-

tions grew in the middle of the eighteenth century, drawing complaints about electoral bribery and vote-seeking. As the revolution drew close, the colonial gentry found it increasingly difficult to maintain its status and social control. Displays of wealth and prestige often grew more pronounced, but also carried an air of angry defiance against imminent change.[41]

The American Revolution accelerated the erosion of hierarchy and galvanized the demands for equality. In the years immediately preceding the Declaration of Independence, equality was an important issue. Much of the argument against parliamentary taxation stemmed from the conviction that Americans enjoyed equality with Englishmen, that they enjoyed the same rights and privileges and thus need not submit to writs of assistance or taxation without representation.[42] Debates about rank and deference abounded as the erosion of social, political, and economic deference accelerated. One Englishman noted that in America "an idea of equality seems generally to prevail, and the inferior order of people pay little but external respect to those who occupy superior status." A Thomas Cushing complained to the lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, Thomas Hutchinson, that "a spirit of Levillism Seems to go Through the Country, and Very little distinction between the highest and the lowest in Office" remained.[43] Once the Continental Congress declared its Independence from the British monarchy, this assault on privilege and distinction became even more dynamic.

The American Revolution, in the words of historian J. R. Pole, "introduced an egalitarian rhetoric to an unequal society."[44] Nowhere was this more evident than in the Declaration of Independence, but that document was no isolated matter. Many state constitutions included statements similar to Jefferson's. Virginia declared that "all men are by nature equally free and independent;" Massachusetts asserted that "all men are born free and equal." Precisely what that equality meant would remain contested throughout American history, but a number of aspects were a matter of consensus. Equality lay at the heart of revolutionary republicanism. Americans had traded the status of subject for that of citizen, and citizens shared amongst one another the sovereignty that the king held in a monarchy. There was no inherent right for one free white male to claim rulership over another, whatever differences in wealth and power

society produced. At the very least, free white male Americans could lay claim to equality before the law, an equal right to hold property they lawfully owned, and an equal freedom of conscience. Those assumptions by themselves made the American Revolution a radical break with the traditional monarchical societies of Europe and even Britain. No country had ever been built around such a clear assertion than men were, at least in principle, of equal worth.[45]

On a more practical note, the Revolution produced many equalizing tendencies in politics and society. The revolutionary effort was a massive political mobilization that drew many into public service who would not have sought it under colonial conditions. Revolutionary committees, new state legislatures, and even Congress provided opportunities for men who had not been gentlemen before. Many revolutionary leaders, whatever their subsequent claims to rank and distinction, came from relatively humble origins. Washington, Jefferson, and John Hancock were wealthy gentlemen, but Knox had been a bookseller, and Hamilton had arrived in North America with little more than a great mind and some letters of introduction. Samuel Adams had never been successful in business; it was the Revolution which brought him to prominence. And these were examples from the revolutionary leadership; many more relatively common men found a place in politics. Finally, the revolutionary years saw the gradual widening of the right to vote through declining property requirements. It would be decades until the establishment of the universal white male franchise, but the first steps were taken.[46]

The revolution also chipped away at hierarchical and deferential customs. In Boston, the formerly subtly differentiated designations "yeoman" and "husbandman" fell into disuse. "Mr.," once an appellation of distinction, became more and more the universal honorific among adult white males. Such processes took longer in the South than in New England, but a decade after the end of the war, even the Charleston city council – arguably one of the most aristocratic bastions in the United States – did away with the titles "Esq." and "His Honor." Dress codes, too, changed: the display of finery as a means of social distinction became increasingly unpopular. Hereditary and family privileges came under especially widespread attack. All thirteen states abolished pri-

mogeniture and entail, often on a constitutional level. The North Carolina denounced these legal devices for raising "the wealth and importance of particular families and individuals, giving them an unequal and undue influence in a republic…" Abolishing them would "promote that equality of property which is of the spirit and principle of a genuine republic." Obviously, Americans had come a long way from the privileges of nobility still prevalent in England, let alone continental Europe.[47]

The egalitarian impulse of the American Revolution was strongly idealistic. As Gordon Wood put it: "The republican revolution was the greatest utopian movement in American history. The revolutionaries aimed at nothing less than a reconstitution of American society. They hoped to destroy the bonds holding together the older monarchical society – kinship, patriarchy, and patronage – and to put in their place new social bonds of love, respect, and consent."[48] That utopian desire for equality not only formed the theoretical basis of America's new republican system, it also became one of the central themes of historical development and progress. Whatever the realities of the situation, the idea that no man was born to rule another reverberated strongly with Americans of the late eighteenth century – as it does today.

However, the reality of American society and politics remained considerably different from the egalitarian ideals of the revolution. For one thing, white Americans owned half a million slaves in a state of dependence that surpassed even European notions of servitude. For another, women remained legally subordinate to men throughout the United States. Both forms of inequality were challenged during the revolution and its aftermath. The northern states gradually phased out slavery in the years after the revolution, and near the end of his life, Franklin even attempted to bring a Quaker anti-slavery petition into Congress. However, the Southern states effectively made the continued existence of slavery the *sine qua non* of their support for the Constitution and successfully preserved this starkest form of inequality for many decades. Similarly, intellectual women like Mercy Otis Warren, Abigail Adams, and Judith Sargent Murray challenged male preconceptions of female inferiority. Women made some inroads, for example in divorce law, but resistance to female participation in politics and the marketplace remained extremely high. In these two most obvious cases of inequal-

ity, the American Revolution provided an impetus and the rhetoric for eventual change, but the fulfillment of the revolution's utopian promise remained out of reach for generations.[49]

Among white men, too, many levels of inequality survived the American revolution. Indentured servitude, for example, remained in use for a long time. Economic inequality actually increased in the new republic. The confiscation of loyalist estates did not lead to a redistribution of land, as wealthy patriots bought most of it. Opportunities in trade, privateering, and land speculation created a class of *nouveau riche* who challenged older, more entrenched economic elites but also felt the need to separate themselves from their poorer compatriots. Wartime disruptions and postwar depression destroyed many livelihoods and contributed to a rising number of debtors and indigent persons. In many ways, the relatively equal distribution of property in pre-revolutionary America had been the result of the colonies' relative economic primitiveness. In the decades after the revolution, the American economy slowly embarked on the road to market-orientation and modernization, a process which resulted in increasing economic stratification. Urban poverty, which had existed to some extent even in colonial times, rose in the post-revolutionary era.[50]

Despite the inroads of popular politics on the selection of magistrates and representatives, traditional elites maintained a strong presence in republican politics. Most states – with the notable exception of Pennsylvania – retained a bicameral legislature, and the upper houses remained the strongest bastions of the "better" sort. Governorships and other high posts routinely went to men of extraordinary economic, social, and family prestige; John Hancock's dominance in Massachusetts politics was a prime example. Adopting techniques such as pre-election feasts and simpler dress when needed, the gentlemanly elite found itself well-equipped to win elections despite the efforts of upstart challengers. From New England to the South, traditional elite families retained a far greater hold on political power than the egalitarian trends of the American revolution indicated.

A certain degree of elite power was not incompatible with the new system. Both classical and Whig republicanism called for the political leadership of those who pos-

sessed virtue – the ability to put the common good before one's own selfish interest. Furthermore, a degree of leisure and education were requirements of proper republican political participation. Who could better fit this profile than the wealthy, educated and traditionally influential "gentlemen" of America? Many revolutionary leaders struggled with the republican promise of equality on the one hand, and the need for competent and hopefully incorruptible leadership on the other. Poor, humble men such as subsistence farmers, artisans and tradesmen hardly seemed an ideal choice for high office. John Adams, for one, while principally endorsing republican equality, nevertheless tried to de-emphasize the egalitarian ideal in his original draft for the Massachusetts constitution, but found himself overruled. Jefferson, arguably the most egalitarian-minded of the major founding fathers, embraced a concept of "natural aristocracy." Ability and merit instead of lineage, in the Virginian's opinion, would determine leadership in the republic. But Jefferson also expected his natural aristocrats to acquire some of the trappings of gentility such as higher education. Even Jefferson had no intention of leveling property distribution. He hoped for a republic of independent farmers, but he did not propose to break up the estates and wealth of the planter class to which he himself belonged.[51]

The conflict over how much hierarchy the new republic should have was one of the most urgent debates of the 1780s and continued as a central topic of the first party system. It also was a strong theme in the debate about the Constitution. The framers deliberately introduced indirect modes of election for the president and the senators. With its long term of office and election by the state legislatures, the senate in particular seemed predestined for the traditional gentlemanly elite. Madison, in Federalist 10, described a filtration of talent that would circumvent local factions and bring the best characters into office. While Madison did not mention wealth and social distinction as qualifications for federal office, it seemed clear that these attributes would play a role. Consequently, a distinct populist or democratic strain of Antifederalists attacked the aristocratic and elitist concentration of power in the hands of the well-born and rich.[52]

Over the course of the critical period, the debate over popular equality within the republic superseded the revolutionary conflict over political equality between

Americans and Englishmen. According to Wood, "the principal antagonists in the society were no longer patriots vs. courtiers but had become democrats vs. aristocrats." Many former revolutionaries held fast to the idea that political leadership in a republic required outstanding qualities of virtue and education, and were quite willing to accept a preponderance of the "better sort." To others, any form of distinction, superiority, or exclusiveness had become increasingly suspect; they were dedicated to "a society whose members, whatever their differences in wealth, education, fortune, or social style, would respect one another as equals." The friction between the two positions became a central dynamic of the American republic, where the ideological endorsement of equality continued to clash with the existence of very real inequalities.[53]

The egalitarian ideals and anti-aristocratic implications of revolutionary ideology played a major role in the attacks against the Society of the Cincinnati. Practically every anti-Cincinnati publication attacked the society's audacity to introduce new artificial distinctions to the fledgling republic. Burke declared that the establishment of the society would "occasion such an inequality in the condition of our inhabitants, that the country will be composed only of two ranks of men; the patricians or nobles, and the rabble." To Judge Burke, the society constituted "a fatal stab to that principle of equality, which forms the basis of our government." A correspondent of Samuel Adams protested that the society meant to "establish a compleat & perpetual Distinction, between the numerous Dignitaries of this Corporation & the whole Body of Plebeians." The Middletown convention protested that the Cincinnati stood "distinguished from the rest of the citizens." In North Carolina, the Orange county petition stated that "as those Officers was formerly taken from Amongst the Mass of the People Without Distinction, We wish them to Return again to be Common Citizens."[54] Clearly, the desire for republican equality found an especially sharp focus in the attacks against the Cincinnati.

That did not mean the critics of the Cincinnati consisted of the most committed egalitarians in America. Jefferson, admittedly, turned equality into a resounding political program in the 1790s. But Gerry, by the time he entered Congress, could make a

strong claim to the status of gentleman and was a strong believer in the virtuous leadership of a republican elite. Burke never quite made it into the top ranks of South Carolina society, but not for lack of trying. And John Adams, for his part, was no believer in "the people" as the ultimate source of political wisdom and virtue. Nevertheless, these men all agreed that the Cincinnati would wreak on the structure of American politics and society.

The endorsement of some hierarchy and elitism in a republic on the one hand and the embrace of revolutionary equality on the other were not mutually exclusive propositions. The dividing line between "aristocrats" and "democrats" was blurry – a matter of degree more often than of principle. No American revolutionary rejected equality as a basic ideal of republicanism, and very few, if any ever advocated complete political, social, and economic leveling. But in the perception of their critics, the Cincinnati had left the playing field of the debate on equality. By seemingly establishing a hereditary nobility, the society appeared a throwback to a system of hierarchy and distinction that even the more conservative revolutionaries had left far behind: a titled aristocracy.

