

LEE BENSON

The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy

New York as a Test Case



PRINCETON LEGACY LIBRARY

**THE CONCEPT OF JACKSONIAN
DEMOCRACY**

THE CONCEPT
OF JACKSONIAN
DEMOCRACY

NEW YORK AS A TEST CASE

BY LEE BENSON

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

Copyright © 1961, Princeton University Press
All rights reserved

L. C. Card: 61-6286
ISBN 0-691-00572-9



Publication of this book
has been aided by the Ford Foundation program
to support publication,
through university presses, of works in the humanities
and social sciences



Printed in the United States of America
by Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey

First Princeton Paperback Printing, 1970

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise
disposed of without the publisher's consent, in any form of
binding or cover other than that in which it is published.

TO PAUL WALLACE GATES
TEACHER AND FRIEND

PREFACE

IN AN EARLIER, more leisurely age, this book might have been called *Some Aspects of the Transformation of American Society from the Aristocratic Liberal Republic of the Late-Eighteenth Century to the Populistic Egalitarian Democracy of the Mid-Nineteenth Century, with Special Reference to New-York State*. Considerations other than contemporary taste, however, have led me to call it *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case*. For, although the book examines the impact of egalitarian ideas upon New York politics from 1816 to 1844, I conceive it to be essentially an essay on the clarification of historical concepts.

Like other students of men in society, historians develop concepts, or ways of looking at their subject matter to make it intellectually manageable. But it seems safe to say that historians have not as a group tended to view analytically and study systematically the problems inherent in the construction and use of their concepts. What combination of phenomena are designated by a particular concept? How are the phenomena related to one another? Can indices be developed that will help researchers to observe the presence or absence of such phenomena? How? Inadequate study of these and related conceptual problems has, I believe, hampered the efforts of American historians to resolve the substantive controversies that have long engaged their attention.

No attempt is made in this book to deal with all the problems that historians encounter when they use concepts. On the contrary, in order to suggest the need for sustained, systematic work on general conceptual problems, I try to answer two specific questions: what empirical phenomena can logically be designated by the concept Jacksonian Democracy? Does that concept help us to understand the course of American history after 1815?

Searching for tentative answers to those two questions, I have concentrated upon one state. Single cases do not verify general conclusions, of course. But to verify general conclusions eventually, it is necessary to begin somewhere. And in my opinion, particularly because questions related to Jacksonian Democracy require the study of mass behavior, they are better essayed by increasing the precision of research than by widening its geographic scope.

PREFACE

I believe that the approach adopted in this book will add to its representative character. Although it may be argued that New York during the Jacksonian period was so heterogeneous that it must be considered unique, few specialists would deny that it contained many towns, wards, and counties that more or less resembled towns, wards, and counties in other northern states. Since my data have been collected on the local as well as the state level, generalizations based upon them probably do not apply uniquely to New York. At any rate, although it is not claimed that this book provides general answers to questions about the meaning and utility of the concept of Jacksonian Democracy, it is hoped that the book provides new material for a reconsideration of the concept.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge that the manuscript benefited from critical readings by my wife, Eugenia Singleton Benson, by Daniel Aaron, David M. Ellis, Richard Hofstadter, James C. Malin, Charles G. Sellers, Jr., Harold Syrett, and George R. Taylor, and from the stimulating company of Fellows at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, 1958 to 1959. I am also grateful for the resources made available to me by the Director of the Center, Ralph W. Tyler, and by its other administrative officers, Preston S. Cutler and Jane A. Kielsmeier. My thanks go also to Mary Hurt who typed several drafts of the manuscript with unfailing patience and good humor, and to the many staff members of the Columbia University Library, New-York Historical Society, New York Public Library, and New York State Library, who gave me the benefit of their expert knowledge and cheerful assistance.

I am indebted to many people, but particularly to Dr. Leland C. DeVinney and the other officers of the Rockefeller Foundation who recommended generous support of an exploratory study designed to adapt to historiography procedures developed in other disciplines. The study has been carried out at the Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University. The present book is one of a series of publications reporting upon the results.

Columbia University
January 1960

A SUPPLEMENTARY NOTE ON METHOD
FOR THE PAPERBACK EDITION

NOT EVERYBODY who talks about heaven is going there, not everybody who calls for clear methodological statements makes them. In this book I call for clear methodological statements. Alas, as it was originally published, I failed to indicate clearly all the variables (or characteristics of people) considered in trying to determine "Who Voted for Whom?" nor to indicate clearly the methods used in that attempt. Fortunately, publication of the Atheneum edition provides an opportunity to try to remedy those defects in this supplementary note. (The text is unchanged, except for correction of typographical errors and a few, slight, stylistic revisions.)

For reasons explicitly stated in the book, it gives considerable space and emphasis to the group voting patterns that I believe crystallized in 1844. To determine the group bases of voting behavior in 1844, six additional variables were considered: 1) previous voting behavior; 2) economic group; 3) ethnocultural group; 4) religious group; 5) residential group (i.e., large city, small city—large town, small town, large village, other rural); 6) regional group (i.e., residence in geographic areas of New York state). Because the electorate was restricted to males, sex was a nonrelevant characteristic; age and education could not be considered because of lack of data.

The main method used to identify who voted for whom was "multivariate analysis" (defined and illustrated in the text) adapted to historical sources and aggregate units (i.e., states, counties, rural townships, urban wards). That is, since it was impossible to do what modern survey researchers do, collect data about specified characteristics of *individuals* and then infer relationships among those characteristics, I collected data about specified characteristics of *aggregate units* and then made inferences about the group bases of voting behavior. Clearly, the more homogeneous the aggregate units in respect to specified characteristics (e.g., economic group, ethnocultural group), the more precise and credible the inferences about group voting behavior.

For some purposes, counties are useful units of analysis. But they tend to be heterogeneous. My conclusions, therefore, derive mainly from data for rural townships and urban wards. Tending to be much smaller in size and population than counties, they tend to be more

NOTE ON METHOD

homogeneous. And, following the same elementary line of reasoning, I relied most heavily on the most homogeneous townships and wards—a procedure that apparently is not made clear in the text.

For example, since I found that all electoral *units* that definitely contained a very large proportion of “Scots,” although located in different regions of the state and varying widely in other characteristics (except previous voting behavior), voted overwhelmingly against the Democratic Party, I inferred that *Scots* voted overwhelmingly against the Democratic Party (impressionistic evidence was also used to support the inference). In contrast, I found that units that definitely contained a very large proportion of “Yankees” tended to vary widely in their Democratic percentages, depending upon variations in other characteristics. It seemed reasonable to infer, therefore, that Yankees, unlike Scots, tended to vary widely in their voting behavior. Similarly, I found that units that definitely contained a very large proportion of “poor” or “marginal” farmers tended to vary widely in their Democratic percentages, depending upon variations in other characteristics. Again, it seemed reasonable to infer that poor or marginal farmers tended to vary widely in their voting behavior—an inference supported by similar findings for farming units assigned to every category of economic wealth.

