
Factional Relationships Between the Continental Congress and State Legislatures; a New Slant on the Politics of the American Revolution

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Once, when determinism was the fashion, there seemed to be little dispute over the meaning of the American Revolution, and little disagreement over the continuity of partisan politics between the era of the Revolution and the Federalist period. Charles Beard, the mentor of the Progressive school of historians, saw an essential ideological connection between the Patriot challenge to the Royal-conservative colonial establishment and the Democratic-Republican challenge of the Federalist regime.¹ The struggles over "who should rule at home" during the turbulent days before Independence were related to if not identical with the heady politics of the Jacobin "phrenzy." Wilfred E. Binkley, writing in the early 1940's, detected a lineal development from the Patriot of the resistance to the radical of the Revolution, to the Antifederalist to the Democratic-Republican, a functional analysis which rested comfortably upon the neatly interlocking tenets of Beard and other historians such as Carl Becker, Arthur Schlesinger, J. Franklin Jameson, Merrill Jensen and Eugene Link.²

Most of these tenets have either been discarded or severely challenged by a host of historians writing during the last twenty years. Edmund Morgan, Jack Greene, Robert E. Brown, Forrest McDonald and many other scholars, concentrating on particular events, institutions, provinces, or even particular Progressive interpretations, such as Beard's analysis of the formulation and ratification of the Constitution, have been participating in a flight from the congruities of determinism.³ The collective conclusion of these intensive researches is that the Revolution was not caused simply or even primarily by a clash of economic interests or social classes, that the Constitution was neither written nor ratified in response to the imperatives of personality against reality, and that the emergence of a two-party system seems to have had little connection with the War for Independence which endured a "chaos of faction" rather than produce a national party of the Revolution. What we have as a result is a neo-Whig persuasion that the Revolution was over before Lexington, that the minimal political and social change which occurred during the war was little more than anticlimatic affirmation of the achievement of a liberal colonial tradition, and that the persistence of a parochial factionalism during the Revolution was a procedural manifestation of that same liberal tradition which flourished in a condition of provincial autonomy.

Determinism is out, for the moment at least. Yet the mosaic of particulars loosely joined by the neo-Whig notion of consensus covering a Revolution which continues to perplex most scholars in its ambivalence is not entirely satisfying. Certain fundamental questions still elude us. Was it one revolution, or three, or thirteen? Can we really explain the inconsistency of a violent revolution to conserve established values. Have we used the right indices to measure the degree of change in the Revolution? (Robert R. Palmer has contended that if one examines the incidence of expatriation and property confiscation it is possible to

argue that there was relatively more internal upheaval in the American Revolution than in the French Revolution. William Nelson has wondered if we have recognized the psychological effects produced in America by the loss of a mother country.⁴ Exactly how different were the factional patterns of the Revolutionary era from those of the 1790's? Before we can rest comfortably with the inferred conclusions of the neo-Whigs, we will have to dispose of the deterministic contentions of the Progressive historians, and to do this it will be necessary to execute a systematic analysis of various aspects of the whole Revolutionary period, an analysis providing an angle of vision which will assume neither conservatism nor radicalism, neither conflict nor consensus.

One possible approach would be a comprehensive study of factionalism using consistent techniques of analysis in the state legislatures, in the Continental Congress, and in the relationship between these two levels of government. The method of roll call analysis developed by political scientists should be used wherever possible in the examination of state assemblies, state councils, and the Continental Congress. Techniques employing roll calls to establish the configuration of voting blocs over the full term of a legislative session, or more intensive analysis of bloc alignments on a given issue, could provide us with much more sophisticated information than we now have in that a priori assumptions concerning the ideological convictions of individuals are unnecessary, and further that all members of the legislative body who participate in the roll calls can be examined and located in terms of their voting behavior.⁵ (Hitherto we have relied upon fragments of different kinds of evidence—correspondence, newspaper reports, scattered roll calls, legislative debates and so on—to establish the political attachments of more prominent individuals about whom such evidence happens to have survived. This approach, of course, is likely to produce distorted and incomplete conclusions.)

With roll call analysis we should be able to determine whether indeed there was chaos or a fairly consistent factional pattern in the legislative bodies of the Revolutionary era. We could determine which issues were more divisive. We might be able to decide more satisfactorily what factors determined the composition of factions—economic class, social class, geographic section, or other factors, or a combination of factors. The factional patterns of one state or section could be compared with patterns in other states and sections, the determinants of factionalism in the Congress with those in state legislatures, and the patterns and determinants of the Revolutionary era with those of the Federalist period.