John Adams best summarized how a republican could accept some forms of inequality and still attack the Cincinnati's alleged bid for distinction. "Is it [the society] not an effectual subversion of our Equality?" Adams wrote to Gerry. "Inequalities of Riches cannot be avoided as long as Nature gives Inequality of Understanding and Activity, and these Inequalities are not unusefull. But artificial Inequalities of Decorations, Birth and Stile not accompanying public Trust, are those very Inequalities which have exterminated Virtue and Liberty and substituted Ambition and Slavery in all ages and countries."[55] Whatever his own confusions in the struggle between equality and elitism, attacking the society was an almost natural response for Adams. Any revolutionary, if he believed that the Cincinnati were guilty of the presumption of aristocracy, was bound to detest an organization that had left the minimal consensus on equality in the American republic.

Economic Depression and Political Crisis

In addition to the debates about a standing army, power, and equality, the United States faced an economic depression and resultant political crisis in the immediate aftermath of the revolutionary war. These were the same problems that eventually led to the drafting and ratification of the Constitution, but they also contributed to a general sense of disappointment and alarm in the 1780s. Americans had expected the war to be short and independence to bring prosperity. Instead, the war turned out to be protracted, and independence ushered in the severest and longest economic slump in North America to date. As with the more subtle frictions in revolutionary ideology described above, the economic downturn of the 1780s revealed a disparity between expectation and reality that contributed to social and political friction and generated a climate conducive to severe accusations against suspicious groups, such as the Society of the Cincinnati.[56]

At the heart of the postwar depression lay a massively negative balance of trade with England. Americans had always imported more from the mother country than they exported in return, but in colonial times the English military and administrative expenditures had somewhat offset the imbalance.[57] After the war, Americans faced the dual problems of overconsumption and obstacles to their exports. The revolutionary war had created a pent-up demand for manufactured goods that the newly independent Americans sought to satisfy, often on credit. Whatever the political differences with the former mother country, England still remained the easiest and cheapest source of finished goods, and pre-war business contacts and lines of credit proved easy to reestablish. English merchants successfully lobbied Parliament to favor exports to the United States, and thus a steady flow of goods and payments crossed the Atlantic before the ink on the peace treaty was even dry.[58]

In colonial times, being part of the British imperial trade system had provided a large market for staple goods and allowed some colonies to become a major player in the carrying trade. With independence, the United States was no longer part of that trade system, and that fact hurt American exports badly. English legislation excluded American traders from the lucrative West Indies trade and put substantial duties on

staples such as rice or tobacco. Previously, the British fleet had protected American shipping; now the United States' traders fell prey to North African pirates. Nor was England the only problem. Spain, in a reversal of its wartime policy towards as an ally, eliminated trade privileges in the Caribbean and did its best to hamper American use of the Mississippi river. France did open a number of ports to American shipping, but structural problems, such as a monopoly on tobacco, prevented the country from becoming a suitable substitute for England as the major trading partner.[59]

All of this meant that in 1783 and 1784, American imports exceeded exports by a factor of almost five to one, and this imbalance continued to a substantial degree throughout the 1780s.[60] The result was a massive specie drain on the United States, and a crisis of deflation ensued. With hard money in short supply, prices and wages fell, and unemployment rose in the cities. Moreover, deflation exacerbated an already substantial problem of indebtedness. In order to meet their own obligations, American merchants called in debts owed them by customers who, with specie scarce and wages and farm prices low, often were unable to pay. For the same reasons, farmers often found themselves incapable of paying taxes. Imprisonment of debtors and foreclosure sales on farms mounted, creating a sense of crisis and desperation among those affected and causing no end of human misery.[61]

The crisis did not hit the thirteen states evenly. Observers from the middle states continued to express confidence in the strength of the economy, despite great difficulties of their own. Other regions could not share that optimism. New England probably fared the worst. The closing of the West Indies trade, formerly an economic lifeline, meant disaster for those unwilling to take the risks of smuggling. Fishery and whaling contracted drastically, and the limitations on the carrying trade dealt a devastating blow to shipbuilding and the trade in naval stores.[62] South Carolina, on the other hand, faced the collapse of rice prices in the 1780s. Furthermore, England had previously put bounties on the production of indigo, which were obviously discontinued after independence. With its two most important staples far less profitable than before, South Carolina faced economic devastation comparable to that of New England.[63]

The economic crisis had enormous political repercussions, both on the state and federal level. Faced with specie drain, falling tax income, and a heavy wartime debt of their own, states took what measures they could to make ends meet. Unfortunately, many of these acts proved at least partially counterproductive. Some states raised import duties of their own, thus creating competition and considerable ill-will between neighbors, such as developed between New York and Connecticut. A number of states also sought to increase the amount of cash in currency through a variety of paper money measures, and several also passed relief legislation granting debtors more time to pay their obligations. Unsurprisingly, paper money depreciated rapidly, infuriating creditors who had to accept the scrip at face value. Likewise, debtor relief came under assault as an unprecedented subversion of the sanctity of contracts. No matter which direction a state went, problems resulted. Rhode Island, which endorsed the most massive paper money and debtor relief program, gained the contempt of its fellow states and the unflattering nickname "Rogue Island." Massachusetts, whose creditor-dominated, fiscally conservative leadership refused to pass relief measures, had to contend with Shays' Rebellion in 1786-87. A number of states allowed payment of taxes in depreciated certificates or accepted commodities such as tobacco instead of hard cash. Clearly, public finances were far from stable and proved an obstacle to economic recovery in general.[64]

The haphazard situation of state finances detrimentally impacted the federal government. Thwarted in 1781 and 1783 in its attempts to secure an independent income by means of an impost, Congress had to rely on requisitions to meet its own financial obligations. However, while requisitions typically yielded enough income for administrative expenses, servicing the federal debt became increasingly impossible. Instead of paying requisitions, the states preferred to honor the domestic debt themselves. Thus they made sure that their own citizens would receive interest payments due them rather than risking that other states would not pay their fair share and still profit from a centralized payment of debts. Congress fought this erosion of its authority throughout the mid-1780s but finally gave up in 1787. The situation was even worse with regard to the foreign debt. Paying international creditors required specie that the

requisitions simply did not yield. Consequently, Congress suspended payment of interest on the French debt in 1785 and defaulted on payments on the principal in 1787. Needless to say, these failures debilitated the United States' creditworthiness, making it all the more difficult to secure new, desperately needed loans. With its domestic fiscal authority crumbling and its international standing damaged, Congress seemed a government on the verge of failure. Increasingly, the states failed to even send full delegations to Congress, thus further undermining the prestige and viability of the federal legislature.[65]

It was no coincidence that the 1786 Annapolis Convention aimed primarily at a reform of the economic powers of the federal government, nor that the Constitution of 1787 assigned Congress unprecedented powers of taxation, along with the regulation of international and interstate commerce. Eventually, the tariff of 1789 and Hamilton's 1790 financial program put the United States back on its fiscal feet, but not without sparking an entirely new series of political conflicts. The Constitution did not precisely end the postwar depression. In fact, symptoms of recovery had been present since 1786, although any improvement had yet to reach the realm of public finance.[66] Nevertheless, the Constitution removed major obstacles on the path to fiscal consolidation and economic growth, and implemented reforms that had been elusive throughout the Confederation period. In this, as in many other ways, ratification marked the end of a critical period in which economic disaster, social disruption, and political collapse had threatened the success of the young American republic.[67]

The connection between the economic and political crisis of the 1780s and the attack against the Cincinnati was more indirect than the impact of the various ideological traditions and debates. Still, it was no coincidence that the conspiracy theory against the society found its most virulent expression in the two regions where the economic downturn hit hardest: New England and South Carolina. Furthermore, the controversy peaked during the years of the worst economic disruption, 1783-85. Simply put, the postwar depression and the political quakes of the 1780s seemed to threaten the success of the revolution; as Richard Morris phrased it, "the Americans

had won the war and stood perilously close to losing the peace."[68] The reality of the Confederation period clashed strongly with the expectations of the revolutionary effort. Disappointment, insecurity and human misery contributed to an atmosphere of distrust and anger, and helped fan the flames of suspicion in the social and political arena.

Surprisingly enough, the critics of the Cincinnati did not simply blame the society for the hard times; the controversy went beyond a simple scapegoating mechanism. Instead, suspicious Americans were on the lookout for those who might seek to profit from the crisis, to turn the suffering of others into their personal economic and political gain. Gale, who never tired of accusing the Cincinnati, lamented: "The People have been Told, a Revolution would Confirm all our Civil Liberties – That our Burdens would be Lessned – That the Crown Lands would Trebly Pay all the Expences of War – That Our Ports would be Filled with Ships from all The Trading Nation of Europe – and That The Produce of our Farms, would Sell at a much Higher Price. How much we have been Disappointed in All the foregoing Enumerated Instances, Let Every on Say." High taxes, farm foreclosures, depressed trade, and defaults on debt payments plagued the people, Gale wrote – and yet there were those who would turn the misery of others into political intrigue. The Cincinnati, Gale feared, had "a fixed an settled Design to Alter the Form of our *Republican* Government, Established by The Articles of out Foederal Union, and to Convert It into An *Aristocracy.*" As disappointment at the post-revolutionary situation mounted, Gale and other critics directed their outrage at those who, instead of supporting the struggling republic, might use their influence and prestige to claim the choicest portions of the revolution's carcass. The Society of the Cincinnati drew these disgruntled republicans' ire like no other group in America.[69]

In light of the various ideological problems and the general crisis of the post-revolutionary war era, the conspiracy theory against the Society of the Cincinnati was not as surprising as one might think. The critics had not forgotten what the Continental officers had done for the revolution; in fact, most made a point to acknowledge the debt of gratitude the country owed its military champions. Yet the Cincinnati violated

too many premises of American political culture at too inopportune a time to escape intense scrutiny and angry accusations. The society's military background made it too reminiscent of the long-asserted dangers of a standing army for comfort. Its organizational structure resembled what many Americans feared would corrupt the new republic: a junto or faction, bent on usurping and abusing power. Additionally, the hereditary feature of the Cincinnati's institution made them vulnerable to charges of hereditary aristocracy, which violated basic assumptions about republican equality.

Furthermore, the society resembled these familiar threat patterns at a time when the ideological assumptions behind them were increasingly shaky. Despite the rhetoric about the military and civic virtue of militia, the American revolution could not have succeeded without a professional military, and that need remained evident in the post-war period. While republican ideology warned of the corrupting influence of power, the new republic suffered from a lack of energetic government, not an excess of arbitrary control. Finally, the country was torn between the revolutionary celebration of equality and the persistence of old and emergence of new inequalities in the post-revolutionary decades. Added to these republican fears and confusions was an economic and political crisis which seemed to threaten the success of the American Revolution itself. In time, the adoption of the Constitution and the development of American society and politics in the postrevolutionary decades helped resolve the contradictions and crises of the new republic – or at least dragged them out in the open – but in the critical period, Americans faced a baffling discrepancy between expectation and reality in all too many aspects of society and politics.

In the difficult times of the 1780s, it must have been almost reassuring for revolutionaries reared on radical Whiggery to find an organization like the Cincinnati. The society seemed to resemble the threat Americans *expected* in the aftermath of the Revolution: a reactionary force bent on corrupting the fledgling republic into an aristocratic tyranny. Facing such a foe, however daunting, was considerably easier than coming to terms with the ideological contradictions the American polity generated as it emerged from the revolution and steered towards a new century. "Know thy enemy,"

the proverb ran. Instead, the critics of the Cincinnati assaulted an enemy they *thought* they knew.