Although multivariate analysis was the main method used to identify the group bases of voting behavior, it should be noted that the first step taken was to compute the party percentages for every unit within every county in 1844 (and earlier years). The next step was to rank the units in each county according to 1844 Democratic percentages. Once the three top and three bottom Democratic units in each county were identified, it was possible to determine whether the top and bottom units in any given county differed from, or resembled, each other in respect to any specified characteristic, or particular combination of characteristics. Similarly, it was then possible to compare the top (and bottom) Democratic units in all counties and develop a number of working hypotheses about the group bases of voting behavior (e.g., Scots voted overwhelmingly against the Democrats). These hypotheses were then tested by systematic analysis of all units definitely assigned to specific categories (e.g., an analysis was made to determine whether “Scots” farming units, assigned to different economic categories, located in different re-

NOTE ON METHOD

gions of New York, etc., uniformly cast low Democratic percentages).

To begin a study by identifying and analyzing the top and bottom units of a given party in each county is, I believe, the most economical way to generate working hypotheses about the group bases of voting behavior. In any event, that procedure was used in this study, as well as in a subsequent study that will report on continuities and discontinuities in New York voting behavior from 1844 to 1860.

CONTENTS

PREFACE	vii
CHAPTER I. From Populism to Egalitarianism	3
A. The Decade of Confusion, 1816-1826	4
B. The Egalitarian Impulse, Antimasonic Style	11
CHAPTER II. Antimasonry Goes Political	21
A. Spontaneous Combustion Fires a New Party	21
B. The Anti-Regency Coalition, 1829-1830	32
C. Antimasonry Converts to Social Reform	43
CHAPTER III. "Bank War" and Restoration of the Two-Party System	47
A. Van Buren Republicans and State-Licensed Monopolies	47
B. Two New Parties, Not Two Old Parties in New Dress	62
CHAPTER IV. New York Party Leadership, 1834-1844	64
A. Who Led the Democrats and Whigs?	64
B. Middle-Grade Democratic and Whig Leaders: Who Were They?	79
CHAPTER V. Positive versus Negative Liberalism	86
A. Federalist, Whig, and Democratic Theories of the State	86
B. The Movement for Free Banking in New York	89
C. Whig and Democratic Models of the Liberal State	104
CHAPTER VI. Two Minor "Parties"	110
A. The Liberty Party	110
B. The American Republican Party	114
CHAPTER VII. Class Voting in New York	123
A. The 1844 Election in Historical Perspective	123
B. A Voting Cycle and its Phases	126

CONTENTS

C. What Happened in the 1844 Election?	131
D. Who Voted for Whom in 1844?	140
 CHAPTER VIII. Ethnocultural Groups and Political Parties	 165
 CHAPTER IX. Religious Groups and Political Parties	 186
A. Catholic Voting Patterns	187
B. Protestant Voting Patterns	191
C. Free Thinkers versus Orthodox Believers or Conformists	192
D. Puritans versus Nonpuritans	198
 CHAPTER X. Who Voted for the Minor "Parties"?	 208
A. Liberty Party Voters	209
B. American Republican Voters	213
 CHAPTER XI. Party Programs, Characters, and Images	 216
A. Projecting and Reconstructing Party Images	217
B. National Democratic Party: Official Images	219
C. New York Democratic Party: Official Images	227
D. National Whig Party: Official Images	237
E. New York Whig Party: Official Images	242
 CHAPTER XII. Texas Annexation and New York Public Opinion	 254
A. Conditions and Conduct of the 1844 Campaign	254
B. Was the 1844 Election a Referendum on Texas?	255
C. The Hidden-Persuaders Syndrome	267
 CHAPTER XIII. Outline for a Theory of American Voting Behavior	 270
A. Some Crude Generalizations about American Voting Behavior	271
B. A Tentative Classification System for American Voting Behavior	278

CONTENTS

CHAPTER XIV. Interpreting New York Voting Behavior	288
A. Patterns in New York Voting Behavior	289
B. Voting Behavior in Rockland and Chautauqua Counties	293
C. Negroes, Catholic Irish, "New British"	317
CHAPTER XV. Jacksonian Democracy—Concept or Fiction?	329
A. The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy	329
B. An Alternative Concept and Hypothesis	335
APPENDICES.	
I. Sources for Election Statistics	339
II. Economic Classification of Political Units	340
III. Ethnocultural Groups in New York, 1844, Estimated Percentages, 1845	342
INDEX	345

THE CONCEPT OF JACKSONIAN
DEMOCRACY

. . . If I let myself believe in anything on insufficient evidence there may be no great harm done by the mere belief; it may be true after all, or I may never have occasion to exhibit it in outward acts. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards man, that I make myself credulous. The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous.

—WILLIAM E. K. CLIFFORD, *Lectures and Essays* (1886), 345.

*He who would do good to another must do it in
Minute Particulars:*

*General Good is the plea of the scoundrel,
hypocrite & flatterer,*

*For Art and Science cannot exist but in minutely
organized Particulars . . .*

—WILLIAM BLAKE, in GEOFFREY KEYNES, ed., *The Complete Writings of William Blake* (1957), 687.

CHAPTER I

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

AFTER living a dozen years in New York," wrote Oliver Wolcott, a veteran of early nineteenth century political wars, "I don't pretend to comprehend their politics. It is a labyrinth of wheels within wheels, and it is understood only by the managers." Variations on this theme by skilled readers of political signs, as well as the actual course of events, suggest that the "managers" were almost equally baffled when they contemplated that "vast deep," that "most unfathomable of subjects, the politics of the State of New York."¹

Despite the complexity of its politics, New York is a good place to begin a systematic study of the concept of Jacksonian Democracy. As we shall see, after 1815 some of the nation's most significant political movements either originated or developed most fully in New York. Its decennial censuses from 1825 to 1875, and other printed sources (for example, almanacs, gazetteers, registers), supply much of the raw data needed to study political behavior systematically. New York then had the largest population of any state in the Union. In 1840, for example, it was only one of 30 states or territories, but generalizations about its politics represent generalizations about the politics of 17 per cent of the American white population.

