

Yankee Confederates: New England Secession Movements Prior to the War Between the States

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An insurrection once every twenty years is a wholesome feature of national life.

- Thomas Jefferson

Contrary to standard accounts, the birthplace of American secessionist sentiment was not Charleston, South Carolina in 1860, but the heart of the New England Yankee culture -- Salem, Massachusetts -- more than half a century before the first shot was fired at Fort Sumter. From 1800 to 1815, there were three serious attempts at secession orchestrated by New England Federalists, who believed that the policies of the Jefferson and Madison administrations, especially the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, the national embargo of 1807, and the War of 1812, were so disproportionately harmful to New England that they justified secession.

If these New England Federalists had been southerners and said the things they said in 1861 rather than in 1803, they would have long ago been denigrated by historians as maniacal "fire eaters" or traitors. "I will rather anticipate a new confederacy, exempt from the corrupt and corrupting influence and oppression of the aristocratic Democrats of the South," wrote the prominent Massachusetts Federalist politician and U.S. Senator, Timothy Pickering, in 1803. "There will be ... a separation," he predicted, and "the white and black population will mark the boundary."¹ His colleague, Senator James Hillhouse, agreed, saying, "The Eastern States must and will dissolve the Union and form a separate government."² "The Northern States must be governed by Virginia or

must govern Virginia, and there is no middle ground," warned the conspiratorial Aaron Burr, who joined the New England Federalists in a secessionist plot (discussed below).³

These "Yankee Confederates" were not an isolated band of radicals. They were among the leaders of the Federalist Party, many of whom had participated in the Revolutionary War and had even helped write the U.S. Constitution. John Hancock and Samuel Adams are among the best known of the New England Federalists who, by the early nineteenth century, were reaching their twilight years. The push for secession came primarily from the younger generation of Federalist leaders, including George Cabot, Elbridge Gerry, Theophilus Parsons, Timothy Pickering, Theodore Sedgwick, John Quincy Adams, Fisher Ames, Harrison Gray Otis, Josiah Quincy, and Joseph Story, among others.

Their cause, moreover, was virtually identical to the southern Confederacy's, a half century later: they were defending the principles of states' rights and self-government from an overbearing federal government. They condemned the Jefferson administration as being plagued by "falsehood, fraud, and treachery," which induced "oppression and barbarity" and "ruin among the nations."⁴

They believed that the South -- especially Virginia -- was gaining too much wealth, power, and influence, and was using that influence against New England politically. Their complaints are virtually identical to John C. Calhoun's concerns, decades later, about the unjust regional impacts of excessive federal power.

RATIONALES OF THE NEW ENGLAND SECESSION MOVEMENT

In 1800, Thomas Jefferson's Republican Party took control of the presidency as well as the Congress. To the Federalist party, this was nothing but apocalyptic, for most party leaders absolutely abhorred Jefferson and all that he stood for. New England clerics, who were extremely influential, likened Jefferson to Beelzebub, and talked of a "moral putrefication that covers the land" because of Jefferson's ascent

to the presidency.⁵ To the Federalists, Jefferson was not just a political opponent who had defeated them; he was the personification of evil.

Jefferson was intolerable to the Federalists because his philosophy, policies, and even religious beliefs were fundamentally incompatible with the Federalist worldview. An essential, if not primary, element of the Federalist worldview, notes historian James Banner, was that "public and private virtue" were required for a successful republic.⁶

But "virtue" implied dedication to organized religion, and Jefferson was "known to be deeply hostile to the Congregational clergy and the long-rooted religious sensibilities of the majority of New England's inhabitants."⁷ More than any other public figure of his time, Jefferson insisted on the strict separation of church and state. Because of this, writes Jefferson biographer Claude Bowers, he "had been habitually denounced as an anti-Christ by the political preachers of his time" and "in the New England states, where the greater part of the ministers were militant Federalists, he was hated with an unholy hate. More false witness had been borne by the ministers of New England and New York against Jefferson than had ever been borne against any other American publicist."⁸ Many Federalists apparently could not countenance the fact that Jefferson, whose party controlled the federal government, stood in the way of state-sponsored Puritanism.