The bitter irony of the situation was that the Cincinnati were almost completely innocent of the crimes of which they stood, but by hastily forming an organization that seemed a violation of revolutionary principles, they made themselves vulnerable to charges of conspiracy and anti-republican subversion. In the spring of 1783, Knox, Steuben and the other founders of the society, in their eagerness to organize the officers before the army disbanded, did not take the time to check the political terrain for pitfalls. As a result, they faced a massive backlash against their society that almost destroyed the Cincinnati and prevented it from becoming an effective voice for the officers' interest. In the process, those who had led the revolutionary war to its successful conclusion found their achievements compromised and their reputations tarnished.

Notes

[1] Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 23 April 1784, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, Harry A. Cushing, ed. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1908), 4: 302.

[2] For a detailed discussion of the standing army controversies in England, see Lois G. Schwoerer, *"No Standing Armies!" the Antiarmy Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Lawrence Delbert Cress, *Citizens in Arms: The Army and the Militia in American Society to the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 15-33. Daniel Defoe, *A Brief Reply to the History of Standing Armies in England with Some Account of the Authors* (London, 1698); Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Dublin: Printed for Messrs. Whitestone Chamberlaine W. Watson, 1776).

[3] John and Thomas Gordon Trenchard, *Cato's Letters, or Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects,* 4 vols. (London: 1755); Cress, *Citizens in Arms*, 16-25.

[4] James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: H. Davidson, 1982), 11; Cress, *Citizens in Arms*, 35.

[5] On the dangers of standing armies, see Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783-1802* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1975), 2-6; Richard H. Kohn, "The Creation of the American Military Establishment, 1783-1802," *The Military in America: From the Colonial Era to the Present*, Peter Karsten, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1980); Cress, *Citizens in Arms*, 16-21; Martin and Lender, *A Respectable Army*, 6-9; E. Wayne Carp, *To Starve*

the Army at Pleasure: Continental Army Administration and American Political Culture, 1775-1783 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 5-15.

[6] Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 2; James D. Scudieri, "The Continentals: A Comparative Analysis of a Late Eighteenth-Century Standing Army, 1775-83" (PhD dissertation, CUNY, 1993), 27; Cress, *Citizens in Arms*, 18.

[7] Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 5.

[8] Cress, *Citizens in Arms*, 38.

[9] Don Higginbotham, "The Federalized Militia Debate: A Neglected Aspect of Second Amendment Scholarship," *Wiliam and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 55 (1998): 41; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 6-9; Cress, *Citizens in Arms*, 20-21; Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 35-38;

[10] Cress, *Citizens in Arms*, 21.

[11] Ibid., 13.

[12] Martin and Lender, *A Respectable Army*, 32-33; Scudieri, "The Continentals", 5, 25, 276, 380.

[13] Scudieri, "The Continentals," 45-52; Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 66-69; Cress, *Citizens in Arms*, 51-66.

[14] Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 36; DHRoC 1: 110, 114.

[15] for the moderate Whig stance on standing armies after the Glorious Revolution, see Cress, *Citizens in Arms*, 25-33.

[16] Lawrence Delbert Cress, "Republican Liberty and National Security: American Military Policy as an Ideological Problem, 1783 to 1789," *Wiliam and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 38 (1981): 73-86 examines the various aspects of the Washington plan, including variants proposed by his advisors in detail.

[17] for Steuben's proposals, see *Hartford American Mercury*, 28 March 1785; *New Haven Connecticut Courant*, 22, 29 March 1785; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 73-88.

[18] for Knox' plan, see Cress, "Republican Liberty and National Security," 91-95; for the Antifederalist argument and the fate of militia reform, see Higginbotham, "The Federalized Militia Debate," 45-48; for the creation of a federal military in the 1790, see Kohn, "The Creation of the American Military Establishment, 1783-1802"; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*.

[19] Richard Henry Lee to James Monroe, 5 January 1784, Lee Family Papers, University of Virginia [microfilm].

[20] Aedanus Burke, *Considerations on the Society or Order of Cincinnati; Lately Instituted by the Major-Generals, Brigadier-Generals, and Other Officers of the American Army. Proving That It Creates a Race of Hereditary Patricians or Nobility. Interspersed with Remarks on Its Consequences to the Freedom and Happiness of the Republic. Addressed to the People of South Carolina, and Their Representatives.* (Charleston: Timothy, 1783), 9.

[21] Cress, *Citizens in Arms*, 67-73.

[22] for the seminal discussion on "country" Whig ideology, the dangers of power and the American Revolution, see Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), 22-160, and also Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 3-45. Not all opposition authors who wrote against corruption of the English constitution were actually radical Whigs, in fact some of the most prominent voices came from the Tory camp. But it was the radical Whigs who most strongly shaped public opinion in the American colonies.

[23] Trenchard, *Cato's Letters, or Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects*; Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 63, 79.

[24] Trenchard, *Cato's Letters, or Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects*; Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 47-49; for the development of radical thought in eighteenth century England, see also Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961). Robert M. Calhoon, *Dominion and Liberty: Ideology and the Anglo-American World, 1660-1801* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1994), 35-56 offers a useful summary of English opposition thought from the Walpole ministry throught the reign of George III.

[25] James Burgh, *Political Disquisitions: Or, an Enquiry into Public Errors, Defects, and Abuses* (London: printed for E. and C. Dilly, 1774), 1: 106; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 21.

[26] H. Trevor Colbourn, "A Pennsylvania Farmer at the Court of King George: John Dickinson's London Letters, 1754-1756," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 86 (1962): 241-70, 417-50; Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 90.

[27] Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 42; Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 98; see also James H. Hutson, "The Origins of 'the Paranoid Style in American Politics': Public Jealousy from the Age of Walpole to the Age of Jackson," *Saints and Revolutionaries: Essays on Early American History*, David D. Hall, John M. Murrin, and Thad W. Tate, eds. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 334.

[28] Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 119, 122-24; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 18-21, 25.

[29] Hutson, "Public Jealousy", 336. Note that jealousy in an eighteenth century context is not synonymous with envy, but rather used as in "jealously guarding one's liberty."

[30] L.H. Butterfield, ed., *Letters of Benjamin Rush* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 1: 22; Hutson, "Public Jealousy", 350.

[31] for the traditional distrust of parties or factions in America, see Jürgen Heideking, *Die Verfassung Vor Dem Richterstuhl: Vorgeschichte Und Ratifizierung Der Amerikanischen Verfassung 1787-1791* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1988), 93-97; Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System; the Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

[32] Thomas Burke, Abstract of Debates, 12-19 February 1777, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, Edmund C. Burnett, ed. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1921-1938), 2: 262-62; Samuel Adams to Arthur Lee, 21 November 1782, *Life of Arthur Lee, Ll. D, Joint Commissioner of the United States to the Court of France, and Sole Commissioner to the Courts of Spain and Prussia, During the Revolutionary War. With His Political and Literary Correspondence and His Papers on Diplomatic and Political Subjects, and the Affairs of the United States During the Same Period*, Richard H. Lee, ed. (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1829), 2: 230; Hutson, "Public Jealousy", 351-54.

[33] Harold Coffin Syrett and Jacob Ernest Cooke, eds., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 2: 650.

[34] for the Antifederalist position on power and its connection to radical Whig thought, see Calhoon, *Dominion and Liberty: Ideology and the Anglo-American World, 1660-1801*, 120-22; Saul Cornell, *The Other Founders: Anti-Federalism & the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788-1828* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 26-34; Heideking, *Die Verfassung Vor Dem Richterstuhl*, 277-82; Madisons ground-breaking essay can be found in Clinton Lawrence Rossiter, ed., *The Federalist Papers* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books USA, 1961).

[35] Wood, *Creation of the American Republic,* 543-47, 593-615; Cornell, *The Other Founders*, 1-8; on the struggle with the problems of power see James H. Read, *Power Versus Liberty: Madison, Hamilton, Wilson, and Jefferson* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

[36] *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 25 March 1784.

[37] Burke, *Considerations*, 12.

[38] Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 23 April 1784, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 302.

[39] for an in-depth discussion of how English and colonial society was changed by the American Revolution, see John F. Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1926); J. R. Pole, *The Pursuit of Equality in American History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), Gordon Wood, *Social Radicalism and the Idea of Equality* (Houston: University of St. Thomas, 1976); and most importantly Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1992). Obviously, all observations about social, political, and economic stratification ought properly be broken down by region and specific time; this brief summary can only offer sweeping statements.

[40] Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 9-42.

[41] Pauline Maier, "Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America," *William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 27 (1970): 3-35; Thomas L. Purvis, "Origins and Patterns of Agrarian Unrest in New Jersey, 1735 to 1754," *William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 39 (1982): 600-27; Richard B. Morris, "Class Struggle and the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 19 (1962): 3-29; Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution,* 113-16, 143.

[42] see for example John Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania, to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies* (Philadelphia: Printed by David Hall and William Sellers, 1768); Thomas Jefferson, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America: Set Forth in Some Resolutions Intended for the Inspection of the Present Delegates of the People of Virginia. Now in Convention* (Williamsburg: Printed by Clementina Rind, 1774).

[43] William Eddis, *Letters from America*, ed. Aubrey C. Land (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), 65; see also Robert Eldon Brown, *Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1691-1780* (New York,: Russell & Russell, 1968), 57-58, 223-24.

[44] Pole, *The Pursuit of Equality in American History*, 13.

[45] David Brion Davis, *Revolutions: Reflections on American Equality and Foreign Liberations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 14; Pole, *The Pursuit of Equality in American History*, 42.

[46] Richard B. Morris, *The Forging of the Union, 1781-1789* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 163-65; for the development of popular politics, see Richard R. Beeman, "Deference, Republicanism, and the Emergence of Popular Politics in Eighteenth-Century America," *Wiliam and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 49 (1992): 401-30.

[47] Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 183, 233; Stanley N. Katz, "Republicanism and the Law of Inheritance in the American Revolutionary Era," *Michigan Law Review* 76 (1977): 1-29.

[48] Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 229.

[49] See for example Nancy F. Cott, "Divorce and the Changing Status of Women in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *Wiliam and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 33 (1976): 586-614; Rosemarie Zagarri, "The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America," *Wiliam and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 55 (1998): 203-30; F. Nwabueze Okoye, "Chattel Slavery as the Nightmare of the American Revolutionaries," *Wiliam and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 37 (1980): 3-28.

[50] Morris, *Forging of the Union*, 174-179; Stuart Bruchey, "Social and Economic Developments after the Revolution," *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*, Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole, eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Reference, 1991), 555-556.

[51] Pole, *The Pursuit of Equality in American History*, 43, 56; Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 180.

[52] for the differing strains of Antifederalism, see Cornell, *The Other Founders*, 99-109; Jackson Turner Main, *The Antifederalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781-1788* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 129-33.

[53] Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 241; Pole, *The Pursuit of Equality in American History*, 57.

[54] Burke, *Considerations*, 6, 14; " A Minister of the Gospel" to Samuel Adams, 22 December 1783, Samuel Adams Papers, DCLC [photostats], originals in NYPL; *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 7 April

1784; North Carolina General Assembly Records, October-November 1784 (Box 2) House Bills (Oct 26-Nov 11), NCSA.

[55] John Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 25 April 1785, Elbridge Gerry Papers, DCLC.

[56] Some scholars of the critical period have claimed that the 1780s were not a time of economic crisis, but rather of growth: see for example Merrill Jensen, *The New Nation: A History of the United States During the Confederation, 1781-1789* (New York: Knopf, 1950) and Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the American Constitution* (New York: Macmillan, 1913). However, the evidence for a major (if not universal) economic crisis appears overwhelming. This short sketch mainly follows Morris, *Forging of the Union*, 130-161 and Heideking, *Die Verfassung Vor Dem Richterstuhl*, 36-92. See also Curtis P. Nettels, *The Emergence of a National Economy, 1775-1815* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962); Gary M. Walton and James F. Shepherd, *The Economic Rise of Early America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Edwin J. Perkins, *The Economy of Colonial America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

[57] Walton and Shepherd, *The Economic Rise of Early America*, 99-101.