Considerations other than size of population make New York a good state for testing generalizations about American history. Although it cannot be regarded as the United States in microcosm, New York can reasonably be regarded as the North (that is, free states) in microcosm.² We find in New York, during the period covered by this book, an extraordinary range of social relationships, processes, and phenomena. It contained some of the oldest settled areas in the country and some just emerging from the frontier stage; it contained the largest, most dynamic city in the country, as well as sparsely settled communities which had remained relatively static for many decades. Except for slave plantations and coal mines, its econ-

¹ As quoted in De Alva S. Alexander, *Political History of the State of New York* (New York, 1906), 1: III; Herbert D. A. Donovan, *The Barnburners* (New York, 1925), 3.

² Support for this argument is found in David M. Ellis, "New York and Middle Atlantic Regionalism," *New York History*, 35: 3-13 (January 1954); Frederick Jackson Turner, *The United States: 1830-1850* (New York, 1950 printing), 92-143.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

omy included every form of economic activity significant in the United States. Moreover, its boundaries, stretching from the Atlantic Coast to the Great Lakes, encompassed almost every religious, ethnic, and social group to be found anywhere in the North; and they tended to live in distinct geographic areas, which helps us to identify their political behavior.

A. The Decade of Confusion, 1816-1826

The decade after 1816 stands out as a period of great confusion, even in a state where confusion is the political norm. Unfortunately, because we lack intensive, cumulative studies, we can now offer little more than impressionistic generalizations about New York politics during these years. I assume, however, that political parties were nonexistent—if we define political parties as competing organizations which are relatively stable and which “put forward candidates for office, advocate particular courses of governmental action, and, if their candidates win, create enough of a sense of joint responsibility among various officials to aid them in the fulfillment of a group responsibility for the direction of government.”³

Admittedly, this assumption contradicts the traditional view that the original Jeffersonian “Republican Party” continued to dominate politics in New York after the War of 1812, particularly after the Federalists gave up the organizational ghost in 1820. If the assumption is valid, those who claimed the name Republican held such different principles, sought such different objectives, and were grouped together so loosely in so many different and antagonistic factions that to think of them as constituting a political party is to confuse names with things. Some continuity existed in New York politics after 1816, of course, and some distinct patterns can be found. But I maintain that the literature assumes *certain* continuities and patterns whose existence has not been demonstrated. Intensive research may show that they were actually nonexistent.

1. Where Did the Federalists Go?

To my knowledge, no one has yet retraced the political paths followed by ex-Federalists after 1820. And yet the literature tends to assume a straight line of descent from Jefferson’s Republican Party to Martin Van Buren’s Republican faction to Andrew Jackson’s “Democratic Party.” It also assumes that the overwhelming majority

³ V. O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York, 1949), 298-311.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

of Federalists aligned themselves with De Witt Clinton's Republican faction. Then, under the successive disguises of Clintonian Republicans, National Republicans, and Whigs, ex-Federalists continued their aristocratic battle against the democratic and egalitarian aspirations of "the people."⁴

Unfortunately, this delightfully simple historical pattern of continuing struggle between Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians breaks down at too many critical points. Even before 1819, when the Republican Party in New York formally split, the available evidence suggests that there were factions within factions, as well as "wheels within wheels." After the split, the Van Buren and Clinton factions worked equally hard to attract Federalists and to advertise their unshakeable devotion to the Republican Party and to Republican principles. Significantly, one influential group of Federalists opposed Clinton so fervently that they sounded a requiem for their party in 1820 and publicly proclaimed their "high-minded" resolution "to unite ourselves unequivocally, and without reserve to the great republican party of the state and union."⁵

How many erstwhile Hamiltonian "aristocrats" followed the lead of their "high-minded" brethren into the Van Buren ranks and reentered the political lists, washed of ancient sins and marching under "Jeffersonian democratic" banners? Lack of evidence prevents a firm

⁴ The study probably most responsible for fixing this assumption in the literature is Dixon Ryan Fox, *The Decline of Aristocracy In The Politics of New York* (New York, 1919), *passim*. Though this famous dissertation contains many illuminating insights (some of which have not yet been fully exploited), it is important to recognize that it was written at a very early stage of Professor Fox's life-long researches in New York history. Critically analyzed, it presented only flimsy evidence to bolster the assumption of Federalist-Whig, Republican-Democratic continuity, and its dominant assumptions were based on Charles Beard's economic determinist interpretation of American political history. The material presented in this chapter, I believe, supports the belief that a careful study will fail to validate Fox's assumptions. In fact, Fox himself substantially altered his views two decades later in a brilliant series of lectures which have been relatively neglected by historians. Compare *ibid.*, *passim*, with his *Yankees and Yorkers* (New York, 1940), 1-26, and *passim*. For example, discussing early New York politics in the later work, Fox wrote a passage which contrasts sharply with the views presented in his dissertation: ". . . The party lines were not closely drawn between rich and poor. So assured were the aristocrats of their social place and so various their backgrounds that they did not move together as one interest; families faced each other as Capulets and Montagues." *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁵ Jabez D. Hammond, *History of Political Parties in the State of New-York* (Cooperstown, N.Y., 1846, 4th ed.), 1: 527-531; Robert V. Remini, "The Early Political Career of Martin Van Buren, 1782-1828" (Columbia University, Ph.D., 1951), 246-248, 261-262, 283-286. For a sympathetic account of the metamorphosis of "high-minded," anti-Clintonian Federalists, see Robert W. July, *The Essential New Yorker: Gulsian Crommelin Verplanck* (Durham, N.C., 1951), 29-71.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

answer to that question; but it cannot be said that the available evidence supports the view that party battles continued in New York between Jeffersonian "populists" and Hamiltonian "aristocrats" during the 1820's. Since Alexander Hamilton was dead, speculations as to what he would have done in those years can only be speculations. It is worth noting, however, that his sons headed the procession of "high-minded" Federalists into the Van Buren camp, and that their baggage train included the *New York Evening Post*, the newspaper Hamilton founded to advance the cause and doctrines of Federalism.⁶

As the *Evening Post* eventually became an influential "radical" organ of the Van Buren Republicans, so James A. Hamilton became an influential figure in the Van Buren-Jackson alliance. In fact, Andrew Jackson found the son of Alexander Hamilton so impressive that knowledgeable observers believed him to have "the ears of Jackson more than any other individual" when his first Cabinet was formed in 1829.⁷ One Federalist sprig does not form a Republican branch, of course. But James A. Hamilton's example does suggest the present dangers of making firm statements about the political development of ex-Federalists and their physical or spiritual descendants. Numerous other individual examples can be cited; perhaps the most revealing is the conversion to the Jackson Party of James Fenimore Cooper, the antidemocratic, antileveling scion of a great Federalist landed magnate.⁸ And, according to the classic historian of early New York politics, "such eminent federalists as Chancellor Jones, Thomas J. Oakley, and many others, early declared in his [Jackson's] favor."⁹

⁶ Hammond, *op.cit.*, 1: 528-529.