Not the least intriguing would be an examination of factional relationships between the state legislatures and the Continental Congress, for the connection (or lack of connection) between divisions in the Congress and divisions in the various state legislatures which elected Congressional delegates is a subject of crucial importance to the meaning of the Revolution. The Progressive notion that the political history of the Revolution was conditioned by a conflict over who should rule at home virtually demands, for example, that partisan struggles exist in both the states and Congress over issues such as the allocation of authority within the Confederation. This thesis also implies that the struggle for power between conservatives and radicals within the states should be reflected in the composition of the various Congressional delegations. If, on the other hand, the neo-Whigs are right, we might expect a minimum of factionalism, an emphasis on unity, and few interprovincial and confederal-partisan connections. While neither result is automatic, these expectations do suggest how we might use a study of factional relationships between Congress and the states to illuminate our understanding of the politics of the Revolution.

It is impossible to demonstrate the use of this approach in an extended manner in a limited amount of space, but a few specific examples of relationships between Congressional and state partisan politics may be included. I have suggested elsewhere that a basically sectional pattern of factionalism existed in the Continental Congress for the whole period when roll calls were recorded (August of 1777 to the end of Congress in 1789). New England and the Southern States formed two opposing factions while the Middle States sometimes split in support of these two factions and sometimes formed yet a third faction.⁶ This

persistent sectional antagonism which came close to fracturing the Confederation would seem to support the notion of conflict rather than consensus. Yet while conflict was clearly present, it was not precisely the sort of conflict envisioned by the Progressive historians who, in emphasizing social and economic class antagonisms, would of necessity expect to uncover intersectional factionalism—at least to the degree that such antagonisms were reflected in Congress. I see little evidence that this sort of conflict determined the factional structure of Congress. The Progressive historians may have been right to stress conflict, but wrong in assessing its determinants.

Factional relationships between Congress and the states seem to point to the same conclusion. There was, for example, a muted split within the New York Congressional delegation during 1778 and 1779, with William Duer, John Jay and Gouverneur Morris aligning with the South, and Francis Lewis, James Duane and William Floyd tending to line up with deviants from the New Jersey and Pennsylvania delegations to form an incipient Middle States bloc.⁷ That the New York Assembly endorsed Duane and Floyd for election to Congress in 1778, 1779 and 1780 while supporting Morris fairly soundly in 1778, rejecting him in a close vote in 1779 and in a lopsided vote in 1780 may very possibly reflect the influence of national politics upon the state of New York.⁸ If this relationship were fully investigated, we might learn more about the energies of partisan politics on both levels of government. The Progressive assumption that class conflict was the root of factionalism again seems unwarranted, however, since both Morris and Duane were associated with the aristocratic old family tradition in New York politics.

That other determinants may have played a part in Revolutionary factionalism seems possible from evidence in the politics of another Middle State—New Jersey. There were also occasional splits within its congressional delegation, as in 1779 when John Fell deviated from the New England orientation of his fellow delegates Nathaniel Scudder, William Houston and John Witherspoon.⁹ Fell, along with many other Congressional delegates, served both in Congress and in his state legislature—in Fell's case, the New Jersey Council in 1783. Thus it is possible to compare Fell's role in Congress with his position in the factional structure of the New Jersey Council. In the Council, Fell belonged to a bloc of legislators who came from the northern and central counties of Bergen (Fell's county), Sussex, Essex, Reading, Monmouth and Burlington. The opposition bloc in this rather dichotomized body came from the four southern counties of Cape May, Cumberland, Salem and Gloucester, as well as by the two northern counties of Morris and Somerset. Within these two blocs there were moderate and extreme subgroups which became defined on about six roll calls out of the twenty-one votes recorded during the session. Fell belonged to the northern extreme subgroup which stands out on roll calls dealing with debtor relief, which he opposed. The other extreme subgroup, composed mostly of delegates from the southern counties, became defined on religious and moral issues, specifically on bills to incorporate particular Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed churches and bills related to the allowance of divorce.