[58] Morris, *Forging of the Union*, 130-132.

[59] Heideking and United States, *Die Verfassung Vor Dem Richterstuhl*, 52-53.

[60] United States Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington: U.S. Dept. of Commerce Bureau of the Census 1975), 2: 1176.

[61] Heideking, *Die Verfassung Vor Dem Richterstuhl*, 53-54.

[62] Morris, *Forging of the Union*, 139-142.

[63] Heideking, *Die Verfassung Vor Dem Richterstuhl*, 54-55; United States Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, 2: 1192.

[64] for the various measures states took to shore up their finances, see Morris, *Forging of the Union*, 148-152; Heideking, *Die Verfassung Vor Dem Richterstuhl*, 61-84.

[65] E. James Ferguson, *The Power of the Purse; a History of American Public Finance, 1776-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 220-50.

[66] Heideking, *Die Verfassung Vor Dem Richterstuhl*, 55-60.

[67] Ferguson, *Power of the Purse*, 306-326; Heideking, *Die Verfassung Vor Dem Richterstuhl*, 88-92; Morris, *Forging of the Union*, 152.

[68] Morris, *Forging of the Union*, 151.

[69] Philip H. Jordan, "Connecticut Anti-Federalism on the Eve of the Constitutional Convention," *Connecticut Historical Society* 28 (1963): 17-18.

Conclusion

Causes and Effects

In the 1780s, the Society of the Cincinnati found itself confronted with a virulent conspiracy theory. Men like Burke, Gerry and the Adamses accused the Continental officers of everything from trying to establish a hereditary nobility to secretly controlling the political system of the United States. As I have endeavored to show, this conspiracy theory was by no means limited to the margins of American political culture. A number of the revolution's top leaders were among the society's critics, and the controversy was felt from Charleston to Boston, a political topic that crossed state boundaries and social classes. Like the debate on federal power and reforming the Articles of Confederation, the conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati was one of the premier topics of political discussion in the critical period. In fact, the controversy was intertwined with nearly the all volatile issues of the decade: the impost, commutation, the ratification of the Constitution, the federal debt, and even the early stirrings of the first party system. There was nothing marginal about the conspiracy theory; for a number of years it stood at the very center of the American polity.

The conspiracy theory attained such a prominent position because it connected to a number of central issues of eighteenth century American political culture. From the English radical Whig tradition and their own experience, the American revolutionaries had acquired a rampant distrust of all things military; the Cincinnati seemed a militaristic association. The same sources had taught Americans to distrust power, and from the outside, the society appeared well-organized and influential. Finally, the American Revolution had shattered long-held assumptions about social and political hierarchy and introduced a rhetoric of equality to the young republic. The society however, with its rule of hereditary succession and eagle badges, looked too much like a European knightly order or aristocracy. It seemed that the Continental officers had violated the most basic consensus on equality in America.

In short, the conspiracy theory was linked to specifically American issues and could thrive because of it. France, the only other country where accusations against the Cincinnati surfaced imported both the society and the conspiracy theory from America. And although the French Revolution destroyed the local Cincinnati, that was largely a by-product of a much larger social and political meltdown. Over time, the French Revolution produced its own conspiracy theories, which were even vaster and more abstruse than the American narrative of suspicion against the Continental officers.

What caused the accusations against the Cincinnati to spring up in the first place? Hofstadter[1] and other proponents of the paranoid style theory pointed to a sense of social, cultural, or political crisis at the bottom of conspiracy theories. Such a sense of crisis certainly existed in the United States of the 1780s. For a number of reasons, the American experiment with republicanism seemed on the verge of failure in the critical period. The United States appeared unable to get off the ground economically or politically; domestic instability and foreign threats endangered the success of the revolution. Drawing on what they thought were the lessons of history, the society's critics looked for those who might wish to destroy the republic to further their own ends. They found their culprits in the form of militaristic ambition and political subversion; many opponents of the Cincinnati discovered historical parallels that might shed light on the imminent demise of the American republic.

Burke, for example, pointed out how Roman leaders after the overthrow of the Tarquin monarchy had established themselves as an increasingly oppressive nobility of patricians. Their abuse of power incited divisions and discontent in the republican order and paved the way for the tyranny of Caesar and Augustus. Likewise, Burke argued, the field officers of the Goth and Vandal armies were to blame for the evils of European nobility because they had raised themselves to hereditary status out of a thirst for power.[2] Finally, the South Carolininan cautioned, deception and plotting had destroyed the republican experiment of the English civil war. "When Cromwell and his Major Generals, those scourges of monarchy, and champions for popular government, when

they were executing their fine schemes, did they tell the world they intended to usurp the sovereignty, though this was their design?," Burke questioned. "Or did not they amuse even their own party, with preaching and canting about religion and liberty? Were their usurpations the less so, because they fought well, served their country, and made fair promises?" To Burke, it was evil intent and deception that had produced the tyrannies of history, and he found the same pernicious design in the Society of the Cincinnati of his own time.[3]

Even more outspoken was the author of the 1788 series of articles in the *Boston Gazette*. In order to judge the "pernicious tendency" of the society, this author contended, "it may not be improper to compare the analogy between the new *American Order*, and those which have arisen, under various shapes, forms and pretences in other countries; by these means we may more readily discover the *cloven foot* of the *Cincinnati*, and trace its future progress." The author proceeded to draw a parallel between the society and the ancient Druids, whom he accused of subverting the kingdoms of Europe, establishing themselves as a privileged class of overlords, exempt from taxes and all obligations and wielding the true power of government wherever they existed. "Like the Cincinnati," the author wrote, the Druids "were scattered throughout many independent states and kingdoms; like them they were arranged into different Orders or *Societies*; like them they had a supreme assembly over all the rest, wherein presided the *Arch-Druid*, or *Grand President* of the Order; like the *Cincinnati* they created to themselves a *Patriciate*, and *conspired* against their country." Nor were the Druids the only pertinent example; the writer also argued that the Cincinnati were "like the *Gothic Chiefs* who subdued their neighbours, …and transmitted their names and honours to posterity by a *similar conspiracy*."[4]

Thus the conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati served as a method of causal explanation. Just as theorists Groh and Wood[5] described, the society's accusers sought to explain the downfall of legitimate governments in history and the imminent failure of the American republic. Enlightenment thought predisposed intellectuals to seek personalized explanations for events that really had structural causes. Instead, the critics found planned malevolence and intentional subversion at work; in other words, they

identified conspiracy as the cause of political disaster. In the 1780s, the Society of the Cincinnati appeared as the most likely threat to republicanism; thus, the Continental officers became the target of those who wished to prevent the destruction of the American revolutionary experiment with representative government.

Yet the anti-Cincinnati rhetoric went beyond simple scapegoating. The ideology of the American revolution ran into internal contradictions which gave rise to the conspiracy theory. Radical Whig thought had always championed the citizen-soldier and the militia as the guardian of liberty, but the realities of war and the uneasy peace of the critical period clearly showed the need for a professional military. Similarly, the revolutionaries distrusted political power because of its corrupting tendencies. In their efforts to prevent abuses, however, they crippled the legitimate federal government of the United States to the point where Congress was unable to meet its financial obligations and guarantee domestic stability. Some Americans tried to come to terms with these contradictions and developed a political theory that made power the servant of liberty rather than its executioner. Others were unable to resolve the contradiction between revolutionary ideology and the reality of the early republic. Instead, they looked for the familiar threat pattern of a standing army and aristocratic subversion, and found it in the Society of the Cincinnati. These conspiracy theorists merely followed the conventional wisdom of their time, which predicted that unless the people remained ever vigilant, militarism and the abuses of power would destroy the liberty of the American people.

Nevertheless, the conspiracy theory was not all about fear and loathing; it also carried a strongly idealistic strain. The accusations against the Cincinnati stemmed at least partly from the critics' commitment to American exceptionalism. Men like Burke and John Adams believed that the United States carried a sacred trust to preserve the flame of liberty in a world dominated by arbitrary forms of government.

For example, Burke argued that if the society were to succeed in subverting the American republic, "our example too would serve to strengthen tyranny in Europe, by evincing that a people brought up under a monarchy, and accustomed to be governed by others, are too degenerate to govern themselves in a state of liberty; and that after

all we have done, we still keep a hankering after the orders, titles and trumpery we have been used to under royal government, where the people are so bewitched, that abilities, virtue or wealth itself, are not such objects of reverence as a star or ribbon." John Adams, in despair over what he felt was the imminent ascendancy of the Cincinnati, lamented, "I don't wonder that the word Republicans is odious and unpopular, throughout the World. I don't wonder that so few, even of the great Writers, have admired this Form of Government." This sense of responsibility for preserving republicanism in the world increased the critics' suspiciousness of anything that smacked of aristocracy and anti-republican subversion.[6]

Finally, the utopian ideal of equality played a significant role in creating the conspiracy theory against the society. While not all of the Cincinnati's critics were committed egalitarians, they subscribed to the notion of a republic where all men were created equal. Whatever forms of inequality they were willing to accept as the result of differences in native ability and wealth, hereditary aristocracy was not among them. Thus, once Burke had established the notion of the Cincinnati as a nobility, even Americans who were not at all levelers attacked the society as a violation of revolutionary principle. It was not from the basest of instincts that the accusations against the Cincinnati arose, but from a deep commitment to the success of the fledgling American republic and its promises liberty and equality.

Partly because the critics of the society acted out of idealism instead of spite, the conspiracy theory did not become a pathology of the American body politic. To be sure, the accusations were extremely unfair to the former officers of the Continental Army, and a number of Cincinnati expressed their extreme frustration at being made the bogeymen of the postwar republic. In some cases, membership in the society proved an obstacle at the polls, as the critics tried to exclude the Cincinnati from positions of political power. Yet none of the attempts to disfranchise members of the society came to fruition: the Massachusetts legislature did not take action on the highly critical committee report, the North Carolina motion was quickly tabled, and the rumors of disfranchisement in Rhode Island proved to be false. While the society's abor-

tive reform of 1784 had a lot to do with staving off the more robust efforts against the Cincinnati, it appeared that the American polity came to its senses quickly enough to prevent substantial damage to individuals.

It could be argued that several state societies became casualties of the conspiracy theory, and that the society as a whole nearly vanished in the wake of the accusations, but the Cincinnati themselves bore some of the blame. They might have fully implemented the reform of 1784 and returned to heredity after the dust had settled, or they might have simply weathered the storm. Instead, they allowed themselves to be divided in their reactions, and interest in the society gradually waned among its members in the decades of the early republic. When the political climate had finally changed, the Cincinnati had lost the ability to serve as a unified political voice for veteran officers.

Nevertheless, the society endured to the present day. The grim fate of the French branch showed how easily anti-aristocratic rhetoric could get out of hand, but in America no one went to the guillotine. Arguably, the early republic would have been better off without the controversy about the Cincinnati, but in no substantial way did the conspiracy theory devolve into a full-fledged political pathology of persecution and gross injustice. However unfair their accusations were, at least the critics did not target a typical scapegoat minority such as Jews or Blacks. Instead, they took on someone of their own size, the officers of the Continental Army. And however disgusted these Cincinnati were at being labeled the undertakers of republicanism, they possessed the prestige and influence to resist the conspiracy theory. Their society almost became a casualty of the accusations, but the Cincinnati themselves did not. Compared to other conspiracy theories in the course of history, the attacks against the society proved comparatively harmless.

Indeed, while the conspiracy theory did nothing to help the young republic overcome its problems, many of the Cincinnati's critics did contribute to the real solutions of the critical period. Whether as Federalists or Antifederalists, the same men who reviled the Society of the Cincinnati took part in the political debates that shaped the new Constitution. Most critics of the society opposed the new political system, yet

some, like Gerry, contributed both to the document itself and to the political reservations that prompted the creation of a Bill of Rights. Even comparatively radical Antifederalists like Burke embraced a position of loyal (if critical) opposition after ratification. He, like other Antifederalist critics of the society, turned out to be more than just an obstructionist. In the end, the believers in the conspiracy theory were not right, but neither were they lunatics.