ETHNIC HOMOGENEITY

The Federalists also believed strongly that homogeneity of race, and "ethnic purity," were essential ingredients of a successful republic. These New Englanders thought of themselves as "choice offspring of the choicest people, unpolluted by foreign blood."⁹

New England Federalists were almost universally of English descent. Most of them agreed with William Smith Shaw that "the grand cause of all our present difficulties may be traced . . . to so many hordes of Foreigners immigrating to America."¹⁰ "Our progenitors were choice scions from the best English stock," added Federalist William Cunningham. Their "natural wants" did not "force them here for

subsistence, like the wild Irish and sour Germans in Pennsylvania."11 And, in a widely cited if not celebrated remark, William Stoughton stated that "God sifted a whole Nation that he might send choice Grain over into this wilderness."12

Given these strong feelings about the primacy and importance of ethnic purity, the Jeffersonian policy of expansionism -- especially the Louisiana Purchase which incorporated "hordes of foreigners" into the U.S. -- was an abomination to the Federalists. Josiah Quincy was one of the most respected and influential of the Federalists. He warned that the Louisiana Purchase obligated the nation to assimilate "a number of French and Spanish subjects, whose habits, manners, and ideas of civil government are wholly foreign to republican institutions."13 Quincy felt so strongly about this that he clearly stated that if the purchase were consummated the only recourse for New England would be secession. For the purchase meant that

the bonds of this Union are virtually dissolved; that the States which compose it are free from their moral obligation; and that, as it will be the right of all, so it will be the duty of some, to prepare definitely for a separation, amicably if they can, violently if they must.¹⁴

The Federalists, as well as the Jeffersonians, understood that the Constitution was a carefully considered compact between the states which formed the union for certain well-defined reasons. Any measure that would fundamentally alter its relationships without a formal amendment would require consent of the parties to the compact. But the Louisiana Purchase was carried out by Jefferson and twenty-six senators -- without consulting Congress, and without first attaining any such agreement among the states. Many of the Federalists considered this to be a gross violation of the compact that made a mockery of states' rights.

It was at this point in history -- in 1803 -- that the New England Federalists began discussing secession. The ring leader was Pickering, who was among the most prominent of the Federalists. He had been

elected colonel of the Essex County (Massachusetts) Militia at the outset of the American Revolution, and later served as adjutant general and quartermaster general of the Revolutionary Army. After the revolution, he was a member of Congress, Secretary of War, and U.S. Senator from Massachusetts.

In a letter to George Cabot, Pickering wrote of the "depravity" of Jefferson's "plan of destruction" and concluded that "the principles of our Revolution [the Revolution of 1776] point to the remedy -- a separation. That this can be accomplished, and without spilling one drop of blood, I have little doubt."¹⁵ Pickering believed that the different cultures of the North and South were inherently incompatible and would only lead to perpetual political conflict, if not violence. "The people of the East cannot reconcile their habits, views, and interests with those of the South and West."¹⁶

Pickering undoubtedly had in mind the clear cultural differences among different sets of British immigrants that historian David Hackett Fischer outlined in his treatise, *Albion's Seed*.¹⁷ Fischer charts four distinct migrations to the U.S. from England: the exodus of Puritans from the east of England to Massachusetts from 1629-1640; the migration, from 1642 to 1675 of "a small Royalist elite and large numbers of indentured servants" to Virginia; a movement from the North Midlands of England and Wales to the Delaware Valley between 1675-1725; and the flow of English-speaking people from North Britain and Ireland to Appalachia from 1718-1775.

These four groups had much in common, but were also very different in their religion, social ranks, history, language or dialect, folkways, and perhaps most importantly, their conceptions of "order, power, and freedom."¹⁸ And these were just the differences among the four British cultures in Colonial America. Dutch, Spanish, French, and other immigrants created even more diversity. The Federalists, however, were stridently opposed to multicultural assimilation. They thought secession and a truly federal system of government was necessary to avoid violent clashes among these incompatible cultures. These men,

being of European ancestry, understood fully how ethnic divisions had historically been the source of much slaughter and strife, as indeed they still are today.

But this cultural incompatibility need not extend to *commercial* relationships. Pickering and other Federalists thought the creation of a northern confederacy would be economically beneficial to both North and South, while eliminating much of the political conflict that would inevitably occur under a more centralized governmental regime. "A Northern confederacy would unite congenial characters, and present a fairer prospect of public happiness; while the Southern States, having a similarity of habits, might be left to manage their affairs in their own way." Secession would "render a friendly and commercial intercourse" between North and South, for the southern states would probably want to contract out for such things as naval protection by the northern confederacy, while the products of the South would "be important to the navigation and commerce of the North."¹⁹

Some historians have portrayed Pickering and his colleagues as crackpots or traitors because of their secessionist views, but all they were really advocating is an American continent organized more along the lines of modern Switzerland, with its twenty-six cantons, than the highly-centralized mega-state the U.S. has become. In Switzerland, there are "long-standing and deep linguistic, cultural and religious divisions -- French, Swiss-German, Italian, and a local language, Romansh, plus several dialects."²⁰ These differences are typical of Europe and have been the source of violence and bloodshed there for centuries.

