

BOOKS

[*Scandal and Civility: Journalism and the Birth of American Democracy*, Marcus Daniel, Oxford University Press, 400 pages]

Fighting Words

By Patrick Allitt

IT'S DIFFICULT FOR US to get into the frame of mind of Americans in the 1790s. We know that the Republic was going to endure for at least the next two centuries, but they didn't, and to many of them it seemed terribly vulnerable. Britain was still a military threat. The French Revolution was turning to terror, anarchy, and conquest. Worse still, the Whiskey Rebellion, breaking out when the Constitution was well short of its tenth birthday, threatened the nation with internal collapse, just as Shays' Rebellion had brought down the government under the Articles of Confederation a few years before. Rival political factions, Federalist and Republican, were growing stronger and more antagonistic, despite a widely shared belief that factions and parties were signs of moral decay. Anyone who today thinks of George Washington's presidency as a golden age should spend an hour or two leafing through Marcus Daniel's *Scandal and Civility*. A history of political journalism in the 1790s, it also offers a readable narrative of the decade's turbulent events and bitter disputes.

The six newspaper editors profiled by Daniel believed that the citizens of a republic should be well informed. A taste for news was in fact widespread in the generation that had lived through the upheavals of the 1770s and 1780s. Nearly all white Americans were literate, and even those who were not enjoyed listening to the news being read aloud in public places. In the early days of the Constitution, most newspapers struck a pose of editorial neutrality and concentrated on passing along a wide array of stories from

home and abroad. As the political temperature rose, however, these editors backed one or other of the new political parties. Their high-mindedness gave way to character assassination, gossip, and outright propaganda. By the late 1790s, journalism was coming into disrepute for its scurrility, its tendency to inflame partisan passions, and its poisoning of political life. As Daniel remarks, "the violence of the printed word often flowed off the page and into the streets, provoking verbal and physical assaults, duels, public demonstrations, and riots."

These editors were a colorful group, six workaholics who had to meet tight deadlines, write prolifically, know the financial and technical side of the printing business, brave recurrent yellow-fever epidemics in filthy cities, and risk arrest for sedition. They also had to maneuver in the shifting currents of national politics as they scrambled for government patronage. They had fascinating careers outside journalism, too. Philip Freneau (formerly James Madison's college roommate at Princeton) was as much a poet as an editor—he wrote thousands of lines of nationalist doggerel, energized by his hatred of the British and his love of the new Republic. Noah Webster is remembered today more as a language and spelling reformer than as an editor; he wrote America's first dictionary and believed that the American language ought to be purified of corrupt old English vestiges. Benjamin Franklin Bache, the favorite grandson of Benjamin Franklin, spent his formative years in France when the grand old man was America's ambassador there, and knew Paris better than New York or Philadelphia. William Duane, educated in Ireland and an important figure among English radicals, had spent ten years as a soldier and writer in Calcutta before being deported for criticizing the East India Company.

Those who took the Federalist side in the politics of the 1790s—Webster, John Fenno, and William Cobbett—argued for a strong central government, a powerful presidency, and sound financial institutions of the kind then being established by Alexander Hamilton, the first

secretary of the Treasury. Suspicious of democracy, they favored established religion, social hierarchy, and restraints on popular passions. Hamilton and John Adams often wrote pseudonymously in their pages, justifying their policies and rebutting opposition attacks. Adams also published under his own name, in Fenno's *Gazette of the United States*, his *Discourses on Davila*, a tract on the hazards of democracy and equality.

By contrast, those who supported the Democratic Republicans, Freneau, Bache, and Duane, shared Thomas Jefferson's vision of a decentralized agrarian Republic, worried that a strong presidency might lead to a revival of monarchy, dreaded the rise of a new aristocracy, and applauded Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791). Freneau, convinced that the Federalists' economic policies would create inequalities of wealth, promoting luxury and corruption, urged his readers to "sweep the legislative floors of such vermin ... who devour liberty in the bud and suck the vitals of the honest industrious farmers, merchants, and tradesmen."

The prickly Cobbett, an immigrant from England, was the most gifted writer and the most vituperative. Calling himself "Peter Porcupine" and editing the Philadelphia Federalist *Porcupine's Gazette* from 1797, he argued that the Jeffersonian Republicans were the equivalent in America of the French revolutionary Jacobins and would bring catastrophe to the new nation. As Daniel notes, Cobbett broke down a previously honored distinction between the personal and the political, mocked local dignitaries like the radical doctor Benjamin Rush, whom he called a "murderous quack," and made annihilating attacks on Republican politicians and writers. Convicted of libel in a campaign orchestrated by the Philadelphia Republicans, he wrote a brilliant defense of press freedom before fleeing the country in 1800.

