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# CONSPIRACY IN THE NEW REPUBLIC: PETER PORCUPINE AND THE LESSONS FROM REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE

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Alleged conspiracy theories and alleged threats against the constitutional republic are nearly as old as the Constitution itself. This is a logical expression of a divided, post-colonial society establishing a new form of government while seeking to agree upon the true nature of its revolution. Deciding the appropriate balance between change and continuity was an ongoing task in the early republic; elements of those debates remain to the present day. The vigorous debates in the new republic through the 1790s reflected a complicated morass of contradictions that defied easy explanation, much less agreement. Creating a new national government to replace the ineffectual Continental Congress was not an easy process, and the debates between advocates of a stronger national government and those favoring the rights of the states were often volatile. Divisions based on class and geography persisted, and arguments surrounding cultural and social change found their expression in the growing divide between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans.

The ratification of the Constitution was far from the inevitable, uncontested event that twenty-first century American culture remembers. In many places, ratification was a bitterly contested political event that contrasted several different theories of how to balance the need for national political strength that was required to preserve order in the nation with the popular fear that was associated with a powerful national government.<sup>1</sup> The very public debate between Federalists and anti-Federalists reached some degree of conclusion by the ratification of the Constitution, but serious divides continued to separate the competing visions of American society. The Constitution provided a broad outline for the political organization for the early American republic, but no political document could produce a consensus over how the document should be interpreted or how questions of political disagreement would be handled. The Constitution did provide for a

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<sup>1</sup> THE FEDERALIST NO. 70, at 391 (ALEXANDER HAMILTON) (Clinton Rossiter ed., 1999).

series of formal federal political structures, but those structures were often times weak, contested, and in constant evolution due to very serious personal, philosophical, and political conflicts among society elites. Political parties had no place in the classical concept of Republican government.<sup>2</sup> Steeped in the traditions of classical Greece and Republican Rome, the authors of the Constitution created no structure for the operation of political parties. The vice of the political party, or faction, represented one of the many evils of governance that the new constitution sought to control. However, this worthy goal did not survive Washington's first administration. Political factions quickly coalesced around differing economic, philosophical, and religious viewpoints almost as soon as the ink was dry on the first draft of the Constitution. The Federalist Party tended to be "conservative," supporting a strong central government operated by elites, encouraging commercial interests, advocating friendly relations with Britain, a standing military, and a strong support for social order based at least in part on Christian morality. The Democratic-Republican, on the other hand, was the more "liberal" of the two parties. Republicans supported a weaker central government, rural and agricultural interests, and tended to seek friendly relations with France as opposed to Britain, while holding a worldview that based public order on the intelligence of the population as well as their piety.

The ideological rupture in Europe as a result of the French Revolution further complicated the era's debates. Americans of every profession and every political opinion kept a careful eye on European affairs, and what changes there may serve as models—or warnings—for the new republic. Foreign policy debates on the merits of supporting revolutionary France or the more conservative Great Britain took on a distinctly domestic connotation. Any political stance that could be perceived as favoring one side or the other was construed as an effort to mold American society into an imitation of one of the European countries. This framework supported a host of conspiracy theories, counter-conspiracy theories, character assassinations, misrepresentations, and outright propaganda in the American press. The growing availability of print media intersected with all of these trends. The social and cultural debates that once would have been the purview of the elites debating behind closed doors were now contested in public by the general public. The increased use of newspapers as a means of conducting public conversation often polarized the public body through the use of fiery

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<sup>2</sup> See JOHN F. BERENS, *PROVIDENCE & PATRIOTISM IN EARLY AMERICA, 1640-1815* 112 (1978).

political rhetoric that often times bordered on personal slander.<sup>3</sup> The spread of information and views through the newspapers that allowed for a public debate of political issues throughout the country reinforced not only the beginnings of an American public identity, but also exposed some of the fault lines that were embedded in this new national construction.

Into this picture stepped William Cobbett, a recent immigrant from England. Cobbett was a writer and political theorist best remembered in British history as an advocate for parliamentary reform. In American history, he is remembered as a conservative gadfly and journalist with close but undefined links to the Federalist Party. The truth is more complex than either vision. In his 1924 biography of Cobbett, author G.D.H. Cole remarked that Cobbett “spans the gulf between two worlds—between the aristocratic feudalism of the eighteenth century and the plutocratic absolutism of the new industrial system.”<sup>4</sup> Cobbett was not an unthinking reactionary or an unquestioning supporter of Great Britain, as many of his critics in the United States contended. He was also not the radical reformer British audiences claimed, for reasons good or ill. Rather, Cobbett was a romantic seeking a return to the comfort of the mid-eighteenth century who equally feared the combination of aristocracy and capital on one hand and Jacobin revolution on the other.<sup>5</sup> This places him politically as a classic British country gentleman—a supporter of property, possessing a basic economic competency, mild religion, and with a keen interest in order. Cobbett’s vision of society and social change saw Edmund Burke as a model rather than Thomas Jefferson. The idea of the Jeffersonian yeoman, and the Democratic-Republican concept of the agrarian republic superficially reflected Cobbett’s agrarian interests, but Cobbett’s conception of an agrarian society was far different than Jefferson’s. Cobbett became a regular villain in the Democratic-Republican press due to a number of political conflicts that would become more apparent with time.

Cobbett came from humble origins and learned to read and write while serving as an enlisted man in the British army. There is a dichotomy between Cobbett’s political beliefs and his class background, however his writings do not suggest that he dwelled on the apparent incongruity. From this unlikely background sprang an author, political commentator, and

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<sup>3</sup> See RICHARD N. ROSENFELD, *AMERICAN AURORA: A DEMOCRATIC-REPUBLICAN RETURNS. THE SUPPRESSED HISTORY OF OUR NATION’S BEGINNINGS AND THE HEROIC NEWSPAPER THAT TRIED TO REPORT IT* 25 (1997).

<sup>4</sup> G.D.H. COLE, *THE LIFE OF WILLIAM COBBETT* 1 (2011).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 8-11.

political pundit. After returning to England from service in Nova Scotia, Cobbett asked for and received his discharge in 1791. Fleeing potential prosecution for his accounts of corruption in the army and seeking a career as a writer, Cobbett fled to France in March 1792. Writing his autobiography in 1798, Cobbett noted that his time on “French Leave” were the happiest of his life. The bias against the French people and religion taught to him in England was a deception. His neighbors were “honest, pious, and kind to excess” except for those that “were already blasted with the principles of the accursed revolution.”<sup>6</sup> Upon hearing of the collapse of the monarchy, Cobbett embarked for America as he feared the unhealthy political climate in France.<sup>7</sup> From this early adventure, we see a key element of Cobbett’s political philosophy. His conflict was not with France as a country or the French as a people. Rather, his disdain was for an ideology which could be adopted—or rejected—by people anywhere.

