

Carol Berkin. 2017. *A Sovereign People: The Crises of the 1790s and the Birth of American Nationalism*. Basic Books, 307 pages.

Historian Carol Berkin is best known among scholars for her studies of notable women in colonial, revolutionary, and Civil War America. She has also written popular volumes on the making of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and most recently the Federalist era. While not billed as such these volumes constitute a kind of trilogy on the American Founding, and while intended for non-specialists each develops a thesis alongside a more or less conventional narrative. In *A Sovereign People: The Crises of the 1790s and the Birth of American Nationalism*, Professor Berkin examines the Whiskey Rebellion, the Genet affair, the XYZ affair, and the Alien and Sedition Acts—grave crises that challenged the authority of the federal government, the sovereignty of the nation, and the durability of the Constitution. In the end, Berkin argues, the resolution of each crisis strengthened the new government, gave legitimacy to the Constitution, and furthered a sense of American identity.

*A Sovereign People* is an exemplar of popular history. Written with clarity and style, it is a fitting account of the decade when Washington, Madison, Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, and Jay stood at the center of power. Frequently the events of this period are cast against the emergence of the organized opposition to the Hamilton-led Federalists and the formation of the first national political parties. In the absence of a tradition of “loyal opposition” and at a time when “party” meant “faction,” the “Republican interest” formed by Jefferson and Madison opened a chapter of partisan warfare—often bitter—over policy, ideology, and the fate of the nation. Most historians have emphasized the conflicts and divisions that marked the politics of the Early Republic, feuds that were exacerbated by a succession of crises. Yet for Professor Berkin, it was *through* these crises—“the least expected places”—that the government gained legitimacy and a national identity was forged (p. 3).

Historians will be less likely to quibble with Berkin’s central thesis—that the Federalists deserve credit for providing strong nationalist leadership during a period when weakness or ineptitude

could have proved disastrous to the fledgling nation—than with some of her specific findings and judgments. The book itself is divided into four parts, each dealing with a major crisis that occurred during the administrations of Washington and John Adams. What is striking about the Whiskey Rebellion is the scope of the resistance, the degree of violence, and the patience of the government. Defiance of the tax on spirits was widespread in the backcountry and proved largely unenforceable for more than two years. In the end, Washington felt compelled to lead an army into the field in order to break the resistance of the Whiskey Boys. But how did this contribute to legitimacy and nationalism? According to Berkin, Washington’s great stature, the cooperation of state militias, and the bloodless dispersal of the rebels “promoted nationalism rather than the provincialism so prominent in the Antifederalist battle against ratification” (p. 80). Conversely, the fact that the Republican opposition was working within the system “suggests that acceptance of the legitimacy of the Constitution and its government was growing” (p. 80).

The crisis occasioned by Citizen Genet was a “crisis of sovereignty” (p. 83). The French minister’s attempt to make the United States a satellite of France and embroil America in its “wars of liberation” did not merely divide the cabinet and the nation—the standard interpretation—but “expose[d] the pervasive sense of the fragility of American sovereignty in the 1790s” (p. 82). Had Jefferson and the devotees of France prevailed, America may have been dragged into a disastrous war against Britain and its allies. The steady hand of Washington, backed by Hamilton’s clear grasp of executive power, allowed the government to avoid a direct conformation with either side. In Genet’s fall Berkin finds not merely the popularity of Washington at work, but “the office he held and the power given it by the Constitution” (p. 150). The Genet affair also impressed upon the public the wisdom of vesting the conduct of foreign affairs in the president and the federal government.

The XYZ affair, involving the shakedown of American diplomats by French agents, not only galvanized party politics, but witnessed “the emergence of loyalty to the federal government and the Constitution as the *sine quo non* of patriotism” (p. 152). In warmly supporting President Adams’ defense of the country’s honor, the people were

not merely rallying to the man or even the office, but to the nation as a whole, “and in doing so, they discovered an identity they shared as Americans” (p. 200). As deep as the ideological divisions ran between Federalists and Republicans, “the nation’s leaders managed to win the devotion of the people of the disparate states and bind them ever more to the vision of government they had ratified” (p. 152). Despite the efforts of the French Directory, the American people could not be permanently divided against each other or be made to forsake their government.

The argument that the resolution of the crises of the 1790s added to the legitimacy of the government and fostered national identity is plausible enough in regard to the Whiskey Rebellion, the Genet affair, and the XYZ affair, but it faces a formidable challenge in the case of the Alien and Sedition Acts. As Berkin notes, these measures—the Federalists’ response to the XYZ affair and the threat of war with France—are commonly viewed as harbingers of the intolerance and abuses of twentieth century America. Yet what Jefferson called “the reign of witches” was a far cry from the Red Scare or Japanese internment: “There would be no executions, no wholesale destruction of presses, no censorship of publication” (p. 242). Indeed, while the attempt to stifle the critics was ill-conceived, the “Federalists could perhaps be excused” given the absence of the idea of a loyal opposition (p. 212).

Still, the Alien and Sedition Acts gave rise to the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, themselves harbingers of interposition, nullification, and secession. How does Berkin divert these defiant tributaries into the stream of nationalism and legitimacy? Not very successfully. The sleight of hand offered by Jefferson and Madison in the Resolutions—the compact theory of the Constitution—was “not a challenge to the Constitution but a challenge to a particular interpretation of that document.” “Thus, ‘nullification’ and ‘interposition’ were offered as a remedy, not a renunciation” (p. 243). In short, Jefferson and Madison were working within the system. Yet on Berkin’s own account “it was the introduction of the concept of nullification that would eventually threaten the survival of the nation the Federalists had nurtured and sustained” (p. 202). Indeed, it should come as no surprise that those who drafted and

ratified the Resolutions “saw themselves as loyal citizens of the Union” (p. 243) and upholders of the Constitution. Upon what other ground could they stand? It was the same divided ground occupied by Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun, Daniel Webster and Robert Y. Hayne. The fact that there was “no longer an anti-Constitution movement” (p. 249) a decade after the document was ratified (or even a half century after that) did not prevent party and sectional tensions from eventually tearing the nation apart.

This is the central flaw in Professor Berkin’s thesis: it equates stated loyalty to the Constitution and the federal government with undiluted nationalism. American nationalism has always co-existed with other loyalties: to party, to state, to section. Ironically, Berkin appears to recognize this fact as the source of “tragedy” for both Federalists and the Republicans, who would conflate the national interest with the interest of party or region. Whereas the Federalists “did not recognize their mission had been accomplished: the government they had designed in 1787 was no longer an experiment but an institution,” the Republicans “did not realize the destructive potential [interposition and nullification] had if they became uncoupled from a loyalty to this union of the states” (p. 243).

There is little doubt that the crises so ably chronicled by Professor Berkin added to the prestige of the government and to an enlarged sense of national identity for many Americans. Yet the tragedy of 1861–65 showed that darker forces were also at work in the national psyche; forces that would require not only a “new birth of freedom” but a new birth of nationalism.

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