Why did politics become so contentious in the 1790s, and why did journalism follow suit? Daniel shows that the Federalists' and Republicans' disagreement over the future of the Republic was closely linked to the unfolding events in

France. Madison and Jefferson, writing in Freneau's *National Gazette*, argued that the fate of France and that of the United States were united: "the form our own government was to take depended much more on the events of France than any body had before imagined." When the French Revolution began in 1789, nearly all Americans welcomed what looked like the dawn of freedom, regarding French events as the logical sequel to those that had liberated their own country in the 1770s and 1780s. When heads began to fall to the guillotine in 1793, however, Federalists shrank back in dismay, explaining the Terror as an object lesson in the hazards of popular democracy. Cobbett called its perpetrators, the Jacobins, "a gang of bloodthirsty cannibals" who had "drenched the country with the blood of the innocent." Most Republicans, by contrast, approved, rationalizing the executions as necessary to exorcise the mystique of an old tyranny.

When Citizen Genet, the revolution's emissary, arrived in America in April 1793, Republican editors, led by Freneau, feted him while the Federalists warned that he was trying to draw America out of its neutrality and into war with Britain. Genet's meddling in American domestic affairs soon embarrassed the Republicans and obliged Jefferson to distance himself from Freneau. In 1794 and 1795, on the other hand, Jay's Treaty, by which Britain imposed humbling terms on the Americans, embarrassed the Federalists. Effigies of John Jay, the American negotiator, were paraded through the streets by angry Republican mobs and then burned. Even President Washington suffered lacerating attacks from Republican journalists like Bache. Washington, hitherto venerated on all sides as the Father of His Country, seemed to the Jeffersonians too much the patriarch, too lordly to preside over a democracy. Bache wrote, "no character or place ought to be so sacred in a republican government as to be above criticism. Inviolability and infallibility are royal qualities, which *slaves* only can comprehend." Contributors to the anti-Washington campaign in Bache's *Aurora*

often used such pen names as "Brutus" and "Casca," the killers of the overmighty Julius Caesar.

With the "XYZ Affair" of 1797-98, when French politicians like Talleyrand tried to extract bribes from American diplomats, the pendulum took another swing, giving Federalists a renewed surge of popularity. President Adams struggled to resist popular enthusiasm for war against France while Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, by whose terms "Jacobin" editors in the Republican cause (including Duane and Bache) faced prosecution. The acts are usually deplored retrospectively, sometimes even compared with McCarthyism, but as Daniel notes, they were "not only an effort to secure partisan advantage but ... an effort to 'civilize' the increasingly 'uncivilized' tone of American political discourse." Despite scattered prosecutions and convictions, they failed to silence the Republican press, whose leaders helped bring Jefferson to the White House in the election of 1800.

Daniel ends this superb and timely book with a reminder that America's great and durable institutions—freedom of the press among them—arose not out of the calm meditations of the Founders, but in the heat of acute political crises. "Scandal and political incivility have always been part of American public life," he concludes, and it was from the conflicts of the Founders' age that "their own great acts of collective political creativity emerged. ... Without such conflict the political triumphs of the early Republic would have been impossible." It is amusing to imagine Michael Moore, Sean Hannity, Al Franken, and Ann Coulter being spirited back to the 1790s. They might have to spend a week or two adjusting to simpler technologies and learning a new idiom, but they would find the stridency and rancor of political controversy entirely familiar. ■

Patrick Allitt is professor of history at Emory University. His latest work, The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History, is published by Yale University Press.

[*Defending the Republic: Constitutional Morality in a Time of Crisis*, Bruce P. Frohnen and Kenneth L. Grasso, eds., 151 Books, 352 pages]

Constitutional Moralist

By Daniel McCarthy

GEORGE CAREY is the dean of constitutional conservatives. Since 1961, he has been professor of government at Georgetown University, where he's a throwback in the best sense—to the days when faculty cared as much about teaching as about publishing, and political science still had an intimate association with political philosophy. In voluminous essays and a handful of small but densely reasoned books, Carey has kept alive a tradition of scholarship that seeks to understand the American Republic as the Founders understood it.

Over the decades, Carey has made a profound mark upon his peers and generations of students, as *Defending the Republic*, a critical celebration of his thought, shows. Editors Bruce Frohnen and Kenneth Grasso have assembled 14 distinguished contributors to illuminate, and sometimes challenge, Carey's ideas. Their essays explore half a dozen themes of his work: the contrast between a majoritarian republic and mass democracy; the clash between Christianity and the Enlightenment in the American tradition; the usurpation of legislative powers by the executive and judiciary; the fragile basis for public virtue; "constitutional morality"; and the rise of an activist ideology that may already have rendered the Constitution, as Carey fears, "a dead letter."

Frohnen and Paul Gottfried provide the essential background to Carey's thinking in the opening essays. To understand Carey, it helps to understand his friend and collaborator Willmoore Kendall, the "wild Yale don" (in Dwight Macdonald's words) who was "the most