Settling in Philadelphia, Cobbett soon found himself in demand as a newspaper and pamphlet writer, publishing in support of Federalist leaning causes such as supporting close relations with Britain and opposing the French Republic. For him, the Federalist government ensured peace and ordered freedom for all. Revolutionary France provided a loathsome alternative model that he despised and feared would come to America by means fair or foul. His time in France ingrained in him the belief that the values of the French Revolution were a type of corruption—that much like his neighbors in France, the “good” people of society could only fear their corrupted neighbors. As time progressed and his fame increased, Cobbett himself would become enmeshed in the public accusations of conspiracy and counter conspiracy that characterized 1790’s politics.

The fall of the French monarchy in 1791 and subsequent execution of Louis XVI in 1793 led to a series of wars in Europe lasting until 1815. The situation presented contradictory lessons on the relationship between liberty and order that Americans applied to the United States. The growing divides of the first party system intersected with these external events, and political debate within the United States often devolved into a referendum on the European conflict, both in terms of geopolitics and as a philosophical

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<sup>6</sup> PETER PORCUPINE, *THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF PETER PORCUPINE, WITH A FULL AND FAIR ACCOUNT OF ALL HIS AUTHORIZING TRANSACTIONS; BEING A SURE AND INFALLIBLE GUIDE FOR ALL ENTERPRISING YOUNG MEN WHO WISH TO MAKE A FORTUNE BY WRITING PAMPHLETS. TO WHICH IS ADDED, HIS WILL AND TESTAMENT* 27 (Glasgow, D. Niven 1798).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 28.

examination of what path the American nation should take. As time progressed, fears of conspiracy to support either a more classically conservative, pro-British Federalist vision of the republic or a more liberal, pro-France vision became regular features in the American press.

Adopting the penname Peter Porcupine, Cobbett used his pen to attack the two most dangerous influences encroaching from France: irreligion and radicalized political attacks against the existing political order. Based on his observations and conclusions from France and applying those lessons to his new home in America, Porcupine saw the political debates of the 1790s as being orchestrated by potentially well-meaning but misguided Americans, or more likely, outright agents of France working behind the scenes through front organizations like the Democratic-Republican societies. To their benefactors, the Democratic-Republican clubs were social and educational in nature. To detractors like Porcupine, they were explicitly political groups that existed only to ferment dissent and conflict.

The first direct target of his ire was Dr. Joseph Priestley, a well-known but somewhat disreputable British scientist, social reformer, and Unitarian. To Porcupine, Priestley was a dangerous man, whose pamphlet *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* advocated for a reformed Unitarian Christianity that Porcupine saw as little removed from atheism. Priestley's embrace of some elements of the French Revolution rankled him, and he genuinely feared what influence he might have in the United States. As the New York Democratic-Republican Club celebrated Priestley's arrival in the United States as a refugee from injustice, Porcupine saw the occasion as proof of a threat against the United States brought about by the public adulation of a figure with a dark past that included a celebration of the fall of the Bastille so obnoxious that a riot ensued. Although Priestley sued the city of Birmingham, England and won a judgement for damages resulting from the riot, the case proved to Porcupine that Priestley's celebration indicated that he also approved of the subsequent political violence in France, which saw the death of thousands of suspected enemies of the revolution.<sup>8</sup> In Cobbett's view, the religious debate that Priestley raised on Unitarianism was nothing more than a plot to "introduce their political claims and projects under the mask of religion."<sup>9</sup> Unitarianism, according to Cobbett, was a

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<sup>8</sup> PETER PORCUPINE, OBSERVATIONS ON THE EMIGRATION OF DR. JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, AND ON SEVERAL ADDRESSES DELIVERED TO HIM ON HIS ARRIVAL AT NEW YORK 6 (Phila., Tho. Bradford 1794).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 5.

political movement, not a religious debate. The immigration of Joseph Priestley to America was not the search for one man's religious freedom, but the desperate flight of a failed revolutionary akin to those in France.<sup>10</sup> By extension, the welcome given to Priestley was a show of support for a dangerous evolution in irreligious thought and a potentially subversive political ideology.

Porcupine's opinion of the Democratic-Republican clubs was not improved by the actions of the Philadelphia chapter. Alexander Hamilton, a well-known member of the Federalist Party and a close associate of President Washington, linked the spread of the Democratic Societies with the presence of Citizen Genet, the French ambassador to the United States.<sup>11</sup> Officially, the United States was a neutral power in the war sweeping through Europe. Genet's mission, however, was to encourage support for Revolutionary France with the end goal of bringing the country into an open alliance against Great Britain and other foes. One correspondent of Hamilton wrote that the groups were "Jacobin Clubs" that existed to promote "an idea to the People of America that there are such defects in our Government as to require an association to guard against them."<sup>12</sup> Rather than being a social or philosophical club, the Democratic-Republican Societies were inherently political and served as an external pressure group to influence government policy. Potentially, this could be outright subversive. Hamilton himself had heard that Genet was the president of the Philadelphia Democratic Society. He described this situation as a "subject of alarm."<sup>13</sup> Potentially the most alarming element was the open and public nature of these potentially subversive activities. The May 7, 1794 edition of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* contains an article detailing a celebration thrown by the Philadelphia Democratic-Republican club to celebrate the successes of the French Republic:

Though the celebration of the day [St. Tammany's] by several separate companies, deprived the general meeting of a number of true Republicans, and though the notice of this Civic Festival was but short, yet about 800 citizens, among

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<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>11</sup> STANLEY ELKINS & ERIC MCKITRICK, *THE AGE OF FEDERALISM: THE EARLY AMERICAN REPUBLIC* 363 (1993).

<sup>12</sup> JAMES ROGER SHARP, *AMERICAN POLITICS IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC: A NEW NATION IN CRISIS* 87 (1993).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 87.

whom the Governor and several officers of the State and Federal governments attended, assembled to celebrate those events which have to eminently conducted to consolidate French liberty and guarantee our independence. The Minister and other officers of the French republic favoured the citizens with their company.<sup>14</sup>

The St. Tammany celebration was evidence of any number of nefarious trends. The presence of Genet and other officials at a spontaneous gathering in support of France was a symptom of conspiracy and disorder. Further, this incident also involved members of the federal and Pennsylvania state governments, suggesting to observers like Cobbett and Hamilton that this conspiracy had a foothold in the official governing structures of the United States.