⁷ See the letter of William Coleman to James A. Hamilton, February 19, 1829, in James A. Hamilton, *Reminiscences* (New York, 1869), 94. For the intimate political relations between Van Buren and Hamilton, and the latter's influence upon Jackson, see the letters and memoranda in *ibid.*, 62-285.

⁸ For a perceptive discussion of Cooper's "close attachment to the Democratic party in the Jacksonian years," see Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, Cal., 1957), 42-75. Meyers notes that "Cooper never felt himself a traitor to his class, or a rebel, or even a critic in any fundamental way; on the contrary, it seemed to him natural that the children of Federalist diehards should be 'almost always decided democrats.'" *Ibid.*, 43. In my opinion, Meyers' adherence to the Jacksonian Democracy concept prevented him from seeing the full significance of Cooper's position. See also the earlier treatment of Cooper in Fox, *Yankees and Yorkers*, 200-205.

⁹ Hammond, *op.cit.*, 2: 255. That Jackson had great attraction for leading Federalists is perhaps most spectacularly demonstrated by the case of the "Old Patroon." Stephen Van Rensselaer, than whom there was no more aristocratic Federalist, wanted to vote for Jackson in 1824-1825 when the presidential election was thrown into the House of Representatives. He "favored Jackson until the

2. Political Liberalism in the 1821 Constitutional Convention

Closely examined, the major political developments of the early 1820's provide little support for the traditional historical account of continuing party battles between Jeffersonian "liberals" and Hamiltonian "conservatives." As a working definition, early nineteenth century political liberalism and political conservatism, respectively, are defined as belief in and disbelief in universal suffrage, popular election of government officials, and popular nomination of candidates by delegated party conventions "fresh from the people." *Implementation* of those beliefs is taken to signify the difference between eighteenth and early nineteenth century political liberalism. If we use those criteria, the historical record suggests that the Van Buren Republicans had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, into the politically liberal nineteenth century.

Ever since Dixon Ryan Fox published his pioneering study of the decline of aristocracy in New York politics, the Constitutional Convention of 1821 has been viewed as recording the final victory of political liberalism in the state. If we use the criteria suggested above, however, the date must be advanced from 1821 to 1826, when universal male suffrage was passed. When this is done, it becomes easier to estimate whether the Van Burenites' conversion to political liberalism owed more to expediency than to conviction.

In 1821, it is true, Van Buren led the dominant group which triumphed over the small band of diehards wedded to the eighteenth century concept of freehold suffrage. But those spokesmen for the *ancien régime* were anachronisms—echoes of the past who represented no influential body of opinion.¹⁰ The convention debates show that the real battle was fought not over extension of the suffrage but over universal male suffrage; in 1821 the champions of political liberalism lost that battle. And in the light of subsequent developments, it is

time that he thought Adams would be the eventual winner." Confiding his views to a kinsman on January 22, 1825, he said "I feel inclined for 'Old Hickory' myself." William B. Fink, "Stephen Van Rensselaer And the House Election Of 1825," *New York History*, 32: 323-330 (July 1951).

¹⁰ Hammond, 2: 15-49; Fox, *Decline of Aristocracy in New York*, 229-269; Remini, *op.cit.*, 301-307. Hammond divided the convention delegates into three groups: one set of "extremists" wanted to retain the freehold suffrage qualifications; a second set wanted white manhood suffrage; the third set "may be called conservatives, who were for abolishing the freehold qualification, but, at the same time, were for placing some restrictions on the right of voting." Van Buren was "among the most prominent men of the conservative corps." *Op.cit.*, 2:48-49.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

worth noting that even those liberal "democrats" were outraged by the idea that free Negroes should continue to enjoy the same rights as free white men. On this issue, therefore, they joined the conservative majority led by Van Buren and supported its efforts to write a property restriction clause into the Constitution that limited suffrage to a small fraction of the Negro population.

Far from leading the liberal movement for political equality, Van Buren led the conservative opposition to universal suffrage and popular election of officials. He used his formidable talents to defend the "stake in society" theory of suffrage, that is, property owners, not people, should vote. As he repeatedly insisted, his proposals for suffrage extension simply granted to owners of "personal property" and to "householders" the right that freeholders already enjoyed. Addressing himself to the diehards opposed to suffrage extension, he stoutly denied any intention "of introducing into the most sacred sanctuary of the constitution, a mob or rabble, violent and disorganizing as were the Jacobins of France; and furious and visionary as the radicals of England are sometimes represented."¹¹

Having easily beaten down the spokesmen for the Right, Van Buren also succeeded in beating down the "radical" democrats of the Left who demanded universal suffrage. Whatever other gentlemen might think proper, he sarcastically observed, he would not go so far as to confer this "precious privilege" indiscriminately "upon every one, black or white, who would be kind enough to condescend to accept it."¹² To check "the dangerous and alarming tendency" developing in the convention, he cited some of "the many evils which would flow from a wholly unrestricted suffrage." Chief among them would be the enlarged electorate in New York City, for "the character of the increased number of voters would be such as would render their elections rather a curse than a blessing." With universal suffrage in operation, the increased number of legislative seats proposed by the convention would not go to the "hardy sons" of western and northern New York, but "would be surrendered to the very worst population of the old counties and cities."¹³ Paying homage to the "stake in society" theory of representative government, Van Buren

¹¹ L. H. Clarke, *A Report of the Debates And Proceedings of The Convention of the State of New York . . . 1821* (New York, 1821), 129-135.

¹² *Ibid.*, 142.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 181-182. The quotation below is from p. 182. It is perhaps instructive to note that two leaders of the movement for universal suffrage in the 1821 Convention, Peter R. Livingston and Erastus Root, wound up in the Whig Party as opponents of Van Buren.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

warned that once universal suffrage was enacted, "the door would have been entirely closed against retreat, whatever might be our after conviction, founded on experience, as to the evil tendency of this extended suffrage. The just equilibrium between the right of those who have, and those who have not, an interest in the government, could, when once surrendered, never be regained, except by the sword."

When the Convention of 1821 finally adjourned, the Van Buren faction could claim victory on all major fronts; universal suffrage had been defeated, some long overdue reforms in government organization had been achieved, and the governor had been given the power to appoint local justices of the peace. These officials exercised considerable influence in their constituencies and, according to a recent sympathetic biographer, Van Buren's "real object" in blocking their popular election was to bring the appointing power to Albany. Once lodged at Albany, that power would be placed "under the care of his organization." Confident that his faction would win the next election, Van Buren also believed that, by gaining control of the justices of peace, "the Bucktails [Van Buren Republicans] would secure an iron grip on the political life of the entire state, right down to the smallest hamlet."¹⁴ But, as Bobbie Burns has noted, things do not always work out according to plan.

