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THE NEW JERSEY FEDERALIST PARTY CONVENTION OF 1814

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THE War of 1812, with the issues, problems, and apparent inconsistencies it raised for the Republican leadership, offered the Federalist party of New Jersey an excellent chance to recapture the political power that it had commanded before 1800. Prior to the elections of 1812, Federalists throughout New Jersey, on township, county, and state levels, prepared for both the state legislative and the national congressional contests. Reverting to the battle tactics of an earlier time they referred to themselves as federal republicans or as the Friends of Peace in order to avoid the opprobrium associated with the word Federalist. A concerted campaign effort together with a rather lackadaisical and inefficient response on the part of the Republicans allowed the Federalists to win a majority in the state legislature for the first time since 1800.¹ Although the Republican party regained control in 1813, the party of talent remained a political force to be reckoned with so long as

¹ Walter R. Fee, *The Transition From Aristocracy to Democracy in New Jersey, 1789-1829* (Somerville, 1933), 170-209; Richard P. McCormick, *The History of Voting in New Jersey, 1664-1911* (New Brunswick, 1953), 86-121; Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System* (Chapel Hill, 1966), 126-128; and Carl E. Prince, *New Jersey's Jeffersonian Republicans* (Chapel Hill, 1967), 182-215, offer descriptions of New Jersey's political development from 1812 to 1814.

the issues of an unpopular war and extravagant government spending remained.

The 1814 elections, then, came to be the last opportunity for the Friends of Peace to capitalize on these issues. Accordingly, in May and June of that year, some four months before the October elections, meetings were held to choose delegates to attend a Federalist party convention.² The gathering was called for July 4th at Trenton for the purpose of nominating a slate of candidates for the United States House of Representatives. It was to precede a Republican convention, held for the same purpose, by over two months.³

On July 4, 1814, amidst much hoopla and celebration, ninety-six federal republicans representing all of the thirteen counties in the state met at Trenton "with the view of making one more effort in behalf of a beloved country."⁴ The convention lasted only one day, interspersed with much parading, oratory, and patriotic toastmaking. Nevertheless the delegates succeeded in nominating six men to run for Congress and in drafting a platform on which these candidates could campaign. The proceedings of the meeting were ordered to be compiled into a campaign pamphlet which was to be circulated throughout the state.⁵

It is this now scarce document, located in the Special Collections of the Rutgers University Library which concerns us here. The tract, entitled *Proceedings and Address of the Second Convention of Delegates held at the City of Trenton on Fourth July, 1814, to the People of New Jersey*, contains the minutes, the address, and the resolutions of the Federalist conclave.⁶ This document thus presents both a description of the convention and a summation of the Federalist appeal for the 1814 campaign. The information that it

² *Trenton Federalist*, May 16 and 23, 1814; June 6, 13, 20 and 23, 1814.

³ *Newark Sentinel of Freedom*, August 2, 1814.

⁴ *Trenton Federalist*, July 11, 1814.

⁵ Federalist Party of New Jersey, *Proceedings and Address of the Second Convention of Delegates, held at the City of Trenton on the Fourth July, 1814, to the People of New Jersey*, p. 6. All quotations are from this pamphlet unless otherwise noted.

⁶ The pamphlet also has a five-page appendix which contains excerpts from two speeches delivered before the United States House of Representatives which tend to support certain of the arguments that are presented in the address and resolutions of the Federalist convention. The speeches were delivered by Daniel Webster of New Hampshire and Timothy Pitkin of Connecticut in January and February of 1814.

imparts, and the fact that very few of the originally printed five thousand copies remain extant, make it worthy of scrutiny.