In his writings on Priestley and the Democratic-Republican Clubs, we see the pillars of Porcupine's political ideology- fidelity to Trinitarian Christianity, support for traditional order, and the formal political structure as embodied by the Federalists in general and President Washington in particular. Most importantly, any disagreement with any of these ideas in form or in content automatically meant support for a Reign of Terror style of revolution in the United States. Further, we see from the case study that Porcupine is not an isolated voice in his concerns. Government officials like Hamilton also linked chaos and the example of France with fears of potential civil disruptions in the United States. The Democratic-Republican clubs were not social or philosophical in nature to him, rather they represented a threat to the American Government in the same way that the Jacobin clubs of France threatened—and eventually collapsed—the French Government.

The *Gazette* was a well-respected and widely circulated publication, which suggests two important features of 1790s political culture that Porcupine had difficulty reconciling to his conception of the Republic. First, there was a market for pro-French news, indicating that there was some level of popular support for revolutionary France. Although this may not extend to the unfolding actions of Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety, the idea of a more radical revolution in property and structure had some undefined appeal. Second, it reflects a genuine split in American political culture that was just becoming open; it was now apparent that two distinct interpretations of American society and foreign policy existed. Porcupine

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<sup>14</sup> *Philadelphia, May 7. CIVICFESTIVAL. PENNSYLVANIA GAZETTE, May 7, 1794, at 3.*



saw the debate as a strict moral dichotomy: one either supported the nation, church, and ordered liberty, or one conspired against the nation by embracing a French influenced philosophy in the guise of “loyal” opposition and “free thought.”

Hamilton and Porcupine’s interpretation of events was reflective of a substantive body of public opinion and a fundamental philosophical belief about the nature of the federal government. The Federalist conception of consensus politics linked the success of Washington in the revolution with divine intervention on behalf of the American people. The personality cult of Washington intertwined this with support for the Federalist administration and policies combined to cast the Republican Party as the tool of France.<sup>15</sup> Opposition to Washington’s regime, or any of its policies was not only unpatriotic but also an unholy act that was an affront to both secular and religious structures. Federalists tied the growth of the Democratic-Republican Party and the Democratic-Republican clubs with the rise of Deism and religious infidelity inspired by France.<sup>16</sup> The very existence of the clubs formed a challenge against the historical and social narrative of the Federalist Party. Washington himself labeled the clubs as “the most diabolical attempts to destroy the best fabric of government, that has ever been presented for the acceptance of mankind.”<sup>17</sup> Discontent with conservative Federalist ideology was not a discontent brought about by genuine disagreement within the American political body; rather discontent was a foreign infection that hindered the proper order of a well-functioning society.

The execution of Louis XVI, and subsequent Reign of Terror in France was a slow turning point for American perceptions of the revolution. The truly radical course of the French Revolution and its divergence from the American experience during its revolution could no longer be ignored as time progressed. Even Genet was compelled to seek refuge in the United States out of fear of Robespierre and the radicalized revolutionary movement. Fears of social upheaval in the United States brought many to the conclusion that the French example of irreligion and rapid social change could collapse the fragile American nation. Conservatives began a public counterattack against

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<sup>15</sup> BERENS, *supra* note 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 135.

<sup>17</sup> John L. Brooke, *Ancient Lodges and Self-Created Societies: Voluntary Association and the Public Sphere in the Early Republic*, in RONALD HOFFMAN AND PETER ALBERT, EDs., *LAUNCHING THE EXTENDED REPUBLIC: THE FEDERALIST ERA* 310 (1996).

“French” ideas by promoting newspaper writers such as Porcupine. Cobbett’s *Porcupine’s Gazette* had a paid subscribership of over 3,000 making it one of the most widely circulated newspapers in the early republic.<sup>18</sup> Cobbett was the voice of Burkean Conservatism in the United States, and his analysis covered many of the same elements for the American audience.

Porcupine’s brand of conservatism had an almost endless supply of fodder to feed upon. One of the most provocative books of the time was Thomas Paine’s reflections on theology. Paine’s American revolutionary credentials were impeccable. During the 1790s, however, he was a delegate to the National Assembly of France. Running afoul of his more radical colleagues, Paine was in prison by 1793 awaiting execution. In his time in jail, he started what he believed to be his final work on the subjects of religion and theology. Combined together, his musings were published as *The Age of Reason* in 1794. *The Age of Reason* forms a watershed in the public perception of Deistic thought by making Deistical tracts readily available for popular consumption, thereby stoking conservative fears of the connection between the example of France, religious infidelity, and social disorder.

*The Age of Reason* was a divisive tract not only because of the popular audience for the work but also for the direct critique of the Christian faith. Paine attacked community religion by casting nationally instituted religion as a “human invention, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.”<sup>19</sup> Paine attacked the theology of Christianity for its dependence on a narrative that attempted to create a communal religious experience based on the word of only a few direct witnesses. For Paine, revelation was limited to anyone that actually heard the voice of God; revelation was not a communal event.<sup>20</sup> Further, although Paine recognized Christ as a great moral philosopher, he believed reasonable evidence concerning His divine nature was inadequate.<sup>21</sup>

The tract amounted to a public manifesto extolling the benefits of Deistical thought that brought Deistical debate to the public to a degree that was exceptionally uncommon for philosophical literature during this time. In his book, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America*, Herbert Morais wrote, “With the publication of *The Age of Reason*, the axis about which deistic

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<sup>18</sup> WILLIAM COBBETT, PETER PORCUPINE IN AMERICA: PAMPHLETS ON REPUBLICANISM AND REVOLUTION 35 (1994).

<sup>19</sup> WILLIAM M. VAN DER WEYDE, THE LIFE AND WORKS OF THOMAS PAINE 1, 398 (Patriots’ Ed., Vol. I, Thomas Paine Nat’l Hist. Ass’n 1925).

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 11-12.

thought in America rotated, the new ideology reached the rural and urban masses.”<sup>22</sup> There was no set definition for Deistic thought; many Deists adapted easily to existing streams of social thought.<sup>23</sup> Douglass Adair and Marvin Harvey argue that Deistic thought influenced the “religious thought or behavior of practically every educated man in the Atlantic civilization . . .”<sup>24</sup> Deistic thought had many manifestations of the relation between the divine and reason, from the violently anti-Christian thought of Voltaire to Unitarians like Jefferson and Adams, to those who remained within the framework of orthodox Christianity.<sup>25</sup> The exact theology was less important than the social effects. What had once been a hushed debate within the upper classes, or a reform movement within the overarching structure of Christianity, was transformed into a public debate over the very existence of Christianity as a foundation for personal or community relations.