What is unique about Switzerland is that despite these differences, it has enjoyed a much higher degree of peace, harmony, and prosperity than most of the rest of Europe over the past 150 years. One likely reason for this is that the Swiss have in common "their political will to lead a free and independent life and to resist the imposition of foreign laws -- and especially foreign taxes."²¹ The Swiss system of highly decentralized and autonomous cantons greatly facilitates this goal.

Something like the Swiss system seems to be exactly what the New England secessionists had in mind.

In 1804, the New England Federalists began plotting their strategy. In a letter to Theodore Lyman, Pickering explained that Massachusetts would "take the lead" in secession, upon which time "Connecticut would instantly join," as would New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania "east of the Susquehanna River."²²

Pickering and his associates decided that New York was the key to persuading all New England states to secede as a block. They struck a deal with Aaron Burr: the party apparatus would do all it could to help Burr get elected governor of New York, and in turn, Burr would see to it that New York promptly seceded and became part of the northern confederacy.

The election was very close, with Burr losing by only 7,000 votes, and exceptionally bitter, with Burr's opponent, Alexander Hamilton, denouncing him as lacking in integrity, dangerous, intemperate, profligate, and dictatorial.²³

After the election, Burr demanded an apology, and when Hamilton refused, Burr challenged him to a duel. Burr won the duel, killing his adversary with one shot, and became a pariah. Hamilton was so well liked and respected throughout the United States that Burr could barely appear in public. The entire nation mourned the death of one of its founding fathers as "more memorial services were held in New England than ever had been held for a native son."²⁴ Because of Burr's association with the Federalists, the death of Hamilton discredited and temporarily stopped the New England secession movement.

All during this episode, virtually no one questioned the right of any state to secede. Any objections that were raised were strictly utilitarian -- the timing was not right, the economic benefits might have been overestimated, and so on. Jefferson himself announced in his first inaugural address that "if there be any among us who wish to dissolve the Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed,

as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it."²⁵

Jefferson was the co-author (with James Madison) of the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions of 1798, which suggested that "where powers were assumed by the national government which had not been granted by the States, nullification is the rightful remedy" and that every state has an original, natural right "to nullify of its own authority all assumptions of power by others, within its limits."²⁶ Thus, both major political parties believed in the inviolable states' rights of nullification and secession in the early nineteenth century.

CALHOUNISM

John C. Calhoun, the fierce southern partisan of the early-and mid-nineteenth century, has been called the "architect of nullification" because of his role, while he was a U.S. Senator from South Carolina, in getting the federal government to reduce the 1828 "Tariff of Abominations." South Carolina and other southern states relied heavily on foreign trade, and believed that high tariffs benefited the northern industrialists by diminishing their competition, while harming the South by causing European governments to retaliate with tariffs of their own on imports from the Southern United States. Moreover, the South hardly benefited at all from the revenues collected by the tariffs, thus rendering the 1828 tariff law "an instrument of monopoly and oppression."²⁷

Calhoun orchestrated a South Carolina nullification convention that voted in 1832 to nullify the tariff. To avoid a confrontation, the federal government compromised by sharply reducing the tariff rates. After the compromise was reached, Calhoun reiterated Jefferson's thoughts on nullification when he declared that nullification should always remain a tool of the states because it was the best known vehicle for arresting "the alarming growth of political corruption and to save the Constitution, the Union and Liberty of these states."²⁸

Nearly thirty years before the South Carolina nullification crisis, the New England Federalists were out-Calhouning Calhoun (who at the time

was a twenty-year-old student at Yale). Throughout the published letters of the New England Federalists, one reads of the complaints of an over-reaching federal government that was disproportionately harming their region. The Federalists, however, were more radical than Calhoun: they wanted to secede, not to merely nullify misbegotten laws.