3. Populistic Democracy Arrives and Conquers in the mid-1820's

The "Bucktails," emboldened perhaps by sweeping success at the polls in 1822, decided to resist the growing demands in New York for the popular election of president and for an end to nominations by congressional and legislative caucuses. The political explosion that followed further fragmented the Republican Party and thoroughly upset political alignments in New York.

Briefly stated, to guarantee their power to cast the state's votes for William H. Crawford in 1824, the Bucktails used control of the state senate to block passage of a law restoring the people's right to choose presidential electors.¹⁵ Moreover, to pay off old scores, they expelled DeWitt Clinton from the Canal Board—an expulsion legally arbitrary and politically inept. Seizing upon the current American antagonism to the European "Holy Alliance,"

¹⁴ Remini, 309-312.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 384-413, 435-447; Hammond, 2: 139-180; Fox, *Decline of Aristocracy in New York*, 286-297.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

“the anti-caucus, anti-Crawford, anti-Van Buren” factions promptly tagged their opponents with the nickname, “Albany Regency.”¹⁶

During the 1824 state and national campaigns, all possible changes were rung upon the Albany Regency theme, and a new era began. Anti-Regency politicians whipped up popular frenzy against the “Royal Cabinet,” “the cabal,” and “the junto,” which had conspired against the “people’s rights.” From Montauk Point to the Niagara frontier, the “monstrous usurpation” of power by “King Caucus” was denounced and “People’s Candidates”—headed by Clinton—were nominated to oppose the Regency at the first delegated party convention in New York history. “Huzza for the people!!!” was the battle cry against the “unholy Alliance,” and men marching to the polls were urged to remember that “the present controversy is the PEOPLE against a purse proud overbearing ARISTOCRACY.”¹⁷ Populistic democracy had arrived in New York.

Not only did populistic democracy arrive in 1824, but the “People’s Party” and DeWitt Clinton conquered so decisively that political liberalism soon disappeared as a live issue in New York. Private convictions notwithstanding, all “practical politicians” thereafter loudly proclaimed devotion to “equal political rights for all.” After the fall of the Regency in 1824, the shape of the future was plain—so plain, in fact, that politicians of all faiths felt compelled to adopt the same strategic doctrine, although their tactics continued to differ. They and their party represented “the people,” their opponents represented the “aristocracy.”

Political conservatism ended, not with a bang in 1824, but with a whimper in 1826. By then, the Van Burenites had publicly come to appreciate the virtues of populism. With their support, the constitutional amendments that Clinton recommended in 1824 were passed. In effect, those amendments established universal suffrage (except for Negroes), and subjected presidents, as well as justices of the peace, to popular election. Moreover, copying their opponents’ tac-

¹⁶ See the *Ulster Plebeian* (Kingston, N.Y.) from January 14 through November 1824. For typical sentiments, see the issues of April 21, p. 2, and September 15, p. 1. “Albany Regency” had become a common term of abuse by September.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, September 29, 1824, p. 2; October 13, 20, 1824, p. 1; November 17, 24, 1824, p. 1; December 1, 1824, p. 2; Harriet A. Weed, ed., *Autobiography of Thurlow Weed* (Boston, 1883), 1: 102-121; C. H. Rammelkamp, “The Campaign of 1824 in New York,” in American Historical Association, *Annual Report . . . 1904* (Washington, 1905), 177-201. For convenience, the *Memoir of Thurlow Weed*, edited by his grandson, Thurlow Weed Barnes, published in 1884, will be cited here as the second volume of Weed’s *Autobiography*.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

tics, the Van Burenites abandoned caucus nominations in favor of delegated political conventions "fresh from the people."¹⁸

Although two distinct sets of candidates competed for popular support in 1826, two distinct parties had not yet developed. At any rate, I cannot discern significant principle or policy differences between the contending factions. Local issues and interests, personal loyalties and antagonisms, political alliances and animosities produced by the 1824 campaign, different attitudes toward the national administration of John Quincy Adams, maneuvers preparatory to the 1828 presidential campaign—all combined to produce factional rather than party politics. Perhaps the kaleidoscopic, factional character of New York politics in the mid-1820's is suggested by these observations: Van Buren was secretly trying to form an alliance with DeWitt Clinton, his longtime foe; although Clinton was all-out for General Jackson, most of Clinton's supporters apparently favored the Adams administration; Van Buren had definitely decided to oppose Adams, but remained publicly "non-committal" toward Jackson and other potential candidates.¹⁹

Given the lack of conflict over principle or policy, it is not surprising that the 1826 campaign lacked popular excitement. Since the outcome was very close, both on the state and county levels, many voters who had been swept away by the 1824 Clintonian tidal wave must have found their way back to Van Buren political moorings. Significantly, the voting returns show no distinct regional patterns. Most counties divided only narrowly in their support for the competing Van Buren and Clintonian Republican factions, and even gimlet-eyed observers would have had difficulty in detecting that the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 had had any impact upon voting behavior in 1826.²⁰ But the New York electorate did not remain becalmed for long.

B. The Egalitarian Impulse, Antimasonic Style

If 1824 was the year when the movement for political equality reached its climax, 1827 was the year when political equality became the weapon of the movement for social and economic equality.

¹⁸ Hammond, 2: 181-233; Willis F. Johnson and Ray B. Smith, *Political and Governmental History of the State of New York* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1922), 2: 67-81; Remini, 491-492, 502-503.

¹⁹ Hammond, 2: 208-236; Fox, *Decline of Aristocracy in New York*, 302-317; Alexander, *op.cit.*, 1: 344-357; Remini, 492-553.

²⁰ The party percentages were calculated from the official state canvass printed in the *Albany Argus* (s.w.), December 16, 1826, p. 2.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

The People's Party had established the proposition that, in the eyes of the law, all white men were politically equal. Broadly conceived, the mission of the Antimasonic Party was to establish the proposition that in America all white men must be regarded as *socially* equal and, so far as the law was concerned, must be allowed equal economic opportunities. "Free, and *therefore* equal" conveys the essence of that Antimasonic "blessed spirit" which radiated from western New York and eventually shaped the permanent character and style of American politics.

1. Transportation Revolution and a Rising Level of Aspiration

That attempts to trace the complex, subtle relationships between economic and social phenomena frequently result in intellectual disaster cannot be denied. Yet I cannot suppress the belief that a strong causal relationship existed between what George R. Taylor calls the Transportation Revolution and the egalitarian movements that lead me to call the years from 1825 to 1850 the Age of Egalitarianism.²¹

Long before 1815, H. St. John de Crèvecoeur thought he detected something different about this "new man," the American. What made him different was a spirit of independence and resourcefulness unknown to the Old World. By 1815, a shrewd contemporary observer (Hezekiah Niles of *Niles' Review*) was emphasizing, as the distinguishing feature of the American national character, "the almost universal ambition to get forward."²² Such claims need not be taken literally to accept the proposition that the general level of aspiration was higher in the United States than elsewhere in the early nineteenth century world. Before 1815, however, the relatively underdeveloped economy sharply limited the ability of most men to *realize* the national ambition "to get forward."