Paine also offended American public opinion by questioning the role of George Washington during the revolutionary struggle. In a letter reprinted in the *American Aurora*, Paine argued that Washington did not in fact win the Revolutionary War; rather, America’s victory was due to the intervention of France on the battlefield and as a vital prop to the American economy. Not only was this letter an attack on the figure of George Washington, but it was also an attack on the Federalist conception of the American Revolution and an open support for France at a time when support for France was on the decline.<sup>26</sup> Washington declared it “the most insulting letter that he ever received” while John Adams wrote, “He must have been insane to write so.”<sup>27</sup>

*The Age of Reason*, along with Paine’s other prison writings, provoked a number of responses. Cobbett’s commentary on *The Age of Reason* was an incendiary attack on both the work and the author: “*The Age of Reason* cannot be better described than by saying that it is as stupid and

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<sup>22</sup> HERBERT M. MORAIS, DEISM IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AMERICA 120 (1960).

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 16, 88-89. Morais writes that basic religious beliefs of Deists focused on the restoration of Christianity to the simple doctrines that Christ taught while stripping away the useless man created rituals associated with churches. Direct divine interactions such as miracles were also outside the interests of this Deistic God because it would not be in keeping with the theology that God ruled the world through his universal laws.

<sup>24</sup> Douglass Adair & Marvin Harvey, *Was Alexander Hamilton a Christian Statesman?*, 12 WM. & MARY QUARTERLY 308, 312 (1955).

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> ROSENFELD, *supra* note 3, at 33.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

despicable as its author.”<sup>28</sup> In Cobbett’s analysis, the tract was a means of Paine easing his plight in prison by integrating himself with Danton and Robespierre.<sup>29</sup> Paine, by this logic, was not speaking from a place of careful and conscious thought about God and the nature of Christianity; he was acting as the voice of an atheistic regime that destroyed both religious and social orders with abandon. There were more than thirty-five printed replies to *The Age of Reason*, and it was “[s]houted down from virtually every pulpit in the country . . .”<sup>30</sup> By crossing the line from the advocacy of reform within the broader theology of Christianity to an open attack on it, he also personally crossed the river that divided his place in the pantheon of revolutionary heroes to a distant shore of obscurity if not outright hatred.<sup>31</sup> There were fears of Deistic philosophy spreading beyond the bounds of the wealthy and educated to the masses of people.<sup>32</sup> Not only would this leave the social hierarchy open to question, but also, the perceived moral basis of society was open to attack.

Writing in 1965, the American historian Richard Hofstadter wrote in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, that the reactions of figures like Porcupine display the attributes of a “paranoid style” in American political culture.<sup>33</sup> The paranoid style featured “moral indignation” brought about by “a hostile and conspiratorial world. . . directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life. . .”<sup>34</sup> Porcupine’s writings as well as Hofstadter’s interpretation of his work illustrate not only the degree to which organized political dissent in the early republic was equated with a conspiracy against both order and religion, but also the fracturing of the Federalist consensus.

Peter Porcupine was unwilling to let the outrage of Paine’s writings rest, and he had a vast audience for his commentary. Even political foes such

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<sup>28</sup> COBBETT, *supra* note 19, at 219.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 221.

<sup>30</sup> Gary B. Nash, *The American Clergy and the French Revolution*, 22 WM. & MARY QUARTERLY 392, 403 (1965).

<sup>31</sup> G. ADOLF KOCH, *REPUBLICAN RELIGION: THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND THE CULT OF REASON* 1, 135 (2nd ed. Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith 1964). One New Jersey stagecoach owner declared that “‘he’d be damn’d if Tom Paine should go in *his* stage” because he was a Deist or an atheist. One editorial in the Baltimore Republican referred to him as “Thou lily-livered sinical rogue, thou gibbet inheriting slave, thou art nought but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pander, and the son and heir of some drunken she-devil . . .” *Id.* at 133-36.

<sup>32</sup> MORAIS, *supra* note 23, at 121.

<sup>33</sup> RICHARD HOFSTADTER, *THE PARANOID STYLE IN AMERICAN POLITICS AND OTHER ESSAYS* 14 (1st ed. New York, Knopf 1965).

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 4.

as the noted Democratic-Republican politician Benjamin Rush severely critiqued Paine: “His principles avowed in his *Age of Reason* were so offensive to me that I did not wish to renew my intercourse with him.”<sup>35</sup> The temporary unity could not last. Writing in March 1796, Porcupine expanded on his analysis of the French Revolution in general and *The Age of Reason* affair in particular in “The Bloody Buoy.” The pamphlet argued that the success of the French Revolution was predicated on the destruction of the Catholic Church by atheistic (or at least Deist) free thinking philosophes.<sup>36</sup> Porcupine’s attitudes on “unconventional” religion and its intersection with politics was well established by the Priestley case years earlier. But further, modern philosophers, in his eyes, were either atheists or Deists who propagated their philosophies with “a sort of fanaticism in irreligion that leads the atheist to seek for proselytes with a zeal that would do honour to a good cause, but which, employed in a bad one, becomes the scourge of society.”<sup>37</sup>

The equation of Enlightenment philosophy with irreligion is an important link between Cobbett’s views on politics and society. Political figures that were part of the Enlightenment intellectual movement, such as Thomas Jefferson and those that supported Jeffersonian thought, were suspect in his eyes due to their attachment to an atheistic doctrine. These figures were also untrustworthy because Cobbett attached an Evangelical ethic to the atheistic doctrine of the Enlightenment. Although not conspiratorial in a strict sense of the word, the conflation between Enlightenment, irreligion, and political debate formed another cornerstone in Porcupine’s analysis.

The “Bloody Buoy” examined the course of American politics over the course of the previous four years through this analytical lens, and in light of American neutrality in the ongoing war between France and Great Britain. Drawing parallels to the French Revolution, Porcupine noted that a vast but unnamed coalition of people had conspired together to discredit Great Britain and anything that resembled the ordered liberty of the British government:

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<sup>35</sup> KOCH, *supra* note 32, at 135.

<sup>36</sup> PETER PORCUPINE, *THE BLOODY BUOY, THROWN OUT AS A WARNING TO THE POLITICAL PILOTS OF AMERICA; OR A FAITHFUL RELATION OF A MULTITUDE OF ACTS OF HORRID BARBARITY, SUCH AS THE EYE NEVER WITNESSED, THE TONGUE NEVER EXPRESSED, OR THE IMAGINATION CONCEIVED, UNTIL THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION* 1, 15 (2nd ed. Phila.: Benjamin Davies 1796).

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 228.