The Federalists were convinced that the federal government "had fallen into the hands of infidel, anti-commercial, anti-New England Southerners."²⁹ They believed there was a conspiracy among the "Virginia faction" to "govern and depress New England," in the words of Stephen Higginson.³⁰ John Lowell, Jr., declared that in any conflict between their state and the federal government, "it is our duty, our most solemn duty, to vindicate the rights, and support the interests of the state we represent."³¹ Timothy Pickering added that his loyalties possessed a "natural order toward Salem, Massachusetts, New England, and the Union at large."³²

These statements are strikingly similar to the justifications of secession given by so many of the most prominent southern Confederates in 1861. They are especially reminiscent of Robert E. Lee's response to General Winfield Scott when Scott offered him command of the Union Army just days before Virginia officially seceded. "If the Union is dissolved and the government disrupted," Lee said, "I shall return to my native state and share the miseries of my people and save in defence will draw my sword on none."³³

Roger Griswold, the governor of Connecticut, sounded exactly like Calhoun if one were only to transpose the words "North" and "South." "The balance of power under the present government is decidedly in favor of the Southern States. . . . The extent and increasing population of those States must for ever secure to them the preponderance which they now possess." He also complained that New Englanders were paying "the principal part of the expenses of government" without receiving commensurate benefits, which led him to conclude that "there can be no safety to the Northern States without a separation from the confederacy" [the Union].³⁴

THE EMBARGO

Clearly, the New England Federalists believed that southern politicians, who dominated the federal government, were intentionally harming the New England states. Considerable credence was lent to this conspiracy theory -- at least in the minds of the Federalists -- in 1807, when Jefferson declared an embargo on all foreign trade. The embargo rekindled the fires of secession that had been cooled by the Hamilton-Burr episode. The Federalists commenced planning a convention that they hoped would lead to the creation of a northern confederacy.

In 1807, Great Britain was at war with France, and announced that it would "secure her own seamen wherever found," which included U.S. ships. After a British war ship captured the USS *Chesapeake* off Hampton Roads, Virginia, Jefferson imposed the embargo as a temporary expedient.

This abolition of legal international commerce crushed the national economy and hurt New England disproportionately, for at that time the region was very heavily trade dependent. However, it has been estimated that about half of all the trade with England and France during the embargo was continued by smugglers, ameliorating some of the harmful economic effects of the policy.

When Jefferson left office in January, 1809, his successor, James Madison, imposed an "Enforcement Act" which allowed for a war-on-drugs-style seizure of goods on the mere suspicion that they were intended for export. The army and navy were empowered to enforce the embargo, doing to American merchants in peace time what our enemies would want to do during war. This radicalized the secessionists who no longer plotted behind closed doors but began to *publicly* call for secession. They issued a public proclamation reminding the nation that the U.S. Constitution was "a Treaty of Alliance and Confederation" and that the central government was an association of states, so that "whenever its provisions are violated, or its original principles departed from by a majority of the states or of their people, it is no longer an

effective instrument, but that any state is at liberty by the spirit of that contract to withdraw itself from the union."³⁵

The Massachusetts legislature formally condemned the embargo, demanded that Congress repeal it, and declared the Enforcement Act "not legally binding." This was an act of nullification, virtually identical to South Carolina's twenty-five years later. A New England convention was scheduled where the strategy for secession was to be worked out.

The New England public was just as outraged as the Federalist politicians were over the embargo. The people "peppered Washington with protests" and of the five New England states, Madison carried only tiny Vermont in the 1808 election.³⁶

Madison won the election, but the embargo generated so much animosity toward him that he ended it in March 1809. Ironically, that action took some of the wind out of the sails of the planned secession convention -- at least temporarily.

EARLY YANKEE ATTITUDES TOWARD SLAVERY

In the early nineteenth century, the Constitution allowed that five slaves could be counted as three whites for the purpose of determining congressional representation. This procedure provided the "Yankee Confederates" with yet another rationale for secession: they believed this arrangement artificially stacked the electoral decks against them. As Josiah Quincy claimed,

The slave representation is the cause of all the difficulties we labor under. . . . [Because of this arrangement,] the southern states have an influence in our national councils, altogether disproportionate to their wealth, strength, and resources.³⁷

The Federalists never voiced *moral* objections to the three-fifths clause. In fact, they argued that blacks should be counted as zero, rather than three-fifths of a white man, for purposes of congressional

representation. Further, they did not make any case whatsoever that southern slavery should be ended.