Static is not the word for the American economy between 1790 and 1815, but it had not yet attained the dynamism that later became its most striking characteristic. True, the land was rich and the people were ready and willing. Or, to use Walt W. Rostow's

²¹ George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution: 1815-1860* (New York, 1951), 3-152. In my opinion, Taylor's concept, the transportation revolution, is an extremely important contribution to a better understanding of all phases of American history during the 1815-1860 period. For a brilliant interpretation of what he calls the "Communications Revolution," see James C. Malin, *The Contriving Brain and The Skillful Hand In The United States* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1955), 1-231.

²² As quoted in Taylor, *op.cit.*, 4.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

happy phrase and illuminating concept, the United States possessed the natural resources and most of the social and cultural characteristics required to launch it on the "take-off stage" of economic growth.²³ To some extent, political factors held back the take-off, but another set of factors held it back even more. A country of continental proportions, the United States required revolutionary changes in transportation and communication before it could realize its potential. For a variety of reasons, the requisite changes occurred soon after the end of the War of 1812.

Although the Erie Canal did not initiate the transportation revolution, its phenomenal success, even before its completion in 1825, served to galvanize the American economy. Inspired by the Erie, men all over the country now saw opportunities where before they had seen obstacles. Put another way, the spirit of enterprise flourished before enterprise itself felt the invigorating effects of the great boom in canals, turnpikes, steamboats, and railroads.²⁴

In short, my hypothesis holds that the boom in transportation and the dynamic expansion of the economy acted as powerful stimulants to movements inspired by the egalitarian ideals of the Declaration of Independence. I do not contend that one-to-one relationships existed between the revolution in transportation and the rise in egalitarianism. But it is suggestive, at least, that William H. Seward observed their reciprocal relationships—and acted upon his observations.

From the time that Seward appeared on the political scene in 1824, the reciprocal relationships among internal improvements, social equality (broadly conceived), and free public education formed the dominant theme in his speeches, writings, and actions. Speaking on "Education and Internal Improvement" shortly after he became governor in 1839, he summarized eloquently the political philosophy and working principles around which he had built his career: "Much

²³ The reference here is to Rostow's "take-off" concept. I find that concept useful, but have a number of reservations, particularly in respect to American economic growth. For one thing, Rostow tends to give disproportionate emphasis to industrial developments and to slight the impetus given to growth by rapid expansion and extension of commercial agriculture. In my opinion, the impact of the transportation revolution on agriculture was at first as important as its impact upon industry, and a complex interaction of economic, political, social, and cultural factors produced the "take-off" stage in the United States during the 1830's. The concept is discussed in Walt W. Rostow, "The Take-Off into Self-Sustained Growth," *Economic Journal*, 66: 25-48 (March 1956), and *The Process of Economic Growth* (New York, 1956), *passim*.

²⁴ Taylor, 32-36.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

as mankind cherish the love of liberty, it is not the only object of desire. Give them freedom, and they will demand improvement as the natural means of gratifying their rational desires. In this country the people are free in their political, social, and religious action, yet from one boundary to the other they are excited with the desire of improvement, and they will not be disappointed or delayed in their efforts. It is the object of republican institutions to encourage and stimulate improvement of the physical condition of the country, and to promote the moral and intellectual advancement of its citizens; to discourage military ambition, and shun the causes which produce stagnation of enterprise and promote personal faction, that engross the passions of the people, and arrest the progress of improvement.

“If the theory of our constitution was fully expounded by its founders, its most complete security is to be effected by *the highest attainable equality in the social conditions of our citizens* [italics added]. Power will always unite with the *few* or the many, according to the extension or limitation of knowledge. *The highest attainable equality is to be accomplished by education and internal improvement as they distribute among the whole community the advantages of knowledge and wealth* [italics added].”²⁵

2. Transportation Revolution and Antimasonry

In 1839 Seward made liberty the precursor of the national “desire of improvement”; a decade earlier he had helped to launch the Antimasonic movement, whose goal was “the highest attainable equality in the social conditions of our citizens” and whose development owed much to the transportation revolution. Other factors contributed to the movement, of course. Chief among them perhaps were the great religious revivals which gave western New York its name, “The Burned-Over District” (that is, fired by religious and moral passions). And yet, as the historian of that district has suggested, it seems reasonable to think that subtle, causal relationships existed among the building of internal improvements, the dynamic economic expansion evident in New York by 1825, and the religious revivals, Antimasonic crusade, and benevolent movements that followed.²⁶ For example, as will be discussed below, it seems significant that the leaders of the movement to crush “the Monster Institution”

²⁵ George E. Baker, ed., *The Works of William H. Seward* (New York, 1853), 3: 213.

²⁶ Those relationships are traced in an excellent intellectual history, Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1950), 55-137.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

of Freemasonry also led the movements for "internal improvements" and "free enterprise."

Some surface facts of the Antimasonic story have been recited many times, but I believe we have a long way to go before penetrating to the core of what John B. McMaster has called "the most remarkable" political party in American history.²⁷ If we ignore the events leading up to it, let us say the story began in September 1826, just 50 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The setting was the thriving village of Batavia, Genesee County, western New York; the plot initially centered around the fate of William Morgan, a "renegade" from the Masonic Order who had written a book purporting to reveal its secrets.

Word of Morgan's decision to violate his Masonic oaths leaked out and set in motion a series of mysterious persecutions which culminated in his kidnapping and subsequent disappearance. Though the details have never been fully established, Morgan most probably "was tied in a weighted cable, rowed to the center of the Niagara River at its junction with Lake Ontario, and dropped overboard. In any case, it cannot be proved that he was ever seen again."²⁸

Morgan was never seen again, but David Miller, the Batavia printer who published his revelations, had not been silenced. Having suffered from Masonic wrath, Miller struck back at his "persecutors" by publishing a lengthy account of the events which led up to the abduction and probable murder of Morgan. Filled with lurid speculations and impassioned rhetoric, it called upon the public to demand vindication of the majesty of the laws and punishment of the Masonic criminals.

²⁷ John B. McMaster, *History of the People Of The United States* (New York, 1900), 109-120. The standard account is Charles McCarthy, *The Antimasonic Party*, in American Historical Association *Annual Report, 1902* (Washington, 1903), 1: 367-574. An excellent doctoral dissertation, this broad-ranging study is now more than fifty years old. A series of intensive state and local monographs is badly needed if a new synthesis is to be attempted. Like McCarthy's study, a recent dissertation examined the Antimasonic movement on a national scale. But it provides an illuminating survey of its rhetoric rather than its politics. (Leslie Griffen, "The Antimasonic Persuasion," Cornell University, Ph.D., 1951.)