A combination of circumstances . . . has so soured the minds of the great mass of people in this country, has worked up their hatred against Great Britain to such a pitch, that the instant that the nation is named, they lose not only their temper but their reason also. The dictates of nature and the exercise of judgement are thrown aside: whatever the British adopt must be rejected, and whatever they reject must be adopted.”<sup>38</sup>

Porcupine was providing commentary on Jay’s Treaty with Great Britain. The end of the revolution left a number of political and trade issues unresolved. Jay’s Treaty provided for continuing peace, with some minor concessions on colonial era debts and American complaints on British interference with American trade.<sup>39</sup> For Democratic-Republicans, this was an unconscionable act that subordinated the United States to Great Britain while adopting an explicitly pro-British foreign policy at odds with neutrality and the interests of republican France. Porcupine and elements of his readership feared that the political disorder associated with the French Revolution would spread to America through the influence of American intellectuals who had ties to France. The debates over Jay’s Treaty were not just about the treaty itself or an honest debate over national interests. It was a much more symbolic stance in the favor of order and the Constitution in opposition to anarchy. This was an association Porcupine explicitly made: “the truth is, those among us who have made the most noise, and expressed the most rancor against Great Britain, seem to have done it only to cover their enmity to the federal government, and consequently to their country, if we may with propriety call it their country.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, figures in American politics like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison that opposed the Treaty were suspect of poor judgement at best, if not outright treason.

Fear for the state of political order was not an idle concern. In 1794, an outbreak of violence in western Pennsylvania, later labelled the Whisky Rebellion, broke out. The spark for the riot was federal taxation policies on whisky production, but more broadly, it was an expression of discontent with

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<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 330-31.

<sup>39</sup> Treaty of Amity Commerce and Navigation, between His Britannic Majesty and the United States of America, Gr. Brit.-U.S., Nov. 19, 1794.

<sup>40</sup> PETER PORCUPINE, A BONE TO GNAW FOR DEMOCRATS; OR, OBSERVATIONS ON A PAMPHLET ENTITLED ‘THE POLITICAL PROGRESS OF BRITAIN’ 1, 27 (3rd ed. Phila.: Thomas Bradford 1795).

a number of issues ranging from tax, a lack of effective political representation, and the ongoing conflicts with Native American tribes in the Ohio Valley. The outbreak of mob violence, including an armed attack on the local tax collector, presented a challenge to the federal government. The possibility of an open rebellion against the government of the United States spurred President Washington into action. In an August 1794 proclamation, Washington commanded all “insurgents” to peacefully return to their homes.<sup>41</sup> According to Washington’s proclamation, after he had called for the insurgents to return home, he also had the authority to call forth the militias of Pennsylvania and other states to enforce the law as the disorder was caused “by combinations too powerful to be suppressed by the ordinary course of judicial proceedings or by the powers vested in the marshal of that district.”<sup>42</sup> This last point was contested by Pennsylvania’s Democratic-Republican governor Thomas Mifflin, who argued that the full force of the state courts still had not been tried.<sup>43</sup>

President Washington declared it an open rebellion against the United States and dispatched 12,000 federalized militia to restore order. For Washington, the decision to resort to military coercion was the last possible resolution of a morality play in which he exhorted “all individuals, officers, and bodies of men, to contemplate with abhorrence the measures leading directly or indirectly to those crimes” which made this sorrowful step necessary.<sup>44</sup> The final instructions to the army were issued on October 20; the instructions charged the army with “suppress[ing] the combinations which exist in some of the western counties of Pennsylvania” by overcoming “any armed opposition which might exist” and “to countenance and support the civil officers in the means of executing the laws.”<sup>45</sup> Armed force was not necessary as no armed opposition could be found. Thomas Jefferson remarked in a letter to James Monroe that “an insurrection was announced, and proclaimed and armed against, but could never be found.”<sup>46</sup> For

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<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

<sup>43</sup> Robert Coakley, *The Role of Federal Military Forces in Domestic Disorders 1789-1878*, CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY UNITED STATES ARMY i, 37 (1988), [https://history.army.mil/html/books/030/30-13-1/CMH\\_Pub\\_30-13-1.pdf](https://history.army.mil/html/books/030/30-13-1/CMH_Pub_30-13-1.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> George Washington, *Proclamation Concerning the Whiskey Rebellion*, in GEORGE WASHINGTON: WRITINGS 883 (John Rhodehamel ed., New York: The Library of America, 1997).

<sup>45</sup> Coakley, *supra* note 44, at 54.

<sup>46</sup> DUMAS MALONE, *Political Bystander*, in JEFFERSON AND THE ORDEAL OF LIBERTY 189 (1962).

Washington, the expedition was less about the enforcement of a revenue law than a strike against a spirit of hostility against all laws of the United States.<sup>47</sup> Writing to Henry Lee, the commander of the militia forces, on August 26, 1794, Washington railed against the establishment of the Democratic-Republican Societies, of which he “consider[ed] this insurrection as the first *formidable* fruit. . .”<sup>48</sup> According to historian James Roger Sharp, the connection between the Democratic-Republican Societies and the Pennsylvania disorders were fixed in Washington’s mind.<sup>49</sup> In Washington’s mind, there was no legitimate voice of the people outside of the Congress; the existence of self-created political societies outside the purview of the Constitutional order were a threat to the Constitutional order.<sup>50</sup>

Porcupine dismissed the whole affair as an outbreak of “American sans-culotteism” and laid blame on the Democratic-Republican clubs for encouraging disorder.<sup>51</sup> For their part, many Democratic-Republicans detected a possible British influence in the federal government’s response to a mostly peaceful public protest against federal tax policy. For Porcupine and his supporters, this looked just like France in 1791, where an alliance between radicalized intellectual elites combined with the lower classes to ferment chaos and ultimately collapse.

By 1795, Democratic-Republic writers took notice of Peter Porcupine and started to attack both Porcupine’s writing and his motivations. “Citizen Snub,” an unnamed writer later identified as potentially being John Swanwick, accused Porcupine of libeling republicanism and promised to “persecute him until I scald him out of his hole.”<sup>52</sup> Snub adopted many of the stylings of Porcupine, including personal abuse. He likened exploring Porcupine’s opinion to “a race into absurdity” as the opinions expressed were

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<sup>47</sup> George Washington, *Sixth Annual Message*, in GEORGE WASHINGTON: WRITINGS, *supra* note 45, at 891.

<sup>48</sup> George Washington, *To Henry Lee*, in GEORGE WASHINGTON: WRITINGS, *supra* note 45, at 876.

<sup>49</sup> JAMES ROGER SHARP, *AMERICAN POLITICS IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC: A NEW NATION IN CRISIS* 98 (1993).

<sup>50</sup> *Id.* at 100-101.

<sup>51</sup> PORCUPINE, *supra* note 41, at 21.