Nevertheless, the conspiracy theory against the Society of the Cincinnati left its mark on American political culture. Distrust against the intrigues of the powerful had played a prominent part in the revolution, but now the suspicion turned inward to search for subversives and traitors in the midst of the American polity. Since the controversy had arisen around topics central to the American debate, such as power, equality, and militarism, it firmly established itself at the center of American political culture at its time, with the support of several of the United States' founding fathers.

In many ways, the controversy about the Cincinnati became the conspiracy theory variant of Antifederalism, addressing many of the same topics as the widespread opposition to the Constitution in its original form. And just as Antifederalism, despite its defeat in 1787, continued to shape American convictions about individual liberties and local political autonomy, the conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati left a legacy of distrust against political and social elites in the United States. These themes persisted in the anti-Masonic movement of the early nineteenth century and in the conspiratorial fear of Wall Street bankers, the United Nations, and even the federal government itself in the present day.

None of these conspiracy theories are uniquely American, and many have become part of a globalized conspiracy folklore in the course of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, there is something specifically American about conspiracy theories that target central actors of the political and economic system rather than scapegoat minorities or imaginary secret societies, and the controversy about the Society of the Cincinnati was one of the earliest incarnations of that tradition.

Over the centuries since its inception, the conspiracy theory against the society lost much of its impact. By the 1790s, it had become a small aspect of Republican rhetoric, and by the 1800s it had ceased to be a serious political issue. Yet vestiges of the narrative persisted. Historians continued to debate the intentions of the Cincinnati, starting with the works of Mercy Otis Warren. At the same time, the original conspiracy theory made its way into the public domain of popular culture, as Americans smirked at the hysteria of the past. As early as the 1790s, Hugh Brackenridge used the Cincinnati controversy as the basis of humorous episodes.[7] And, to my great surprise, two hundred years later the computer game *Deus Ex* made a passing reference to the Cincinnati. In this interactive fiction, the player stumbles across a fictitious book entitled "The Reluctant Dictators," which reads:

> Organized at the end of the American Revolution on May 13, 1783, by General George Washington, the Order of the Cincinnati was ostensibly formed as a fraternity to recognize the accomplishments of those officers who had served with distinguishment during the Revolution. However, the true purpose of the Order was the cultivation of a military force ready, willing, and able to accomplish a coup d'etat if the fledgling American democracy began to stumble.

> Sceptical at the viability of the untried democratic system, Washington took counsel in the story of the Roman general Cincinnatus who was called from retirement to serve as Dictator for sixteen days in the defense of Rome, after which he returned home to his farm. In the wake of the Revolution, the United States was vulnerable to any number of outside forces, and Washington felt a strong, central authority had to be present that could assume control of the government if necessary – and 'temporarily' suspend the Constitution if required.

> Washington resigned as President after only two terms in office, but remained President of the Order of the Cincinnati till his death. The Order still exists to this day, a shadow organization of the wealthy and powerful that has been linked to any number of other organizations ranging from the Illuminati to the Trilateral Commission…[8]

So, although the conspiracy theory against the Cincinnati is no longer a political controversy of any consequence, it has become part of the conspiracy folklore so prominent in today's popular culture, sharing a niche with TV shows and thriller fiction. Today, the fear of the Cincinnati is part of what theorist Peter Knight[9] described as con-

spiracy culture, the consumption of conspiracy theory for fun, profit, and an oppositional hermeneutic. Yet to its adherents in the 1780s, opposition to the Cincinnati was a matter of the life or death of republicanism in America.

Notes

[1] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1965).

[2] Aedanus Burke, *Considerations on the Society or Order of Cincinnati; Lately Instituted by the Major-Generals, Brigadier-Generals, and Other Officers of the American Army. Proving That It Creates a Race of Hereditary Patricians or Nobility. Interspersed with Remarks on Its Consequences to the Freedom and Happiness of the Republic. Addressed to the People of South Carolina, and Their Representatives.* (Charleston: Timothy, 1783), 10-11.

[3] Ibid., 16.

[4] *Boston Gazette*, 9 June, 16 June 1788.

[5] Dieter Groh, "Die Verschwörungstheoretische Versuchung Oder Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?," in *Anthropologische Dimensionen Der Geschichte* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1992), 267-304; Gordon Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series* 39 (1982): 400-41.

[6] Burke, *Considerations*, 7; John Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 25 April 1785, Elbridge Gerry Papers, DLC

[7] Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry: Containing the Adventures of Captain John Farrago and Teague Oregan, His Servant*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: John McCulloch, 1792-1797). See chapter 5 for the details about Brackenridge's anecdotes.

[8] *Deus Ex* (Austin: Ion Storm, 1999).

[9] Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture - American Paranoia from the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Appendix

The following is a transcript of Aedanus Burke, *Considerations on the Society or Order of Cincinnati; Lately Instituted by the Major-Generals, Brigadier-Generals, and Other Officers of the American Army. Proving That It Creates a Race of Hereditary Patricians or Nobility. Interspersed with Remarks on Its Consequences to the Freedom and Happiness of the Republic. Addressed to the People of South Carolina, and Their Representatives* (Charleston: Timothy, 1783, reprint, Robert Bell, Philadelphia). The original pagination is indicated in [brackets], and an unrelated advertisement at the end of the pamphlet is omitted.

CONSIDERATIONS

ON THE

SOCIETY OR ORDER

OF

CINCINNATI;

LATELY INSTITUTED

by the Major-Generals, Briagdier-Generals, and other Officers of the American Army.

PROVING THAT IT CREATES

A RACE OF HEREDITARY PATRICIANS

OR

NOBILITY.

INTERSPERSED WITH REMARKS

On its CONSEQUENCES to the Freedom and Happiness of the Republic.

Addressed to the PEOPLE of SOUTH-CAROLINA, and their REPRESENTATIVES.

By CASSIUS

Supposed to be written by ÆDANUS BURKE, Esquire,

one of the Chief Justices of the State of South Carolina.

Blow ye the Trumpet in Zion.   The Bible.

PHILADELPHIA:

Printed and Sold by ROBERT BELL, in *Third-Street.*

Price, *one-sixth of a Dollar.* M,DCC,LXXXIII.

[2]TO

THE PEOPLE

AND

THEIR REPRESENTATIVES.

The following publication is intended to convey a few observations to my fellow citizens, on a new *Society or Institution* lately established throughout the continent, composed of the Major-Generals, Brigadiers, and other Officers of our army. It is instituted by the name of "THE SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI," and it has arrived to considerable strength and maturity already. For besides the Grand or *General Society* of this order, a subordinate or *State Society* is established in each state; and these again subdivided "into such districts as shall be directed by the State Societies. The General Society is to be held on the first Monday in May annually, so long as they shall deem necessary; and afterwards at least once every three years. The state Societies are to meet the fourth of July annually, or oftner, if they shall find it expedient."

Major-General Baron Steuben is appointed *Grand Master of the Order,* under the more humble title of *President*; and each State Society as well as the Grand one has also its President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, and Vice Treasurer. Annual communications of the States with each other, by circular letters are enjoined: "And the General Meeting of the Society, shall consist of its officers, and a representation from each state in number not exceeding five; whose expences shall be borne by the respective State Societies." So that here are delegates to be sent to form a general convention or congress of the order. They have also instituted a badge of honor, or what they call "an Order by which its members shall be known and distinguished. It is a medal of gold in the figure of an eagle, with an inscription on the face and reverse, alluding to the time of establishing the order, and to their having saved the republic. And this badge of distinction, is to be suspended by a deep blue ribbon two inches wide, edged with white, descriptive of the Union between America and France;" and to be worn by each member, as the French and British nobility wear their stars and ribbons, the insignia of their peerage. They have already conferred the honour and freedom of their Order on

his excellency the French Ambassador, his excellency the Sieur Gerard, late minister plenipotentiary, the count d'Estaing, count de Grasse, count de Barras, the chevalier de Touches, count Rochambeau, and the generals and colonels of his army. And it is reported that several crowned heads and princes in Europe, are to dignify it by becoming honorary members of it. Congress for political reasons no doubt, winks at it; and no one state, nor body of men in any one of them, have given it the least opposition. The discretion of the commander in chief, which I take to be his distinguishing characteristic, is signal on this occasion; for he has appeared quite neutral in this business, if we except his becoming [3] an honorary member of it. I believe the officers do not declare themselves to each other; and that on this occasion, there I too much truth in the remark of an able philosopher, "that there is no man who lets his nearest friend see the bottom of his heart."

The more I reflect on this institution, and the political consequences it will involve, the more am I filled with astonishment, that self created as it is, and coming upon us in so bold and questionable and appearance, so deeply planned, and closely executed, yet that it should have been so little attended to, that it is not even the subject of private conversation. Could I for a moment view this Order with indifference, it would be impossible not to smile, to behold the populace of America, in their town committees and town meetings, so keenly bent on petty mischiefs, in full chase and cry after a few insignificant tories, and running on regardless of an establishment, which ere long must strip the posterity of the middling and lower classes of every influence or authority, and leave them nothing but insignificance, contempt, and the wretched privilege of murmuring when it is too late. So thoughtless are the multitude!

My design at present is to shew, first, What this Order or Society seems to be; in the next place, To demonstrate what it really is, and will turn out to be; and lastly, To prove there is an absolute necessity of extirpating it altogether.

From the outside appearance of their *Association*, or instrument of writing which combines this Order, and which has been sent thro' the states by circular letters, it is nothing more than an "Association, Constitution, and Combination of the Generals, and other Officers of the Army, who have served three years, or were deranged by

Congress, into a Society of Friends, to perpetuate the memory of the Revolution, and their own mutual friendship; to endure as long as they shall endure, *or any of their eldest male posterity*; and in failure thereof, *the collateral branches who may be judged worthy of becoming its supporters and members*; To attend incessantly to preserve inviolate the exalted rights and liberties of human nature; for which they fought and bled: To promote and cherish between the respective states, Union and National Honor: To render permanent, cordial affection, and the spirit of brotherly kindness among the officers: To extend acts of beneficence towards those officers and their families who may be unfortunately under the necessity of receiving it." They advance each a months pay, and open a door for donations from others not of the society, and for the charitable purpose of raising a fund, as well as for the *political* one, of engaging the leading men of each state in the interests of the Order, they have the following rule: "And as there will at all times be men in the respective states, eminent for their abilities and patriotism, whose views may be directed to the same laudable objects with those of the Cincinnati; it shall be a rule to admit such characters as honorary members of the society for their own lives only: Provided that the number of the honorary members does not exceed a ratio of one to four of the officers and their descendents."

The quotations I have made are the words of the General Association; so that it seems to be the offspring of patriotism, friendship, and humanity. And that many of the officers who have not closely viewed the subject, favour it from those principles, I have no doubt. But as several of them are equal in knowledge and ability to any men in American, it is hardly possible but that some of them must see into the nature and consequences of the institution. For to come to the second part of my argument, it is in reality, and will turn out to be, *an hereditary peerage*; a nobility to them and their *male* [4] *issue,* and in default thereof, to the *collateral branches*; what the lawyers would call – a title of peerage of Cincinnati to them and their heirs male, remainders to their heirs general.