Their insensitivity toward slavery should not be surprising, considering the Federalists' strongly held beliefs regarding the primacy of ethnic homogeneity and their belief in the superiority of English descendants. Even though slavery itself was abolished in Massachusetts in the 1780s, Massachusetts communities had, by the turn of the century, "tightened their poor laws, warned more Negroes from their boundaries, and established segregated schools and churches."³⁸ The Federalist leaders also lectured free blacks that they should not try too hard to climb up the social and economic ladder: "Be contented in the humble station in which Providence has placed you," Federalist cleric Jedidiah Morse lectured the Negro Congregation of Boston's African Meeting House in 1808.³⁹

If the Federalists thought the three-fifths clause of the Constitution was oppressive, they would have considered the abolition of slavery in the South -- and the extension of the franchise to blacks -- an unmitigated disaster. As historian James Banner has concluded: "Freed, it appeared, the Negro was more of a political threat than enslaved. What the Federalists wanted, and what their assaults upon the three-fifths clause were designed to gain, was not the abolition of slavery but the abolition of Negro representation."⁴⁰ Because of their belief that the political power of the South was perpetual, the Federalists saw no prospect of ever eliminating the three-fifths clause -- at least not in their lifetimes. Secession was the only sensible course.

THE WAR OF 1812

Virginia statesman John Randolph was a far more consistent proponent of limited government than his fellow Virginian Thomas Jefferson. He frequently pilloried Jefferson on such issues as the embargo, and eventually became a close friend and political collaborator of Federalist icon Josiah Quincy. Randolph teamed up with the Federalists in opposing Jeffersonian interventionism, including the War of 1812. In the

last moments of congressional debate before war was declared, Randolph argued with Calhoun against going to war until he was ruled "out of order" by Speaker of the House and war proponent Henry Clay. Calhoun then prepared a bill declaring war on Great Britain which passed by a 79 to 49 vote, with New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and all the New England states voting for peace.⁴¹

To the Federalist leaders, this was the last straw. "We are to be taxed beyond our means, and subjected to military conscription," an alarmed Governor George Morris of New York wrote to Timothy Pickering.⁴² "We cannot exist, but in poverty and contempt, without foreign commerce," wrote Pickering, and "by a war of any continuance with Great Britain, that commerce will be annihilated."⁴³

The Massachusetts legislature declared the war "needless and unwise" and denounced it as "a wanton sacrifice of the interests of New England."⁴⁴ Dozens of town meetings were organized in New England to denounce the war. The Massachusetts legislature even instructed its citizens not to volunteer: "Let there be no volunteers except for defensive war."⁴⁵ When the federal government came to New England to enlist recruits, those who did enlist were routinely arrested on (mostly) fictitious charges of not having paid their debts. The Federalist courts then ruled that, as debtors, these men were the "property" of creditors and therefore could not leave the state.

The Supreme Courts of Massachusetts and Connecticut also ruled that the states had a right to decide whether exigencies existed that warranted the calling up of the state's militia, effectively nullifying the declaration of war by the national government. Thus, by refusing to fight any war that did not directly take place on its own soil, New England effectively seceded.

President Madison responded to this *de facto* secession by repudiating his old friend Jefferson's policy of opposition to a standing army "which will grind us with public burdens and sink us under them."⁴⁶ He announced that he would need to institute "those large and permanent

military establishments which are forbidden by the principles of free government," thereby validating the fears of war opponents such as John Randolph.⁴⁷

The U.S. Treasury was soon bankrupted by the war, so the government doubled all import duties, harming the U.S. economy even further. Little revenue was raised, however, since international trade was virtually at a standstill.

This policy of protectionist extremism did artificially stimulate some domestic industries which sprung up to compensate for the loss of goods previously provided more efficiently through international trade. Being protected from international competition, they quickly organized politically to assure the continuation of that protection after the war. And they got the protection because, - according to economist Frank Taussig, "the men who had brought about the war . . . felt in a measure responsible for its results."⁴⁸

Thus, the War of 1812 created dozens of protected industries, especially in the more industrialized North, that would form the core of political support for protectionist trade policies for decades to come. These protectionist interests helped precipitate the nullification crisis of 1832 and, eventually, the War Between the States. It should not be forgotten that Fort Sumter was, after all, a customs house where federal authorities collected tariffs and fees that interfered with southern commerce. That most of the revenues collected in this way were spent in the North infuriated southern secessionists.

THE HARTFORD CONVENTION

On 24 August 1813, the British captured Washington, and "New England was practically in rebellion. It had seceded from national action, and had set up a war confederacy."⁴⁹ Governor Strong of Massachusetts called a special session of the legislature in October to declare that the national government had failed to fulfill the terms of the Constitution and to protect New England from invasion. The time had come, he told them,

for a separate New England alliance. The legislature agreed that the Constitution "must be supplanted."⁵⁰

President Madison's mind was said to be "full of the New England sedition" and, as further evidence of the similarity of views between the New England Federalists and John C. Calhoun, there was even "a proposition ... discussed in New England to form an alliance with South Carolina to resist Virginia, so strong was the similarity of the two sections in temper, religion, and trading instincts."⁵¹

The rank-and-file members of the Federalist Party, if not the leadership, were demanding a separate peace with England, secession, and Madison's resignation. Newspapers throughout New England were "largely in favor of prompt action" with regard to these demands, and were complaining bitterly about foot-dragging by the state legislatures.⁵² There were threats of internal rebellion within the Federalist Party. The language of the public was becoming "high toned and menacing," Harrison Gray Otis wrote to Daniel Webster.⁵³ Something had to be done to calm the public, and a convention was the chosen vehicle.