<sup>52</sup> CITIZEN SNUB, *A RUB FROM SNUB: OR A CURSORY ANALYTICAL EPISTLE: ADDRESSED TO PETER PORCUPINE, AUTHOR OF THE BONE TO GNAW, KICK FOR A BITE, ETC. CONTAINING GLAD TIDINGS FOR THE DEMOCRATS, AND A WORD OF COMFORT TO MRS. S. ROWSON, WHEREIN THE SAID PORCUPINE’S MORAL, POLITICAL, CRITICAL, AND LITERARY CHARACTER IS FULLY ILLUSTRATED* vi-1 (Phila.: Printed for the Purchasers, 1795).



nonsensical at best.<sup>53</sup> According to Snub, Porcupine was little more than an Englishman with a “cordial attachment to the British Government” who should return to “the land of roast beef. . . . in order to dance a jig with the Sans Culottes who intend very shortly to sing the Marseillois [sic] hymn and la Carmagnole in the queen of the isles.”<sup>54</sup> But there was a darker element Snub brought to his writing. He openly suggested that violence against Porcupine might be justified, that he may be a convict in England, and was actually in hiding from justice in the United States.<sup>55</sup> Beyond the difficulty of reconciling Porcupine being both an agent of the British and a fugitive from British justice, there is a clear logic Snub uses in his argument. It is the inverse of Porcupine’s own logic on French influence in the United States.

Another critic, writing under the penname Timothy Tickletoby (actual name unknown, possibly Samuel Bradford), confessed to ignore Peter Porcupine until the fact that he was “supported by a British faction in the United States. . . . [and] was made use of by a foreign agent among us” was brought to light.<sup>56</sup> This plot had material consequences, including breaking the 1778 alliance with France, and the character assassination of “some of the worthiest and best men in the U.S.” in order to facilitate a pro-British foreign policy.<sup>57</sup> Beyond being an enemy agent, Porcupine was also a criminal—a forger, a fugitive from justice, a liar, a rogue, and merely a front for “his old friend Beelzebub.” Indeed, Tickletoby speculated that Porcupine and Beelzebub were actually one and the same person.<sup>58</sup> The interesting combination of foreign interest and moral failings brought a Porcupine-ish philosophy to the pamphlets of Tickletoby and Citizen Snub. The goal was not just to refute the ideas of a political foe. Rather, it was necessary to impugn the motivation and character of that foe, in essence, refuting the ideas put forward by destroying the legitimacy of the speaker. There were real-world consequences for this form of debate.

One of Peter Porcupine’s competitors in the Philadelphia newspaper scene was Benjamin Franklin Bache, grandson of Benjamin Franklin. Founder of the pro-Democratic-Republican newspaper *Aurora*, Bache was a regular target for invective from Porcupine and other Federalist writers.

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<sup>53</sup> *Id.* at 32.

<sup>54</sup> *Id.* at 66.

<sup>55</sup> *Id.* at 33.

<sup>56</sup> TIMOTHY TICKLETOBY, *THE IMPOSTOR DETECTED, OR A REVIEW OF SOME OF THE WRITINGS OF PETER PORCUPINE* 3-4 (1796).

<sup>57</sup> *Id.* at 13-14.

<sup>58</sup> *Id.* at 21.

Bache's newspaper had an investigative element, which led to a number of problems including violence. One of Bache's investigations concerned the United States Navy Frigate *United States*, which was fitting out in Philadelphia. He was violently attacked by Clement Humphreys, the son of the ship's architect whom Bache had accused of impropriety. He was eventually rescued by friends; however, the crowd's sentiment was that Bache deserved the beating. The perpetrator was subsequently given a diplomatic post in Europe.<sup>59</sup> A short time later, Bache found himself in another physical confrontation with an outraged political enemy. In this case, the offended part was John Fenno, the printer of the *Gazette of the United States*. The *Gazette* was pro-Federalist, and both the paper and its printer were often times targets for Bache's political commentary. In *Aurora*, Bache published a commentary that Fenno was a "mercenary scoundrel" and Fenno demanded an apology. Bache declined, and Fenno's son publicly beat Bache with a cane. Although the crowd intervened and there were no major injuries, public debate out of doors was beginning to take a decidedly violent turn.<sup>60</sup>

Porcupine was not immune to threats of direct violence either. In a letter written by an author writing under the quill name "Hint", a message was delivered to Porcupine's landlord suggesting that he "save your property by either compelling Mr. Porcupine to leave your house or at all events oblige him to cease exposing his abominable productions or any of his courtly prints at his window for sale."<sup>61</sup> Porcupine responded by connecting this type of out-of-doors politics and agitation with the events of the French Revolution. Just as the revolutionary tribunals tried, convicted, and sentenced anyone deemed guilty of any one of a host of charges, Porcupine saw himself as the potential victim of an extra-judicial proceeding.<sup>62</sup> The letter was actually proof of his argument that freedom of the press, as described in the first amendment of the Constitution, was a convenience rather than a principle for many Democratic-Republicans because the protections for freedom of speech and the press only applied to people they agreed with.<sup>63</sup> In this case,

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<sup>59</sup> JEFFERY A. SMITH, *FRANKLIN AND BACHE: ENVISIONING THE ENLIGHTENED REPUBLIC* 159-160 (1990).

<sup>60</sup> *Id.* at 160-61.

<sup>61</sup> PETER PORCUPINE, *THE SCARECROW; BEING AN INFAMOUS LETTER SENT TO MR. JOHN OLDEN, THREATENING DESTRUCTION TO HIS HOUSE AND VIOLENCE TO THE PERSON OF HIS TENANT, WILLIAM COBBETT. WITH REMARKS ON THE SAME BY PETER PORCUPINE, THE SECOND EDITION* 4 (Phila.: William Cobbett, 1796).

<sup>62</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>63</sup> *Id.* at 22-23.

physical violence was averted, however, the threat of potential violence remained.

Porcupine's growing fame, and willingness to attack public figures associated with the Democratic-Republican Party eventually led to his downfall in Philadelphia. It was not physical violence that drove him away, but rather legal problems. Dr. Benjamin Rush was a well-known physician, as well as a key figure in the party establishment. His role in treating the yellow fever outbreak of 1793 was controversial even at the time, but Porcupine's allegations of outright medical malpractice provoked Rush to file a lawsuit for libel. This was a civil rather than a criminal proceeding, thus questions of the first amendment protections for the press were not part of the defense. The legal production was farcical. While perhaps a conspiracy by the strict definition of the word, it was clearly an abusive if not outright corrupt use of the courts by interested parties to secure a verdict against Porcupine. The chief justice of the state Supreme Court in 1798 was Thomas McKean, a friend of Rush and a regular target for Porcupine's political commentary. By the start of the trial in 1799, McKean was elected governor of the state. The judge in the case was Edward Shippen, a longtime associate of McKean who was appointed chief justice of Pennsylvania by McKean four days after the trial, the jury lists were constructed by Shippen's son-in-law, and Rush's counsel was McKean's nephew. Conviction was virtually inevitable, but the fine was an extraordinary sum of \$5,000.<sup>64</sup> The fine amounted to immediate bankruptcy for Porcupine and the threat of debtor's prison loomed, thus in its own perverse way providing a potentially criminal sentence for a civil offense. Frustrated by what he termed "democratic justice" Porcupine fled Philadelphia for New York.