For suggestive although somewhat conflicting interpretations of the movement in New York and Vermont, see Cross, *op.cit.*, 113-125; and David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont: 1791-1850* (New York, 1939), 86-133. An early history of Antimasonry in New York, written by one of its leaders, is found in Hammond, *History of Political Parties*, 2: 369-403. Thurlow Weed's extremely detailed recollections of the movement are valuable, but must be treated with even more than the normal caution required by such documents. See Weed, ed., *Autobiography*, 1: 210-354.

²⁸ Cross, 114-115.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

Whatever the reasons for the fervent response to Miller's call, it touched off indignation meetings throughout western New York and led to a series of trials and official and unofficial investigations over the next few years. An injury to one member of society, Antimasons stressed, was an injury to all—and duty as well as interest required men to act. "Every member of the civil compact is mutually interested in protecting the rights of individuals. If one citizen is wronged with impunity, the rights of all are liable to invasion. One murder, unavenged, emboldens the perpetrator to multiply his atrocities. It is no less our interest than our duty, therefore, to aid, by the use of all proper means, in vindicating the majesty of the laws."²⁹

Working to vindicate the majesty of the laws, Antimasons let imagination take wing. Numerous "free presses" (that is, free from Masonic control) were soon accusing the Masonic Order of almost every evil practice known to or imagined by man. Seceding Masons, eager to clear themselves of the stigma of their former associations, as well as ex-Masons now genuinely convinced that the Order's existence threatened "republican institutions," publicly testified to the truth of the accusations against it.

Masons who remained loyal insisted that the Order was being blamed unfairly for the criminal activities of a few irresponsibles. Turning upon their accusers, they charged that self-seeking men, animated by base motives of envy and personal aggrandizement, had whipped up bigotry and fanaticism against Masonry. As one Antimasonic leader later put it, "By mutual crimination and recrimination the excitement was stimulated to the highest pitch of violence almost ever witnessed in the country, entering into all the religious, political and social relations of society." The excitement mounted until it spilled over into politics. According to Thurlow Weed, another Antimasonic leader whose later recollections seem in this instance to be trustworthy and whose experience makes him an expert observer, creation of the Antimasonic Party had this result:

"The feeling of Masons, exasperated by the existence of a political organization which made war upon the institution of Freemasonry, became intensely so by the renunciation of Masonry by ministers, elders, and deacons of the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist churches. The conflict therefore became more embittered

²⁹ Antimasonic Broadside, October 1827, in the Cornell University Collection of Regional History. All Antimasonic broadsides cited are from the Cornell collection.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

and relentless personally, politically, socially, and ecclesiastically, than any other I have ever known in our country. Thousands of Masons, innocent of any wrong, and intending to remain neutral, were drawn into the conflict, when all were denounced who adhered to the institution. On the other hand, the Anti-Masons maintained that the abduction and murder of Morgan resulted legitimately from the obligations and teachings of the Order.”³⁰

3. Republicanism, Egalitarianism, and Secret Societies

As time passed and Morgan’s disappearance remained a mystery, the original issue underwent a series of transformations. The question of the fate of one man became the question of whether there existed a secret society powerful enough both to establish a system of private justice and to thwart attempts to punish the executioners. Frustration seems to have contributed largely to this transformation. Local citizens’ committees failed to get county and state organs of government to take what they regarded as appropriate action in connection with Morgan’s kidnapping. And official resistance to the growing demands for punishment of his “murderers” encouraged the conviction that a gigantic conspiracy existed and extended over the entire state.³¹ Once the conspiracy cry arose, the question became: Is *any* secret society compatible with republican institutions?

The impassioned attack upon secret societies had many facets, but attention here focuses upon the charge that secret societies *necessarily* endangered the principles of equal rights and equal privileges. Opponents viewed the mysterious events surrounding the Morgan affair as proof that Freemasonry gave its “infatuated votaries” grossly unfair advantages in the great American race for wealth, power, and prestige. A secret society so powerful, its opponents charged, that it could get away with murder and boast that it pos-

³⁰ The first quotation is from Hammond, 2: 375; the second, from Weed, ed., *Autobiography*, 1: 302-303.

³¹ A typical expression of the conspiracy theme is found in a broadside urging support for the Monroe County “Anti-Masonick Ticket: Considerations of imperious duty impel us to the course we have adopted. The masonic fraternity have outraged humanity, and violated all law. The nature of their offence is so complicated—the offenders so numerous—and their evasions have been so manifold—that justice has only been enabled to pursue her course with tardy and faltering [*sic*] steps. In a dark day of the investigation, we supplicated the legislature to quicken her pace, and strengthen her arm, but it was a MASONIC LEGISLATURE, and we were coldly repulsed! We now appeal to the SOVEREIGN PEOPLE. Let *their* verdict be awarded upon the merits of this question.” Monroe County Antimasonic Broadside, October 1827.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

essed "power in all places where power was desirable,"³² could obviously advance its members' interests in many unscrupulous and devious ways. At a time when the transportation revolution was raising the level of aspiration to unprecedented heights, "equal opportunity for all" was the perfect battle cry. Thus the Antimasons depicted themselves as leading a crusade against the Monster Institution which created "odious aristocracies by its obligations to support the interests of its members; in preference to others of equal qualifications."³³

Appeals designed to satisfy the increasingly widespread and deeply felt demand for equal opportunity in all phases of American life were, I believe, the most powerful weapons in the Antimasonic arsenal of argument. "Every man's observation and experience will furnish instances of Masonic interference with almost all the transactions of life. They exercise an embarrassing, pernicious, and persevering influence upon our social political and business intercourse. The 'sign' and the 'grip' perform their sworn cabalistic office at times and in places innumerable."³⁴ What was the "real" object of the Masonic Order, as distinct from its professed, praiseworthy purposes? "The real object of the institution, is, to procure UNFAIR ADVANTAGES to its members."³⁵ Since its secret operations and binding oaths gave the Order the power which its officers boasted about,

³² Griffen, "Antimasonic Persuasion," 35-39. The quotation below, from a Masonic Address delivered in 1825, is an excellent example of the Masonic oratory which aroused suspicion and resentment. This particular quotation came to be widely used by Antimasons as "proof" of their accusations against the Order. "What is masonry now? It is powerful. It comprises men of rank, wealth, office, and talent, in power and out of power; and that in almost every place where power is of any importance, and it comprises among other classes of the community, to the lowest, in large numbers, active men, united together, and capable of being directed by the efforts of others, so as to have the force of concert throughout the civilized world.