The convention was held in Hartford in December, 1814, and was attended by twenty-six representatives from Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Vermont. But the delegates -- all professional politicians and party leaders -- turned out to be considerably more moderate and less radical than the rank-and-file of New England Federalism. Secessionist John Lowell, Jr., realized this when he forecast that the convention "would not go far enough."⁵⁴ Lowell ascribed this likely result to the fact that the party leaders feared that something as radical as secession would threaten their careers and standing in national politics. "Separation would have severed their last chance for preferment at the national level."⁵⁵

Nathan Dane, a delegate to the convention, explained condescendingly that when "the multitudes" are "excited and highly dissatisfied with their rulers' conduct, often they can be moderated . . . only when they

know not" what their rulers are up to.⁵⁶ Even though the New England Federalist public, and quite a few of its political leaders, were calling for secession, Dane thought of his job as essentially to "prevent mischief."⁵⁷

The convention did issue a published report, which contained several key recommendations. First, it called for the elimination of the three-fifths clause. Second, it called for a two-thirds vote of both houses of Congress to admit any new states. Third, it advocated a limit on embargoes of sixty days and a two-thirds vote of Congress for their enactment to protect states against "the sudden and injudicious decisions of bare majorities."⁵⁸

A two-thirds vote was also demanded before declaring war, and the convention wanted to prohibit a president from succeeding himself (i.e., executive branch term limits), and to outlaw the election of a president from the same state in successive terms. The convention also argued for block grants to the states from the national government, earmarked for state armies for self-defense purposes.

The secretive conventioners tried to appease the Federalist public by proposing a second convention in Boston if their recommendations were not implemented by the national government. But a small group of delegates gave themselves the authority to reconvene such a convention without the assistance of the legislatures so as to "divert any movement for a second and more radical gathering."⁵⁹

The Washington-based Federalists, such as Pickering, complained bitterly that the convention had been "captured" by the political careerists and "moderates," but to no avail. Very little came of the convention's proposals and the delegates were determined to have "not done as much as was expected of them by the great Body of the people of this State," complained Federalist Theodore Dwight, the president of Yale College and John C. Calhoun's academic mentor.⁶⁰

Federalist radicals like Pickering and Massachusetts Governor Strong were bitterly disappointed, but they still thought the union would not last. The western states "will soon prefer a government of their own,"

predicted Strong.⁶¹ When the war finally ended, so did the Federalist effort to secede from the union.

THE SECESSIONIST LEGACY OF NEW ENGLAND FEDERALISM

Throughout these episodes, historian Edward Powell has written, "the right of a State ... to withdraw from the Union was . . . not disputed."⁶² There was indeed virtually universal support -- from Republicans and Federalists alike -- for the right of secession. Moreover, this belief in the right to secession was alive and well in the North at the outset of the War Between the States. Contrary to what most Americans have been taught, many -- perhaps most -- northerners believed the South should have been permitted to peacefully secede, however unwise they thought secession might have been for the South. This belief is the legacy of the early-nineteenth-century New England secessionists.⁶³ It will be useful to cite just a few examples.

On 10 November 1860, the *Albany* (New York) *Atlas and Argus* editorialized that "we sympathize with and justify the South" because "their rights have been invaded to the extreme limit possible within the forms of the Constitution." If the South wanted to secede, the editors wrote, "we would applaud them and wish them God-Speed."

The declared, eleven days later, that "like it or not, the cotton States will secede." The government will not then "go to pieces," but Southerners will be allowed to regain their "sense of independence and honor."

On 24 November 1860, the *Concord* (New Hampshire) *Democratic Standard* complained of "fanatics and demagogues of the North" who "waged war on the institutions of the South" and appealed for "concession of the just rights of our Southern brethren."

Two days later, the *New York Journal of Commerce* condemned the "meddlesome spirit" of people of the North who wanted to "seek to regulate and control" people in "other communities."