One unsympathetic observer writing under the name "Henry Hedgehog" (most likely James Carey) published a mock-heroic poem titled *Anticipation! Peter Porcupine's Descent into Hell*. The funeral procession included a number of enemies the Democratic Party associated with Porcupine- priests, aristocrats, kings, despots, Tories, and other "foe[s] to fair Columbia's land."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> COBBETT, *supra* note 19, at 41.

<sup>65</sup> HENRY HEDGEHOG, *ANTICIPATION! PETER PORCUPINE'S DESCENT INTO HELL; OR AN ELEGY ON HIS DEATH. A MOCK-HEROIC POEM* 4 (Phila.: James Carey, 2nd ed. 1797).

Peter the friend of kings and potentates,  
Peter the foe to the United States,  
Peter the friend of despot's horrid laws,  
Peter the foe to freedom's glorious cause,  
Peter the friend to British frauds and lies,  
Peter the foe to mankind's liberties.  
Peter the agent of Lord Pitt they say,  
Poor Porcupine, he'd gone, he's gone away.<sup>66</sup>

Although the literary merits of Hedgehog's verse may be questionable, the stanza reflects the association made by Democratic-Republican writers against Porcupine. The principles espoused could not be the product of honest inquiry or belief; rather, he was a British spy in pay of the crown with the goal of reenforcing Anglo-American ties and denigrating Democratic-Republicans and the French Republic. By their very nature Porcupine's beliefs were a conspiracy against the United States, freedom, and liberty.

Writing on his life and adventures in 1798, Porcupine reflected on the meaning of his trial, and of his relocation to New York. He saw himself as a victim of a conspiracy by Democratic-Republican politicians, newspaper editors, and "every species of cut-throat" in Philadelphia including (among others) Governor McKean and Benjamin Franklin Bache, the editor of the Democratic-Republican leaning newspaper *Aurora*.<sup>67</sup> "Their great object is to silence me, to this all of their endeavours point: lies, threats, spies and informers, every engine of Jacobinical invention is played off."<sup>68</sup> Even though he had departed from his home in Philadelphia, he remained active in the print debates in American society. The quasi-war with France in 1798 provided another cause for political debate. Due to real and alleged depredations committed by French privateers and warships against American shipping, diplomatic relations with France ebbed. Although President Adams did not call for a declaration of war, sentiment in favor of war was rising. Peter Porcupine saw one potential hindrance to the American war effort—recent immigrants from Ireland known as the United Irishmen.

The United Irishmen were inspired by a multitude of examples, ranging from the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and even the Glorious Revolution of 1688. A combination of Protestant and Catholic Irish patriots, the United Irishmen sought to gain independence from Great Britain.

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<sup>66</sup> *Id.* at 7.

<sup>67</sup> PORCUPINE, *supra* note 7, at 45.

<sup>68</sup> *Id.* at 55.

Although the rising was unsuccessful, many of the Irish revolutionaries, sympathizers, and alleged sympathizers fleeing from British vengeance found refuge in the United States. To Porcupine, this represented a French fifth column designed to weaken the country by promoting “perpetual anarchy” and subversive activities.<sup>69</sup> The constitution of the United Irishmen was proof that the society sought to subvert the government; the preamble declared “devotion to the union, equality, and liberty of all men.” Porcupine noted that this could not be Irish patriotism because it was too open, and (according to Porcupine) the phrase was a direct copy of the clause found in the Jacobin Club of Paris prior to the French Revolution. The only difference was that the Jacobin Club required a new member to commit a crime that led to the death penalty, while the United Irishmen only required the willingness to commit such a crime in the future.<sup>70</sup>

To this Porcupine added another familiar element in his political commentary: the existence of American sympathizers and fellow travelers, in particular Democratic-Republicans. In this particular case, an unnamed printer who was in open conspiracy with the sans-culotte French and the most distinguished of Irish immigrants to the United States; all together, each of these elements were in the service of France.<sup>71</sup> The rot, however, was even worse than it appeared. According to Porcupine, the federal government could not even count on all of the state governments for support, which was a source of weakness for the unity. What rendered the nation “more favorable to the views of France than any other country is the Negro slavery to the southward. It is on this that the villains ground their hope.”<sup>72</sup> In his mind, the United Irishmen conspiracy also included free African Americans. Further, Porcupine detected a conspiracy by slave owners to “set their Negroes free, in order to excite discontents amongst those of their neighborhoods, and thus involve the whole country in rebellion and bloodshed. I [Peter Porcupine] do not take upon me to say that these preparatory steps have been taken, but this I know, that nothing could be thought more hellish or better calculated to insure success.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> PETER PORCUPINE, DETECTION OF A CONSPIRACY FORMED BY THE UNITED IRISHMEN: WITH THE EVIDENT INTENTION OF AIDING THE TYRANTS OF FRANCE IN SUBVERTING THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA 2-3 (Dublin: J. Milliken, 1799).

<sup>70</sup> *Id.* at 5-6.

<sup>71</sup> *Id.* at 20.

<sup>72</sup> *Id.* at 28.

<sup>73</sup> *Id.* at 29.

Fear of an uprising of enslaved African Americans, or recently freed African Americans against the federal government was a new element in Peter Porcupine's analysis of American politics. The underlying structures though are familiar. Fears of a conspiracy against order by "others," whether defined by political ideology, race, ethnicity, religion, or other perceived difference is a consistent thread throughout his writings. He also certainly would have been aware of the Haitian Revolution, and the decree by the French Revolutionary government freeing the enslaved in French colonies. This potentially accounts for his connection between the enslaved, freed peoples, and the sans-culottes although he does not directly address this in his writings. Since Porcupine considered intellectual supporters of France like Jefferson to be a variety of sans-culotte, there is no logical disconnect for why he would free his enslaved people with the anticipation that they would join with him in opposition to the federal government. Why the freed people would pursue this course of action, and on what basis this conclusion was reached is not mentioned in Porcupine's writings.