The sixth article of our confederation says, "Nor shall the United States in Congress assembled, nr any of them grant any title of nobility." But the order of Cincinnati usurp a nobility without gift or grant, in defiance of Congress and the states, as I shall

shew presently. And though the order cannot, at present be sanctified by legal authority, yet that makes nothing against the consequences which will ensue. Though the Order is self-created, and in infringement of a general law of the Union; yet if the courage of the officers does not fail them; if they but keep up with firmness and perseverance against opposition, for this will be but trifling, so unthinking are the people; if they have but patience, subtilty, and address to cloke their design under a pious name of raising a charitable fund; so as to make it go down only for a few years; even if they are obliged from policy to lay aside the *badge and blue ribbon*: My life for it, they will have leisure to laugh at, and master their opponents. And the next generation will drink as deep of noble blood, and a hereditary peerage be as firmly settled in each potent family, and rivetted in our government, as any order of nobility is in the monarchies of Europe. This Order is planted in a fiery, hot ambition, and thrill for power; and its branches will end in tyranny. The Cincinnati will soon be corrupted, and the spirit of the people depressed; for in less than a century it will occasion such an inequality in the condition of our inhabitants, that the country will be composed only of two ranks of men; the patricians or nobles, and the rabble. This is the natural result of an establishment, whose departure is so sudden from out open professions of republicanism, that it must give a thinking mind most melancholy forebodings. This creating of a nobility, and breaking through our constitution, just as we were setting out in the world, is making that liberty which the Almighty has given us, a means for feeding our pride; and turning the blessings of Providence into a curse upon us.

Had this order been created by Congress or our own legislature, even in violation of the confederation and our laws, I should not think it a matter of such moment; dukes, earls, or peers of the Cincinnati, sanctified by an act of Assembly or of Congress, would be understood by all of us. Their pretensions and exclusive privileges, the mode of their trial for life and death, &c. ascertained. But the self-created Cincinnati, like a proud imperious man, would set no bounds to its claims. Jealous that it held not any thing on it own ambitious terms, as they had cut and carved titles for themselves an their posterity, they would be still grasping for every thing; and rising from one usurpation to another, as they succeeded.

Let us examine the ostensible reasons for instituting the Cincinnati. First, "to perpetuate the remembrance of the revolution." But will not the historian more effectually transmit to posterity, the memory of the revolution, and the illustrious actions achieved in bringing it about? And as to "preserving inviolate the exalted rights of human nature;["] these rights will in my opinion be much better preserved inviolate by having no *distinct order* of patricians or nobility among us: which, however thought necessary to support the throne of a prince, or form a barrier between him and his people, is a bane and a curse to the republic; for unless you destroy the one, you cannot have the other.

Again. They will "attend incessantly to preserve inviolate the exalted rights of human nature." Are then, most illustrious [5] Cincinnati, two sorts of rights belonging to human nature? Is there one kind, subordinate, and on a level with the humble condition of Plebeians? and others *more exalted*, which the citizens are incapable of preserving inviolate without the *incessant watching* of a dignified order of patricians? They must mean this or nothing, The people of America, it seems, are not fit to be trusted with their own *national honor*, or their own affairs, unless the Order takes the superintendence and direction of them. Can contradiction be more strong and glaring? In one moment they inistitute an order, and raise a *distinction*, which looks down, as from an high mountain, on all beneath them: They have laid in ruins that fine, plain, level state of civil equality, over which the sight of the beholder passed with pleasure; which God laid out for our use and happiness, and which our Laws and the nature of a Republican government promised us: The have violated all; yet in the same breath, by way of a mask thrown ever [sic] their doings, the spread before us the fine words last quoted. But the disguise is too thin: for in the name of Heaven, can any man in his senses believe that the remaining rights of the people which are yet left untouched, will not be invaded and violated, by men, who disdaining the condition of private citizens, as below them, left it, and mounted up to the elevated and exclusive dignity of hereditary title?

But say they, "an order of nobility will give strength, duration, and reverence to our government." Has not the war of America, I say, convinced mankind that society in

the most trying conjunctures, and fiercest dangers, can do better without them? When first set out we had scarcely a distinction among us: for the bode of our people was chiefly composed of Yeomanry. But though they had no titles or badges, they soon produced excellent officers, soldiers, and statesmen: and every corner of America, at this moment, abounds with men, as well militia as continentals, as capable of command in cavalry or infantry, as any regular officers Europe can boast of. This military virtue of our citizens: their sense of dignity and contempt of danger; the gallant efforts they made; was not this, I say, the offspring of the equality and independent temper of men, who fought for themselves, and not for masters; and whose spirit was not trammeled or broken down by the oppression of an insolent nobility? This was that warm animating pride which disdained to look up to any human creature as a superior, which raised us armies, and fought campaigns without pay or covering: efforts so glorious, as never were, nor can possibly be made by any nation where a nobility have got considerable footing.

But if this orders prevails in our country, the generous gallant virtues of the present day will soon be extinguished, never to appear again. What Salust calls the *common disease of nobility*, nobilitatis commune malum superbia & contemptor animus: *pride and insolence* on the one hand, and oppression and cringing habits on the other, will break the spirit of our children to such a degree of debasement, they would shortly be impressed in good earnest with the idea, that the independence of America was from the beginning ordained: that such an effusion of human life and human blood: so great a variety of glorious achievements and honourable sufferings through the war: that all this I say was effected, not for the good of the people, but for a few families to aggrandize themselves, and monopolize the power of the continent, and to enjoy the fruits of it.

The other pretext is, "to promote and cherish between the respective state, Union and National Honour." But I have the honour to tell Baron Steuben, that though an order of peerage may [6] do very well under the petty princes of Germany, yet in America it is incompatible with our freedom; and instead of being a bond of *political union*, it would on a future day, prove a source of *civil dissension and misery*; by estab-

lishing two *distinct* orders; one whose foundation is the *Army*; the other composed of the *Commonalty*. Thus it opens a theatre for ignominious distinctions, for jealousy and hatred, and ends in civil war, between these patricians and the people, if the latter had any spirit left. And as the Order would be firmly established by time, the world in less than a hundred years would find its descendants a race of men distinct from the rest of society, with the eyes of all fixed upon them, as objects of such worship that it is not at all improbable, but our children should find the Order foisting [sic] the divinity of their institutions into our pulpits, under a *jure divinio* title. In a few generations hence, such are the extravagancies which enter into the heart of man, the peers of Cincinnati might consider themselves as deriving their lineage from heaven. Let us examine the story of those heroes celebrated in the two immortal poems of Homer and Virgil: strip it of the bewitching charms and poetry; and you shall find they afford not a better foundation for idolatry and the Yahoo-like worship of men, than the peers or our Order. The courage of Hector, engaged in defence of his country against a foreign invasion: The valour of Achilles in avenging an insult to his nation: The piety of Æneas in saving his father and a few images of the Trojan Gods out of the ruins of his native city: I speak agreeable to truth and common sense, when I say that all these exploits have been equalled by the Cincinnati. And it is equally probable that they would produce in some future generation of American plebeians, such an admiration and idolatry, that would in the fervor of its operation, as in Rome of old, enable some leading man of the Order to set up a tyranny. Some sycophant poet would not be wanting to prostitute the talents which God gave him, for the vile purpose of dubbing with divinity, as Virgil did Augustus, a tyrant who had swallowed up the liberties of his country.

The Cincinnati at any rate would soon *have and hold* an exclusive right to office, honors and authorities, civil and military. And the whole country besides themselves, a mere mob of plebeians, without weight or estimation; degraded in the eyes of our patricians, as the Roman people were by their republican nobility. These held the others as Livy says, invisi Diis immortalibus; *as if they were odious to the very gods*; and as the Cincinnati soon would, held it an abomination to intermarry with them. This degradation of the people on one hand, and the insolence of the nobles on other,

was in Rome, as it would be with us, a political disease, which never ceased to distract that republic, until at last I occasioned its overthrow. Arising solely from the ignominious *distinction* between the Commons and the Patricians, as an hereditary order: who from the expulsion of the Tarquins, to the time of the Gracchi, about 300 years, produced such perpetual discord and tumults in that republic, that nothing but its good fortune and military virtue preserved it so long from destruction. At last when the people became corrupted their dissentions swelled to open rupture, or civil war: Sylla heading the nobility, and Marius the commons. The latter being compleately vanquished, the conqueror, as perpetual dictator, set up a tyranny: and exercised confiscation, banishment, and every other species of cruelty which marks a disorderly people. Still civil discord admitted of no cessation; for in a short time afterwards, the fire broke out with multiplied fury [7] under Cæsar, the leader of the commons, and Pompey, at the head of the nobility. The event is well known; Cæsar triumphed over his adversary, and over the liberty of his fellow citizens; and the whole ended in cruel despotism. And thus so many wars carried on – so many illustrious actions performed by that gallant people, only to gratify the ambition of an order, similar to the Cincinnati, but in its origin by no means so respectable, as I shall presently shew; and finally to become the slaves of barbarous masters, the Roman Emperors.

In mention these few plain notorious facts, to prove, that the institution of this nobility is not the way to promote and cherish *Union* and *National Honor.* Out of it will arise *discord* and not *union.* And that the people should, without so much as saying a word about the matter, behold this poisonous *exotic* plant taking root throughout the land. That they should commit such a vile abuse of their liberty as to allow it, is a reproach upon human nature; and would, in the eyes of posterity, be a national dishonour to us. I have often thought that the revolution in American would reduce it to a certainty, whether mankind was destined by nature for liberty or slavery; for a republican government never before has had, what we call fair play, in any part of the globe. But the Order of Cincinnati would give a fatal wound to civil liberty thro' the world, and prove that all that Plato, Sidney, Locke and others have bequeathed to posterity on the subject of political happiness, though appearing well on paper, yet was nor

more than ideal pictures of a fine imagination. Our example too would serve to strengthen tyranny in Europe, by evincing that a people brought up under a monarchy, and accustomed to be governed by others, are too degenerate to govern themselves in a state of liberty; and that after all we have done, we still keep a hankering after the orders, titles and trumpery we have been used to under royal government, where the people are so bewitched, that abilities, virtue or wealth itself, are not such objects of reverence as a star or ribbon.

The following clause of the *Association*, I think an extraordinary one. "The officers of the American army having generally been taken from the citizens of America, possess high veneration for the character of that illustrious Roman, Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus; and being resolved to follow his example, by returning to their citizenship they think they may with propriety denominate themselves the society of the Cincinnati."

Then as they were taken from the citizens, why in the name of God not be contented "to return to citizenship," without usurping an hereditary order? or with what "propriety can they denominate" themselves from Cincinnatus, with an ambition to rank, as to aim at nothing less, than *Otium cum dignitate*, "*retirement and a peerage ?*" Did that virtuous Roman, having subdued the enemies of his country, and returned home to tend his vineyard and plant his cabbages: did he confer an hereditary order of peerage on himself and his fellow soldiers? I answer, No; it was more than he dared to do. For a less crime, that republic, in the days of its liberty, put to death, banished or disgraced some of her citizens, as illustrious and renowned as any we have, without exception.

The Romans had learned from sad experience, as lesson which seems to be brought home to ourselves in the example before me; that military commanders acquiring fame, and accustomed to receive the obedience of their armies, are generally in their hearts aristocratics, and enemies to the popular equality of a republic. That [8] becoming illustrious by their services, they are ever ready, under plausible appearances of *justice and merit,* to assume usurpations of of [sic] the most pernicious tendency. The people first adore them with a stupid veneration, which swells their pride; enables

them to form factions; procure followers; create distinctions; aggrandize their families; split the state into division, and like Cæsar, Cromwell, and others, under the smoke they had created, raise themselves to despotism. This is the reason that in wise republics, such citizens were so often and so justly put out of the way; banished their country, or excluded from dignities or influence. And their fame and eclat was thought an ample reward to console them under it. It is probable therefore that it was as much through fear, as republican virtue, that Cincinnatus and his officers were restrained from instituting a new order; for I do not suppose they were either better or worse than our own. Only that republic had wise laws to bridle the ambition and controul the factions of potent citizens, and we have as yet no such laws.