On 13 November 1860, the Bangor (Maine) Daily Union defended southern secessionists by explaining that the Union "depends for its continuance on the free consent and will of the sovereign people" of each state, and "when that consent and will is withdrawn on either part, their Union is gone." If military force is used, then a state can only be held "as a subject province," and can never be "a co-equal member of the American Union."

On the same day, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* clearly explained that "any violation of the constitution by the general government, deliberately persisted in would relieve the state or states injured by such violation from all legal and moral obligations to remain in the union or yield obedience to the federal government." And while the editors saw "no real cause for secession on the part of the South, should any states attempt it there is nothing to be done but let them go."

The *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* echoed similar sentiments by advocating that the southern states be allowed to "work out their salvation or destruction in their own way" rather than "to attempt, through forcible coercion, to save them in spite of themselves."

The *Davenport (Iowa) Democrat and News*, on 17 November 1860, editorialized against secession, but in its editorial it noted that it was apparently in the minority in the North, where most of "the leading and most influential papers of the Union" believe "that any State of the Union has a right to secede."

One such paper was the *Providence (Rhode Island) Evening Press*, which wrote on that same day that sovereignty "necessarily includes what we call the 'right of secession'" and "this right must be maintained" unless we would establish "colossal despotism" against which the founding fathers "uttered their solemn warnings."

The *Cincinnati Daily Press* repeated this sentiment on 21 November 1860: "We believe that the right of any member of this Confederacy to dissolve its political relations with the others and assume an independent position is absolute -- that, in other words, if South

Carolina wants to go out of the Union, she has the right to do so, and no party or power may justly say her nay." This, the editors surmised, is what the Declaration of Independence means when it says that whenever government becomes destructive of the protection of lives, liberties, and the pursuit of happiness, then "it is the right of the people to alter or abolish" their government and "to institute a new government."

The *New York Daily Tribune* made the exact same point on 17 December 1860, adding that if tyranny and despotism justified the American Revolution of 1776, then "we do not see why it would not justify the secession of Five Millions of Southrons from the Federal Union in 1861."

Once South Carolina seceded on 20 December 1860, dozens of northern editorialists viewed it as a confirmation of the principle of sovereignty and self-government, while others, like the *Indianapolis Daily Journal*, said "thank God that we have had a good riddance of bad rubbish."

The *Kenosha (Wisconsin) Democrat* wrote on 11 January 1861, that secession was "the very germ of liberty" and declared that "the right of secession inheres to the people of every sovereign state."

The *New York Journal of Commerce*, sensing the war fever in Washington, reminded its readers on 12 January 1861, that by opposing secession, northerners would be changing the nature of government "from a voluntary one, in which the people are sovereigns, to a despotism where one part of the people are slaves. Such is the logical deduction from the policy of the advocates of force."

The *Washington (D.C.) Constitution* concurred, stating that the use of force against South Carolina would be "the extreme of wickedness and the acme of folly." It further opined the desire "that all the Southern States will secede."

On 5 February 1861, the *New York Tribune* characterized Lincoln's latest speech as "the arguments of the tyrant -- force, compulsion and power."

"Nine out of ten of the people of the North," the paper surmised, were opposed to forcing South Carolina to remain in the Union.

"We ought to let them go," said the *Greenfield (Massachusetts) Gazette and Courier*, once additional southern states began to follow South Carolina's lead.

The *Detroit Free Press* declared on 19 February 1861, that "an attempt to subjugate the seceded States, even if successful, could produce nothing but evil -- evil unmitigated in character and appalling in extent."

The *New York Daily Tribune* argued once again that "the great principle embodied by Jefferson in the Declaration ... is that governments derive their just power from the consent of the governed." Therefore, if the southern states want to secede, "they have a clear right to do so."

On 21 March 1861, the *New York Times* intoned "that there is a growing sentiment throughout the North in favor of letting the Gulf States go."

"The people are recognizing the government of the Confederates," the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* wrote on 23 March 1861, and "there is room for several flourishing nations on this continent; the sun will shine brightly and the rivers run as clear . . . when we acknowledge the Southern Confederacy as before."

"Public opinion in the North," said the *Hartford (Connecticut) Daily Courant* on 12 April 1861, "seems to be gradually settling down in favor of the recognition of the New Confederacy by the Federal Government." The thought of a "bloody and protracted civil war ... is abhorrent to all."