Porcupine's attack on the United Irishmen led to a direct rebuttal, but only in part. Writing in response to the attacks on the Irish, Matthew Carey, the onetime mayor of Philadelphia, openly dismissed Porcupine's efforts to remain on the public stage. To Carey,

Cobbett is a wretch so far sunk in infamy, so detested, so despised, and abhorred . . . what is to be gained in a controversy with a scoundrel, whom no lie, ever so barefaced, can shame. . . . who circulates two thousand papers daily, to people he calls his subscribers, but of whom many have in vain tried every means to have their names effaced from the register of disgrace, his subscription list.<sup>74</sup>

Despite this diatribe on Porcupine's shame, Carey regarded it as a public duty to bring him to justice before any further damage was done. Particularly, he was incensed by the treatment of the United Irishmen in Porcupine's press seeing it as both a slur against the Irish and against Democratic-Republicans. The political element is clear—the rising of 1798 against British rule in Ireland was regarded by many in the United States as a stroke for liberty against tyranny, while others saw it as a dreadful betrayal during a time of

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<sup>74</sup> MATTHEW CAREY, *A PLUMB PUDDING FOR THE HUMANE, CHASTE, VALIANT, ENLIGHTENED PETER PORCUPINE. BY HIS OBLIGED FRIEND, MATTHEW CAREY* 6 (Phila.: Printed for the Author, 2nd ed. 1799).

war. While denying that he was a member of the United Irishmen, Carey expressed a sympathy for them noting that he was Irish, and that Ireland had been “blessed by nature” but “cursed with the hardest fortune.”<sup>75</sup> Conspicuously absent in Carey’s rebuttal is any mention of enslaved or free African Americans, who figured so prominently in Porcupine’s conception of the United Irishmen conspiracy theory.

Cobbett left New York for Britain in 1800 as a disillusioned man still brooding over the Rush case and frightened of the course the nation was on. Writing a farewell address, he hoped the best for the United States (but did not expect it) and noted that he departed with joy for Britain where “neither the moth of *Democracy*, nor the rust of *Federalism* doth corrupt, and where thieves do not, with impunity, break through and steal five thousand dollars at a time.”<sup>76</sup> His invective against republicans in general and American Democratic-Republicans in particular was not soothed by the journey to Britain. Writing from London in 1800, Porcupine lamented the result of the Rush legal case against him at the hands of the “impartial republican jury” which compelled him to flee from his home.<sup>77</sup> He saw himself as a victim of a legalized conspiracy, with the conclusion coming in the form of an inherently unjust legal proceeding. In his interpretation, his fate was just one of many examples of how “Jacobin morality” was spreading in the United States. Republicanism did not end in liberty. Rather it ended with Star Chamber like proceedings and a governing system “approaching very fast towards absolute despotism.”<sup>78</sup> The warning for the audience in Britain was to learn from his experiences.

Although Cobbett had personally left, his influence on political culture was profound. His method of combining objective fact, biting commentary using incendiary language, and suggestions of conspiracy against order and the republic remained part of the political conversation, both within the newspapers and in pamphlets. The election saw a thriving newspaper and pamphlet war between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans in which the intertwined threads of order, license, religion, and

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<sup>75</sup> *Id.* at 39.

<sup>76</sup> COBBETT, *supra* note 19, at 260.

<sup>77</sup> PETER PORCUPINE, THE AMERICAN RUSH-LIGHT; BY THE HELP OF WHICH, WAYWARD AND DISAFFECTED BRITONS MAY SEE A COMPLETE SPECIMEN OF THE BASENESS, DISHONESTY, INGRATITUDE, AND PERFIDY OF REPUBLICANS, AND THE PROFLIGACY, INJUSTICE, AND TYRANNY OF REPUBLICAN GOVERNMENTS A2 (London: Published for the Author, By J. Wright, Piccadilly, 1800).

<sup>78</sup> *Id.* at 181.

conspiracy familiar to Cobbett's writing remained in place. The April 14, 1800 edition of the *Philadelphia Aurora* reprinted an article from the *Federalist Gazette of the United States*, arguing that "Jacobinism is triumphant, and unless a different temper shall soon shew itself, it will soon trample underfoot all order, law, property, as it has done to religion..."<sup>79</sup> In the *Providence Gazette* for July 5, 1800, a writer warned that the people should flee from Jefferson's democratic principles because "if our civil government should be overthrown, religion would inevitably flee away, and atheism, superstition, and idolatry, would immediately creep in..."<sup>80</sup> The *Newport Mercury*, in a September 2, 1800 article argued that Jefferson was "an atheist in principal—destitute of all religion."<sup>81</sup> In an October 8, 1800 article published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, a federal committee addressed the electors of Salem County. The committee restated the basic case against the election of Jefferson as president. Their arguments follow a very familiar course of causality and logic expressed by many supporters of the Federalist consensus throughout the nation:

A revolution in property, as well as government, would no doubt be very convenient to some of these gentlemen; and they probably see no fairer opportunity of bringing it about, than by elevating the man to the Presidency, who has declared it to be a matter of indifference to him whether his neighbour believes in twenty Gods, or no God, who prefers the tempestuous sea of liberty to the calm of despotism (meaning the settled order of our own regular government) and the savage state, where no laws exist, to a government of laws, where men are prohibited from injuring their neighbours; who therefore considers peace as pestilence, and the beautiful order of society as deformity.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> RICHARD N. ROSENFELD, *AMERICAN AURORA: A DEMOCRATIC-REPUBLICAN RETURNS. THE SUPPRESSED HISTORY OF OUR NATION'S BEGINNINGS AND THE HEROIC NEWSPAPER THAT TRIED TO REPORT IT* 770 (1997). (It was not unusual for newspapers to reprint articles from one another. Jacobinism was the catchall term for American republicans, French republicans, dissenters, levelers, and radicals of all sorts).

<sup>80</sup> CHARLES F. O'BRIEN, *The Religious Issue in the Presidential Campaign of 1800*, in 107 ESSEX INSTITUTE HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS No. 1 85 (Essex Institute, 1971).

<sup>81</sup> *Id.* at 86.

<sup>82</sup> Library of Congress, *Gazette of the United States, & Daily Advertiser (Phila.)*, October 8, 1800, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn84026272/1800-10-08/ed-1/>.



Although Cobbett was no longer even in the country, it is easy to see his influence on political discourse. It is even easier to imagine Cobbett writing this article.

America in the 1790s was a country attempting to define itself—what would the new country become, and in what model would the republic develop. The deep philosophical debates contracted into a vitriolic battle in the press, where complex ideas could be reduced to conspiracy theories—both real and alleged. Uncertainty caused by the revolution and subsequent adoption of a new and untried Constitution were compounded by the context of the French Revolution, where unconstrained ideological upheaval had drastic real-world consequences. William Cobbett, alias Peter Porcupine was both a product of this environment and a cause of the circumstances that eventually led to his downfall. One of the brashest voices in early America, Cobbett was able to influence the development of American press and political culture in long-lasting, but decidedly mixed forms. By the end of the decade Cobbett was gone, felled by stories of conspiracy and counter-conspiracy in which he was both an active participant and a victim.