This fragment of evidence is intriguing, since issues with moral and religious overtones often heightened factionalism in Congress as well. The New England bloc tended to believe that the Revolution should be fought not only for independence, but also regeneration through separation from the corrupt mother country. This Puritanical conception appealed to the New Jersey delegate, John Witherspoon, the great Presbyterian divine, much more than it did to Fell, and it would seem to be more than coincidental that Witherspoon aligned with the New England faction while Fell persistently took an independent course. Partisan politics on both state and national levels may have been energized by differing perceptions of the meaning of the Revolution, as well as different stakes in a particular outcome of the Revolution.

The best illustration of interrelated national and state partisan politics is in Pennsylvania where a relatively well developed two-party system emerged as early as the late 1770's. The two parties, Constitutionalists and Republicans, arose from colonial partisan traditions, from the deep political divisions caused

by the decision to declare independence and the formulation of the Constitution of 1776, and also in part from factional struggles in the Continental Congress which was located most of the time in Philadelphia. The Constitutionists are usually described as a radical party drawing support from the artisans and mechanics of Philadelphia and the Scotch-Irish of the interior, a party which identified with Presbyterians and the militia, a party which sought democracy. The Republicans are generally classified as a party supported by merchants, Quakers, Anglicans and the Continental Line, a party opposed to substantial alteration of the status quo. It may be that this traditional description of the two parties is inaccurate, and certainly it is incomplete. Yet clearly two parties (or forces) did exist, and historians of the Revolutionary politics of Pennsylvania such as Robert Brunhouse can label legislative sessions as Republican or Constitutionalist in terms of the dominant tendency of the legislature.¹⁰ Accepting Brunhouse's judgment, we can compare the affiliation of Pennsylvania Congressional delegations elected by Constitutionalist assemblies with that of delegations elected by Republican assemblies. Without exception the Constitutionalist delegations aligned with the New England bloc while the Republican delegations either lined up with the South (as in 1781) or contributed to the formation of a Middle States bloc with splinter support from the South (as in 1783). The relevance of this relationship, which may be at least partly compatible with the Progressive thesis, has never been seriously examined.

The congruities of Congressional politics as well as the relationship between Congressional factions and partisan politics in Pennsylvania and other states suggest that we should re-examine our assumptions about the structure of Revolutionary politics. If such a re-examination were executed using the best analytical techniques available to the historian today, we might very well avoid the pitfalls of determinism and at the same time find new insight into the ambivalent substance of the Revolution, and a new footing for study of party development during the Federal period.

LITERATURE CITED

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³See Edmund Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis* (Chapel Hill, 1953); Jack Greene, *The Quest for Power; the Lower Houses of Assembly in the Southern Royal Colonies, 1689-1776* (Chapel Hill, 1963); Robert E. Brown, *Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1761-1780* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1955); Forrest McDonald, *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago, 1958). Jack Greene has described one part of this interpretive shift in a convenient historiographical article "The Flight from Determinism: A Review of Recent Literature on the Coming of the American Revolution," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, LXI (1962), 235-259. See also Richard B. Morris, "The Confederation Era and the American Historian", *William and Mary Quarterly*, XIII (1956), and William H. Nelson, "The Revolutionary Character of the American Revolution," *American Historical Review*, LXX (1965). An able recent statement on party development which disagrees with Binkley is William Nisbet Chambers, *Political Parties in a New Nation* (New York, 1963).

⁴Robert R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800* (2 vols., Princeton, N.J., 1959, 1964), I, 188-90. William Nelson argues that Palmer's comparison of the emigration rates contains flaws; see Nelson's *The American Tory* (Oxford, Eng., 1961). On the psychological consequences of the Revolution, see Nelson, "The Revolutionary Character of the American Revolution," 1010-11.

⁷There is an enormous literature on this subject. Two different samples of these techniques are David Truman, *The Congressional Party, a Case Study* (New York, 1959), and George M. Belknap, "Scaling Legislative Behavior," *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, II (1958).

⁸See H. J. Henderson, "Political Factions in the Continental Congress," unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1962

⁹In 1779, for example, Duane, Floyd and Lewis agreed with each other 80% of the time on the average, with Jay and Morris 67% of the time, and with Fell of New Jersey and Atlee of Pennsylvania (two deviationists from the New England-aligned Middle States delegation) 72% of the time.

¹⁰*Votes and Proceedings of the Assembly of the State of New York*, October 15, 1778, October 1, 1779, September 12, 1780.

¹¹Scudder, Houston and Witherspoon averaged 83% agreement on votes they cast in common, while their collective agreement with Fell averaged only 61%.

¹²Robert Brunhouse, *The Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania, 1776-1790* (Harrisburg, Pa., 1942).