I know it will be denied, that the Order is, what I do boldly assert it to be, an *hereditary peerage*. Some of its members assume the cloak of political modesty, and under it talk, that they are no more dangerous than a city-corporation of "shop-keepers, taylors, or other mechanics; or like the Free Masons and other clubs who wear badges or medals." Here we see how ambition can assume all shapes and colours, and humble itself to the very dust to accomplish its purpose! This moment take upon them the superintendence of empire, the *honour, union and happiness of nations,* and the *exalted rights of human nature*; and the very next prostrate themselves to the level of men, with whom to be compared on any other occasion, the Order would deem an insult. I say, that a body of military commanders, distinguished from the rest of society under an institution founded on the illustrious actions of so singular a revolution as that of America: invested with the exclusive privilege of wearing a badge of their order, honourable to themselves, as it is ignominious to the people; elevated above others, and in parity among themselves: these, I say, are peers of the realm, *pares regni*, and nothing more or less. And that this order being entailed on the *male issue*, and in default thereof, on the *collateral line*, makes it *hereditary*. And whether it be instituted by the legislature, who alone have the legal power to do it, or be usurped by the officers, it makes no difference in its consequences. For as I observed before, in one generation the order of Cincinnati will be established immoveably. The rank, number and influence of the members; the remembrance of their glorious actions, still heightened by the pro-

pensity of mankind to the marvellous: all this, I say, will raise the order to grandeur, antiquity, veneration and arbitrary power; acquisitions which will become hereditary with the peerage, and once obtained, not one family of them will ever think of renouncing.

But in support of the order, it will be alleged, that the states cannot pay the army, the officers will be contented with this *bauble*, and they will not abuse it. "'Tis like throwing a tub to a whale," they say. Should the states commit such a national iniquity, as not to pay their army, they merit eternal infamy, and to be *peer-ridden* into the bargain. And as to the officers resting satisfied with the *blue ribbon*, it is the nature of man never to be contented with any thing, nor secure of what he has, unless he be perpetually adding. And as this order would still be apprehensive of losing the exclusive honour and influence they had, they would eternally be caballing and working for more, to the disquiet of the government. [9] And admitting the present members would not abuse it; is any one certain, that their children will make no ill use of it? The officers can transmit to their posterity, their fortune, their reputation, and the peerage of the Cincinnati: but can they leave to them, as a legacy, that virtue which lately led them to encounter the hardships of a perilous war? Or when the present generation is off the stage, will the sons of our self-created patricians who will not experience the adversity their fathers bore in defending their liberties; will they, finding themselves raised above their neighbours, agree to descend, and live on a footing of equality with them? Or will they not rather, relying on the rank and power of an aristocratic nobility, disdaining private men, nor standing in fear of public laws, engross the offices, powers and influence of the republic, which should belong to the body of the people? Or in case any ambitious leader, or a few, should threaten the liberties of the commons; or Congress on a future day, invested with a revenue, a fleet and army, attempt a point of consequence; will they not support the one or the other, as it will be most likely to support their order? In such a dispute their weight would turn the scale; for the number of the peers of the order, reckoning honorary members (which their good policy would lead them to choose out of the first rate men) cannot be far short of ten thousand; and as they will be the principal men in America, to suppose that each can, by his

influence, procure two or three followers, which will adhere to his interest and service, is a reasonable calculation. Here is a body of 20 or 30,000 men immediately; and every generation will be adding to the number.

Had our officers less merit and claim to the applause of their countrymen at home, and to fame abroad, I should not be so alarmed at this bold usurpation of theirs. For a class of men of little worth, could never have the influence to render an institution of this nature detrimental to the freedom of their country. It would rather meet with ridicule, and dwindle into nothing. But it must be remembered, that a series of hardy, gallant, splendid actions, through a fierce and desperate conflict; their toils and sufferings; and the patience under them; and above all the glorious success which crowned the whole have rendered the officers of the American army, the most renowned band of men, that this day walk on the face of the globe. And was it as well acquainted as I am, with the temper of goodness and humanity which runs thro' the whole of them, they would be as much beloved as they are admired. Their bravery the world knows: But as it is not foreign to my subject, I shall give an example of their good sense and philanthropy, on a very eminent occasion. It will be a considerable aid for me, while I try to give an idea of their general character.

The southern army was encamped near Jacksonborough, and covered our assembly in 1782, while it was driving down the confiscation business; which has made so much noise, and out of which daily multiply so many unforeseen mischiefs. And it may be worthy of remarking, that from the commander down to the rugged, ragged centinel, the army in general held that act in destestation. The officers mixed with the members of both houses during the session, and opposed the measure with cool, gentleman-like reasoning; which I believe was one cause, that the list of the proscribed was no larger than it is. They could not account how the citizens of South Carolina, whose sufferings lasted only about 16 or 18 months, and most of whom had from the beginning of the troubles been speculating and making money, could be urged on by [10] such a fierce thirst for revenge, which they could not feel themselves: They who half naked and half starved, had passed thro' perils and necessity, and without pay or comfort suffered the extremities of climate, along from the walls of Quebec to the lines

of Savannah, and many of whom, in provosts and prison ships, went thro' the fiery trial of British insolence and barbarity; they could not without grief and horror, behold the distempered rage of their countrymen, thrusting out into utter ruin, their fellow citizens, without so much as hearing what could be alleged in their defence. Their manly souls, taught to humble the despotism of Britain, and bring her tyrants to their feet, disdained the miserable triumph of entailing sorrow upon women and children. Ye illustrious men! May the hand of oppression never compel your sons to drink the bitter cup of adversity! Or should the will of heaven destine them to suffer, may they find a friend to remember that their fathers were the friends of human nature under affliction. May an historian arise, who will think it a task as worthy a man of genius to record deeds of goodness, as acts of valour! But never, never, let so foul a stain be fastened on the human character, as that the very men, who with unfading honour, rescued their country from the galling yoke of foreigners, should lay the corner stone for erecting a tyranny themselves.

My observations here got to prove, that the order of Cincinnati, composed of our Major Generals, Brigadiers, and field officers, reinforced and firmly supported by all the potent families and leading first-rate men, in and out of the different legislatures and public bodies throughout America, whose influence and interest the deep policy of the Order has already determined to pre-engage as honorary members; that this body, I say, in consequence of their merit, services, and lustre of character, forms a very broad and respectable foundation for raising a hereditary nobility in America; and are much more likely to produce it, than were the heads and first founders of ancient or modern nobility in the world.

Let us go up to the source of nobility among the Romans, and see whether it will bear a comparison with the Cincinnati, the fountain of American peerage. In the first age of that republic, they had no idea of instituting such an order. We have only to imagine a society of men, living in a state of simplicity, with fortunes on a level, each possessing no more than two acres of ground. A few old men were chosen for the legislature; distinguished for nothing but the experience of years, and an affection they were supposed to have for the people: hence they called them *patres* or *fathers*. But the

descendents of these plain homespun families, in a few years by considering themselves as distinct from their fellow citizens; assuming pretensions; forming family unions; and cementing them by intermarriages: This policy alone, without title or badge of honor, laid in Rome the foundation of a nobility with such pride and thirst of domineering, that even *after monarchy was abolished*, by the deposition of the *Tarquin family*, the people, by whose assistance it was brought about, gained but little by the bargain. For the great families having once got the government into their hands, and united all the powers of the monarchy and nobility in their own order: then I say, *every patrician turned out a Tarquin,* with this difference, that the whole body was worse, by as much as a thousand tyrants are a greater curse than a single one.

So simple and contracted was the origin if peerage in that republic: as much inferior to the Cincinnati, the foundation of nobles in America, as the disorderly, plundering banditti, who first built [11] their cabins on the foundation of Rome, were beneath a corps of illustrious leaders, such as Washington, Green, St. Clair, Moultrie, Wayne, and the rest of them. The beginning of Roman nobility may be compared to a small spring which forms the head of a great river; it made ad first but a feeble stream; but running in a long trail of time it acquired strength from other rivulets. But the Cincinnati and its honorary members, is *that river* pretty nearly formed already: broad, deep, and forceable, and swoln to such a height that rolling on in *direct lines*, and *collateral meanders*, it would in a short time rise into such a *flush,* as to overflow its banks, and lay the country round it in one dismal scene of ruin.

As to the modern nobility of Europe, it was formed out of the rude, barbarian Generals and field officers of the Goth and Vandal army. And if we believe Robertson, many of those titles were, like the Cincinnati, self-created[*]. The British nobles or Barons sprung from the like origin: and their orders of knighthood particularly, had the most silly, trifling beginning. The knighthood of the garter took its rise, it is said, from the countess of Salisbury, in the reign of Edward III, dropping her garter while she was

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[*] "One step more compleated their usurpations, and rendered them unalienable. With an ambition no less enterprising and more preposterous, they appropriated to themselves titles of honor, as well as offices of power and trust." Hist. Cha. V.i v. p. 15.

dancing. That of the Bath, from another idle story. The order of St. Andrew, very dignified formerly, from a dream of a superstitious prince of Scotland. That of St. Patrick, lately instituted among the Irish, (who, though it is only a link in the chain which ties them down, are, it seems, very fond of it,) from a legendary tale of a fanatic preacher, who, if he ever existed at all, had not half the learning or merit of Whitefield or Wesley. At least nobody will insist that the men or circumstances which gave existence to those order, were so likely to produce an *hereditary distinction*, as the American Revolution and the Cincinnati, the fame of whose exploits resounds through the world.

If we trace nobility up to the head in Venice and other parts of Europe, we shall find it in every nation small and contemptible; but that the very creating of a *public distinct order*, uniformly terminated in every country, in servitude to the people. For the consequences of nobility all over Europe, as it would soon turn out in America, are deplorable. There, instead of being pillars for supporting the crown, as judge Blackthorne is pleased to call them, peers are actually tools and rivets for driving and clenching poverty, meanness and abasement of the people, who are chilled and stunted by the noble families, as the brush and under wood in the forest, is overshadowed and starved by the towering oaks above.

But although the force of those remarks is well known to men of sense of the army, yet they cannot be contented with the reputation which their services have secured to them, unless they appropriate an hereditary peerage. *Except their pay*, I cannot see any thing they want to satisfy them, unless that their eclat being so universal, popularity has, like a mistress after possession, lost her charms in their eyes; they consider her too common, and seek some other beauty out of the ordinary way. Are not their fellow-citizens already as far below many of them, as the earth is below the Heavens? Or can the glory of a human creature go higher, than it has carried some of them? Is it not enough that [12] every muse will raise trophies over their urns, which neither the revolution of ages, nor power of fortune can demolish? But all this, it seems, is nothing to the all-grasping, infatuating ambition of our Generals and field officers: unless they have *a quaint title* stuck upon their family, and a badge or bauble dangling at their button hole; which answers no other purpose in the world but to in-

troduce the misfortunes I have been pointing out, and to draw upon them the well-merited suspicion and jealousy of every man of any thought on the continent. Did these officers but consider what reputation and satisfaction they fly from, they would dissolve their institution at once, and sit down contented with the love and veneration of their fellow citizens.

This order will in time prove mischievous throughout the continent; but its effects will be sooner and more severely felt in South Carolina: and to shew this, I shall make a few remarks on the nature of our constitution, as it stands at present.