"They are distributed too, with the means of keeping secret, and the means of cooperating, in the desk—in the legislative hall—on the bench—in every gathering of business—in every party of pleasure—in every enterprise of government—in every domestic circle—in peace and in war—among enemies and friends—in one place as well as in another." (*Albany Evening Journal*, November 12, 1830, p. 2.) All citations in this chapter are to the semiweekly edition of the paper.

³³ "Declaration of Seceding Masons," July 4, 1828, quoted in Griffen, 211. The frenetic rhetoric employed by the Antimasonic orators had them inveighing against "this SERPENT—this MONSTER . . . the mysterious Order of Free Masonry." *Ibid.*, 377. But the "Monster" theme was not confined to wild-eyed orators; it runs through Weed's editorials. For a typical example, see *Albany Evening Journal*, December 21, 1830, p. 2.

³⁴ Monroe County Antimasonic Broadside, October 1827.

³⁵ *Address* of the Antimasonic State Convention, February 1831, in the *Albany Evening Journal*, February 25, 1831, p. 2.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

Masonry “destroys all principles of equality, by bestowing favors on its own members to the exclusion of others equally meritorious and deserving.”³⁶ By using its influence unfairly to advance the social, political, and economic interests of the few, the Order operated to thwart the legitimate aspirations of the many. Therefore, be it “Resolved, That it is the peculiar aim of Anti-Masonry to restore equal rights, equal laws, and equal privileges to all men, by rendering ineligible to office, the adherents of the blood-stained order. . . .”³⁷

To understand the political history of Antimasonry, we must recognize that it designed its appeals to win support from men brought up in the Republican faith. Whereas the would-be “Kings and High Priests” of Masonry engaged in foul, unrepudicable conspiracies to secure unequal privileges for themselves, “Anti-Masonry goes for the ‘fair thing between man and man’—our fathers called this a Republican principle.”³⁸ In essence the Antimasonic argument can be stated in this syllogism: Equal opportunity was the hallmark of a republican country. Freemasonry destroyed equal opportunity by secretly using its great powers to favor the interests of its members. Freemasonry, therefore, could not be permitted to exist in the republican United States.

Perhaps the best summary of the Antimasonic view of the struggle to preserve and enlarge the promise of American life is in the “Address Of The Minority Of The Members Of The [New York] Legislature Of 1831”:

“On the one side is an aristocratic nobility, composed of men bound together by the most terrific oaths, which conflict with the administration of justice, with private rights, and with the public security; a privileged order, claiming and securing to its members unequal advantages over their fellow-citizens, veiling its proceedings from scrutiny by pledges of secrecy, collecting funds to unknown amounts and for unknown purposes, and operating through our extended country at any time and on any subject, with all the efficacy of perfect organization, controlled and directed by unseen and unknown hands.

“On the other side, a portion of your fellow-citizens ask for equal rights and equal privileges among the freemen of this country. They say it is in vain that this equality of rights and privileges is secured

³⁶ Quoted in Griffen, 211.

³⁷ Antimasonic Convention, Oswego County, in *Albany Evening Journal*, October 10, 1832, p. 2.

³⁸ Antimasonic Convention, Livingston County, in *ibid.*, September 28, 1832, p. 1.

FROM POPULISM TO EGALITARIANISM

in theory by our constitution and laws, if by a combination to subvert it, it is in fact no longer enjoyed. They point you to masonic oaths, and to the effects of those dreadful obligations upon our elections, upon witnesses in courts of justice, and upon jurors. They show you one of your citizens murdered under their influence, and the offenders escaping with impunity. They exhibit to you the power of your courts defied, and the administration of justice defeated, through the instrumentality of those obligations. And they ask you whether our country can any longer be described as a land 'where no man is so powerful as to be above the law, and no one so humble as to be beneath its protection.' They say to you that no man can tell who will be the next victim of masonic vengeance, or of masonic perjury. And they call on you to put an end to these enormities, and prevent their recurrence, by destroying their source; and for that purpose to use the *only* effective weapon in your power; a weapon yet preserved to you, your own free and independent ballots."³⁹

As noted earlier, many questions relating to the emergence and impact of the Antimasonic movement have yet to be investigated. But at present, these assertions seem reasonable: The movement extended egalitarian doctrines to embrace all aspects of American life, invested the egalitarian impulse with a religious intensity, drastically changed the style and substance of American politics, and thereby accelerated the dynamic pace of American economic growth. The People's Party won the battle for political equality in New York, but it was the Antimasonic Party that gave full expression to the egalitarian impulse.

³⁹ Conveniently reprinted in Baker, ed., *Seward's Works*, 3: 348-349. The *Address* was drafted by Seward.

CHAPTER II

ANTIMASONRY GOES POLITICAL

POPULAR indignation erupted shortly after Morgan disappeared but failed to influence the 1826 election. Aside from coming late in the year, demands for "justice" seem at first to have been nonpolitical and bipartisan. Moreover, the highest state positions were the ones at issue, and Antimasons had not yet extended their charges of dereliction of duty beyond local officials. But as frustration spread and deepened among the moralistic, Bible-oriented Yankees who had swarmed into western New York, indignation began to transform itself into political action. If corruption existed in high places, and if an "infidel" secret society controlled the entire apparatus of government, then republican institutions were endangered and *the people* must act.¹ "Let the friends of good order and civil law rise in their strength, and drive back to the dark regions from which it sprang this '*Beast with seven heads and ten horns.*' . . . Repulsed at all points, we will appeal for redress to the ballot-boxes!"²

A. Spontaneous Combustion Fires a New Party

Early in 1827, prior to the town elections, village committees began to pass resolutions declaring "Freemasons unfit for any office of confidence." By the end of the year, to an unprecedented extent in the United States, popular conventions had nominated candidates and the Antimasons had elected town and county officers all over western New York. According to their earliest historian, "The result astonished all—even the anti-masons themselves—and opened the eyes of politicians to the growing power of this new party." Since statewide contests were not held, it is difficult to measure the fluctuations in voting patterns. But a large proportion of the region's voters must have abandoned old political ties, for fifteen Antimasons were elected to the State Assembly.³ A new political party was taking shape.

¹ Jabez D. Hammond, *History of Political Parties in the State of New York*, 2: 371-381; Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 115-116; Leslie Griffen, "The Antimasonic Persuasion," 235-246.

² Monroe County Antimasonic Broadside, October 1827.

³ Hammond, 2: 381-384; Harriet A. Weed, ed., *Autobiography of Thurlow Weed*, 1: 242-243, 299-302; Charles McCarthy, *The Antimasonic Party*, in American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1902, 1: 371-374; Cross, 115-116.