There were, of course, northern papers that supported going to war over secession. The point of this section has been to illustrate how widespread was the view among important opinion makers in the North that to deny the right of secession was to deny the very essence of the Declaration of Independence itself. Lincoln had anything but strong public support when he decided to wage total war on the South. His war

dictated the death of one of the most important rights of a free nation -- the right to secession -- as well as the deaths of 618,000 young men.

Notes

1 Letter of Timothy Pickering to Richard Peters, in Henry Adams, *Documents Relating to New-England Federalism, 1800-1815* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1877), p. 338.

2 Cited in Claude G. Bowers, *Jefferson in Power: The Death Struggle of the Federalists* (Boston: Riverside Press, 1936), p. 235. 3Ibid., p. 243.

4 Cited in James Banner, *To the Hartford Convention: The Federalists and the Origins of Party Politics in Massachusetts, 1789-1815* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), p. 35.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 26.

7 Ibid.

8 Bowers, *Jefferson in Power*, p. 145.

9 Banner, *To the Hartford Convention*, p. 90.

10 Letter from William Smith Shaw to Abigail Adams, 20 May 1798, cited in Banner, *To the Hartford Convention*, p. 90, emphasis in original.

11 William Cunningham, *An Oration* (Leominster, Mass.: n.p., 1803), cited in Banner, *To the Hartford Convention*, p. 91, emphasis in original.

12 William Stoughton, *New England's True Interest* (Cambridge, Mass.: n.p., 1670), quoted in Perry Miller, *The New-England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 135.

13 Cited in Banner, *To the Hartford Convention*, p. 94.

- 14 Cited in Daniel Wait Howe, *Political History of Secession* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1914), p. 13.
- 15 Letter from Timothy Pickering to George Cabot, 29 January 1804, published in Adams, *Documents Relating to New-England Federalism*, p. 338.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- 18 Ibid., p. 6.
- 19 Adams, *Documents Relating to New-England Federalism*, p. 338.
- 20 Arnold Beichman, "What's the Swiss Secret of Serenity?" *The Washington Times* (2 January 1995): A-15.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Letter from Timothy Pickering to Theodore Lyman, 11 February 1804, published in Adams, *Documents Relating to New-England Federalism*, p. 338.
- 23 Bowers, *Jefferson in Power*, p. 245.
- 24 Ibid., p. 252.
- 25 Cited in Edward Powell, *Nullification and Secession in the United States* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1897), p. 128.
- 26 Ibid., p. 63.
- 27 Irving H. Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).
- 28 Ibid., p. 201.
- 29 Banner, *To the Hartford Convention*, p. 48.
- 30 Ibid., p. 100.

31 Ibid.,p.117.

32 Ibid.

33 Douglass Southall Freeman, *Lee* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991), p. 110.

34 Letter from Roger Griswold to Oliver Wolcott, 11 March 1804, in Adams, *Documents Relating to New-England Federalism*, p. 376.

35 Banner, *To the Hartford Convention*, p. 301.

36 Powell, *Nullification and Secession in the United States*, p. 203.

37Banner, *To the Hartford Convention*, p. 102.

38 Mary Stoughton Locke, *Anti-Slavery in America From the Introduction of African Slaves to the Prohibition of the Slave Trade, 1619-1808* (Boston: n.p., 1901).

39 Banner, *To the Hartford Convention*, p. 106.

40 Ibid., p. 107.

41 Bartlett, *John C. Calhoun*, p. 75.

42 Letter from George Morris to Timothy Pickering, 1 November 1814, in Adams, *Documents Relating to New-England Federalism*, p. 390.

43 Letter from Pickering to Edward Pennington, 12 July 1812, in Adams, *Documents Relating to New-England Federalism*, p. 390.

44 Powell, *Nullification and Secession in the United States*, p. 208.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., p. 121.

47 Ibid., p. 212.

48 Frank Taussig, *Tariff History of the United States* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1931), p. 18.

49 Powell, *Nullification and Secession in the United States*, p. 219.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., p. 220.

52 Ibid., p. 221.

53 Cited in Banner, *To the Hartford Convention*, p. 322.

54 Ibid., p. 325.

55 Ibid., p. 343.

56 Ibid., p. 332.

57 Ibid.

58 A text of the convention report is found in Powell, *Nullification and Secession in the United States*, pp. 234-40.

59 Banner, *To the Hartford Convention*, p. 343.

60 Ibid., p. 345.

61 Powell, *Nullification and Secession in the United States*, p. 232.

62 Ibid.

63 These beliefs are chronicled in Howard Cecil Perkins, *Northern Editorials on Secession* (Gloucester, Mass.: American Historical Association, 1964). The following references to newspaper articles are all taken from this source.