The government of this country, as formed by the constitution in 1778, was supposed to be a democracy. If this was the case, which I shall not dispute, it naturally ran into an aristocracy. The nature of the climate and fertility of the soil: The unequal distribution of property: The gentry below holding the government of the state throughout the war; and particularly, the want in the interior settlements, of men of knowledge and capacity for business: All this combined to establish the dominion and authority of a *few* below. But whatever its form was before the reduction of Charleston, it is this moment a pure, simple aristocracy, of about 1000 or 1500 families. The rest of the citizens are excluded from any share or interference in the government; although most of them are natives; capital settlers of old families; good Whigs; and the descendents too of men, who first planted this country, and helped to raise it to its present flourishing greatness. The reader may have to learn, that the aristocracy of South Carolina, is, and will continue to be *hereditary*: for unless the exclusion act be repealed, it will descend to the children of those who now have the government in their hands; while the posterity of the protection-men (as they are called) will be for ever shut out, as a consequence of their fathers forfeiture and degradation under that law.

This revolution (and I cannot call it by any other name) was effected *by law*, in the famous Jacksonborough assembly – whereby the great body of the people was debarred from the right of voting. The law is perpetual: an enormous power it vested in the *few*, was further augmented by the Confiscation Act, which broke up sundry able families: and the Amercement Law, super-added insult and degradation to others: those three laws, together with the distinction which the few set up between themselves, and

such as made a temporary submission to the British army, seemed to have done every thing necessary for concentrating in the few, the powers and weight of monarchy and of nobles. But the unfortunate *Commons* of this country received another blow from the Assembly which sat last January. Instead of redressing public calamities, it degraded the citizens, by forcing them on the humiliating necessity of petitioning, and cringing, in order to get off the lists. Their petitions, I would recommend to the perusal of him who will write of our affairs; and it will give him the heartake, if he possesses the independent, humane spirit of gentleman; or can feel how much more bitter than gall is the severity, and viler than slavery itself, is that debasement, to which man armed with power, and goaded on by passion, is capable of reducing [13] a fellow citizen. The more we look into the Jacksonborough business, the more do the political misfortunes of it croud upon our view; like a conflagration in a city, to the ravages it has already made, it is, according to the direction of the winds, hourly adding more, that were never foreseen nor thought of. And it may be truly said to have turned its fury against the incendiaries who help to light it; for most of them were staunch republicans, and passionately fond of liberty. But from their wanton, extravagant abuse of their power as legislators, they have been the melancholy cause, that the very name of a democracy, or government of the people, now begins to be hateful and offensive.

To apply the force of this remark, here, I must observe, that in the Jacksonborough proceedings, our first-rate men were the leaders and drivers, till the business was gone through. For the others with hearts fully bent on it, had not the heads to contrive a mischief of such magnitude. But after it was over, the gentry below, discovered more inclination to undo what was past; and were touched with more compassion than the other, for the miseries they had created. I believe this was more owing to the effects of education, which humanises the mind, than to policy, in the ways of which they are not as yet sufficiently hackneyed, however the thing itself has gained them considerable weight, while the democracy is sunk in ruin. For the generality begin to look up to the few, as alone possessing the prudence and policy of a civilized people, and alone worthy of holding the reins of the republic; while the democratic part of our Assembly are eyed, as unfeeling and inconsiderate, and making no scruple to abuse their power;

even to the trampling on the laws and rights of their fellow citizens, for the glorious exploit of hunting down a Tory. In short, the public opinion and power of the government, is in the side of the aristocracy; at the same time that the spirit of the people is thoroughly broken. In other countries governments, like thus human body, have had their growth, perfection and decay: but ours, like an untimely birth, suffered an abortion before it was in maturity fit to come into the world.

These remarks may appear trivial to some of my readers; but they are worthy, in my opinion, the attention of the philosopher and historian. They serve to shew, that the freedom of a country may be overturned by causes imperceptible to the multitude: and that when popular assemblies are carried away by violent passions, and strike at persons instead of things, they are then closely working for the aggrandisement of others; an while they avenge party injuries on petty enemies, only lay a snare for that liberty which should be held most dear to them and their posterity.

To hear some thoughtless people boast of our democracy, when it does not exist, is pleasant: for our government, I have shewn, is an aristocracy; and will be in a few years as fierce and oppressive as that of Poland and Venice, if the Order of Cincinnati be suffered to take root and spread in it, for it will compleat what the Jacksonborough policy has left undone.* There fresh slips of nobility will spring up, overshade and prevent the growth and flourishing [14] of our youth; and soon cover under one dark shade of vile insignificance und subserviency, the descendants of the middle and lower order of the virtuous few, and protection men: and after perishing every fair plant throughout the state, they will shoot forth branches wide-spreading on very side: and finally yield such bitter fruit, as will work a fatal poison to the little political health and happiness there is left us.

I have proved I hope to the reader's satisfaction, that the Cincinnati creates two distinct orders amongst us. 1st. A race of hereditary Nobles, founded on the military,

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* It seems no one who took protection will be admitted to the honour of the Order. Is not this asserting a superiority, at once ruinous to the equality of a republic? If the peers of the Order already draw such a line of separation, I would not wish to insinuate to what lengths their children will carry the distinction against the posterity of protection men.

together with the powerful families, and first rate, leading men in the state, whose view it will ever be, *to rule*: and 2d. The people or plebeians, whose only view is not to be oppressed; but whose certain fate it will be to suffer oppression under the institutions: I have shewed that it is a deep laid contrivance to beget, and perpetuate family grandeur in an aristocratic Nobility, to terminate at last in monarchical tyranny. And I shall now pass on to point out the constitutional means of opposing it.

I feel sensibly that the few remarks I have to make, are too bold an decisive to meet the approbation of some men. But if there be among my readers one, who merits the name of a republican, I have the confidence to believe his opinion will go along with mine.

To crush this Order, then, without embroiling the state, there is but one way. Let the legislature immediately enter into spirited resolutions against it; let them tell the Order, and the world, that however pious or patriotic the pretence, yet any political combination of military commanders, is in a republican government, extremely hazardous, and highly censurable. But that instituting exclusive honours and privileges of an Hereditary Order, is a daring usurpation of the sovereignty of the republic; a dangerous insult to the rights and liberties of the people, and a fatal stab to that principle of equality, which forms the basis of our government; to establish which the people fought and bled as well as he Cincinnati; though the latter are now taking every measure to rob them of the credit, and of the fruits of it. If this would not do, and the Order still go on; yet such a resolve would have a good effect. It would, like Ithuriel's spear in Milton, touch the Order; and however plausible the external appearance, under which it now sits transformed, the resolution would oblige it, as the fallen angel in paradise, to start up in its own true hideous shape and likeness; and then we should know how to grapple with. it. And afterwards, though I am willing to consider our officers as the plank, which bore us through the storm safe to land, yet I am one that would not let it be the means of drowning us in a calm, within the harbour. The examples of the wisest, and most renowned republics of which history furnishes any account, and the opinion of the ablest political writers, will support me in a doctrine, which I should discuss on

the present occasion, if I were certain that our citizens, for whose information I am writing, were good stuff for republicans.

With regard to myself, I will be candid to own, that although I am morally certain the institution will entail upon us the evils I have mentioned; yet I have not the most distant idea, that it will come to a dissolution. The first class, or leading gentry in the state, and who will always hold the government, will find their interest in supporting a distinction that will gratify their ambition, by removing them far above their fellow citizens. The middling order of our gentry, and substantial land holders, may see its tendency, but they can take no step to oppose it, having little to do with the [15] government. And the lower class, with the city populace, will never reason on it, till they will feel the smart, and then they will have neither the power nor capacity for any reformation. Besides, the society will have more adherents from another quarter than they are aware of. The seeds of internal division, and a variety of humours are thick in this country. The legislature bearing hard on many families, and individuals: public and private partiality and injustice: malecontents biassed in favour of monarchy: all this will raise a party, who out of hatred to the government of the people, will range themselves under the banners of any man or faction, to promote its interest, and be avenged.

These things I know too well, to entertain the vain hope of any individual succeeding in opposition. But although I foresee the consequences, yet I think it a point of duty to give this public testimony of my dislike of the Order. I trust its members will pardon me, if I shall ever hold it ignominious, that those gallant citizens, who with as much valour and perseverance, though not with the same eclat, as the continental officers, stepped forth and assisted in subduing the Lion, should submit to be degraded by creatures of their own rank and condition.

CASSIUS.

Charleston, October 10, 1783.

POSTSCRIPT.

Since the foregoing publication was in the press, a set of "Rules and Bye Laws of the Society of Cincinnati established in South-Carolina," have been printed and handed about in this city. I have perused their rules and I am more convinced than ever, that the institution is one of the most extraordinary factions, which the story of republics furnishes any account of; that my notion of it, my arguments on the subject, and my apprehensions concerning its consequences, are well founded. I shall transcribe the first rule, and conclude with a few remarks. It runs thus:

"The State Society accedes to the propositions and rules transmitted to Maj. Gen. Moultrie, by Maj. Gen. Heath and Steuben, respectively, on the 20th May and – day of June last; with this reservation, that if the said proposition or rules, should by any construction be held obligatory on the society, to interfere in any shape whatsoever, with the civil polity, of this or any of the United States, or the United States in general, this society will not deem themselves bound thereby: They prizing too highly the civil liberties of their country, and their own rights as citizens, to consent that a military society, should in any sense dictate to civil authority."

Here is a candid fair acknowledgement, that no small danger was to be apprehended to lurk under the institution of a military society. They disclaim, it is true, all sinister views in themselves; and so may the Grand Order, although they let the cat out of the bag too soon, make us the same fine promises in some future resolution. Their prizing too highly the liberties of their country, and their own rights as citizens, is all the security we have against them.

But I would as men of knowledge among them, if there be one example in the world of an ambitious man or powerful faction, who [16] to bring about their design, did not pretend to be public benefactors; warm advocates for the public; and wonderfully careful of the civil liberties of their country? Is not this the surest way of undermining? When Cromwell and his Major Generals, those scourges of monarchy, and champions for popular government, when they were executing their fine schemes, did they tell the world they intended to usurp the sovereignty, though this was their design? Or did not they amuse even their own party, with preaching and canting about

religion and liberty? Were their usurpations the less so, because they fought well, served their country, and made fair promises?

The second rule of the State Order, tells us, "the principal end of the Society, is to maintain their indigent officers and their widows, and to maintain their indigent children." For my own part, I entertain not an idea of such degeneracy in the state, as to suppose it will not make a decent provision for them. But for the purpose of a charitable use, to entail a nobility on the Cincinnati, which will entail bondage on the people, is charity with a witness! It is like that sort of benevolence that would introduce the plague, in order to get rid of a quartan ague.

FINIS.

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Lebenslauf

Markus Hünemörder

Implerstr. 25 - 81371 München - Tel.: (089) 74665746 - markus@huenemoerder.de

geboren am	1. Februar 1971 in Madang, Papua Neuguinea
Familienstand	Ledig
Staats-angehörigkeit	deutsch

Schulische Ausbildung

1981-1987	Besuch des Friedrich-Schiller-Gymnasiums, Fellbach
1987-1988	Besuch der Central Highschool, Springfield, Missouri, USA
1988-1991	Besuch des Staufer-Gymnasiums, Waiblingen. Abschluß mit Abitur.

Wissenschaftliche Ausbildung

1993-1997	Studium der Amerikanischen Kulturgeschichte, Politikwissenschaft und Volkswirtschaft an der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München
1995-1996	Studium der Geschichte an der University of New Orleans, Lousiana, USA.
	Magisterarbeit "The Local Side of Nation-Building: Connecticut's Ratification of the Constitution, 1787-88"
	Abschluß mit Master of Arts in Geschichte
Seit 1997	Promotionsstudium an der LMU München.
	Betreuer: Prof. Dr. Berndt Ostendorf
	Hauptfach Amerikanische Kulturgeschichte, Nebenfächer Politikwissenschaft und Amerikanische Literaturgeschichte.

Berufliche Tätigkeiten

1994-1997	Studentische Hilfskraft am Amerika-Institut der LMU München
seit Oktober 1997	Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter am Amerika-Institut der LMU München