The first six pages of the pamphlet represent the minutes of the July 4th meeting. Although at times sketchy, this account reveals much about the Federalists of New Jersey.⁷ The names of the men attending the convention are listed by county, thus quickly indicating the most prominent lights of the party. Furthermore the manner in which the convention conducted its business is clearly outlined. A committee of thirteen representatives, made up of one member from each county delegation, met between the morning and afternoon sessions to choose a slate of candidates and to draft a campaign address. At four o'clock the convention was reconvened. Here the names of James Giles of Cumberland, Samuel W. Harrison of Gloucester, James Parker of Middlesex, John Frelinghuysen of Somerset, and Jacob S. Thomson of Sussex were presented as candidates for Congress. A list of alternates was also announced and it was further proposed that William B. Ewing of Cumberland be appointed to the House of Representatives to fill the position of Jacob Hufty, a Federalist, recently deceased. "After some progress made" the delegates adjourned to attend an address given by Lucius H. Stockton of Hunterdon at the Presbyterian Church. This speech, delivered at the request of the convention, with its emphasis on the problems of government spending and the war, was to set the tone for the evening meeting of the Federalists.⁸

After dining at the Rising-Sun Tavern, the Friends of Peace accepted the congressional ticket that had been offered earlier in the day.⁹ The resolutions and the address drawn up by the committee were read and unanimously adopted. Finally, it was decided that five thousand copies of these documents, together with an account of the proceedings of the meeting "be published and distributed, in a pamphlet form, among the several counties of the state in such manner and proportions as may be deemed expedient." A committee

⁷ At no time in the pamphlet do the Federalists refer to themselves as the Federalists nor do they call Republicans, Republicans. The Republicans are merely the "opposition" and the Federalists are the "friends of peace."

⁸ Fee, p. 198.

⁹ *Trenton Federalist*, July 11, 1814.

of three men was appointed to handle this matter and the convention then adjourned.¹⁰

Although these minutes provide the historian with valuable information about the leadership and the organization of the Federalist party of New Jersey it is the address and the resolutions of the convention which offer the most rewarding insights into the nature of the party's campaign approach. At the same time, these documents, particularly the address, show traces of the same political rhetoric that have continued to survive into the twentieth century.

The address to the "Free electors of New Jersey," which occupies thirteen pages of the pamphlet, purports to afford its readers a comparison of the "past with the present" so that they may "decide between them." To be sure the general format of the address does follow this outline, yet only three pages are devoted to recalling the Federalist "past" while ten are allowed to excoriate the Republican "present." Moreover the treatment of national Federalist domination appears rather general when compared to the blow-by-blow, mistake-by-mistake account allotted the Republicans.

The Federalist treatment of the years from 1787 through 1799 is most complimentary. During these years,

. . . under the Federal administration of Washington and his successor . . . the people of these states, from imbecility and impoverishment, rose to a height of prosperity, with a rapidity unexampled in the history of nations. . . . The American name and *character* were held in honor abroad . . . the prosperity of one was that of all.

Curiously enough John Adams is never mentioned by name nor is more than a passing reference given to his administration. No doubt this reflects a conscious effort on the part of the writers to gloss over the internal conflicts and bitter feelings generated among Federalists during the Adams years; antagonisms so important to an understanding of the history of the party and of the role of Adams as President.¹¹

Instead, the emphasis is on Washington and his advisors and their

¹⁰ The contents of the pamphlet also appeared in serial form in the July, August, and September issues of the *Trenton Federalist*.

¹¹ Stephen Kurtz, *The Presidency of John Adams* (Philadelphia, 1957), *passim*, deals directly with the split in the Federalist party.

role in laying open "the foundations of national prosperity." The ways in which this was accomplished, as explained by the Federalists of New Jersey, set the framework in which the administrations of Jefferson and Madison are to be attacked. In a passage likely to warm the hearts of certain present-day American historians the address proclaims:

Their Federalist measures and their objects were purely *American*. They struck out no visionary *theories*—were influenced by no rash and vindictive passions, but proceeded on the pure grounds of *practical* wisdom and prudent legislation.

The Republican leaders abandoned the practical and turned instead to "specious innovations and promises of visionary reform." The remainder of the address serves to illustrate the ways in which this abandonment took place and the dire consequences that it produced.

The attack on the Republicans is detailed under four major headings: constitutional usurpation, the introduction of legislative "novelties" inconsistent "with ancient habits," the squandering of public resources, and the introduction of a misguided foreign policy. Proceeding in an orderly fashion the authors of the address fill in the specific charges. The Republicans are accused of perpetuating their ascendance by creating a "pernicious ARISTOCRACY of STATES and PERSONS." This has been accomplished by using patronage, by violating the right to free speech, and by the purchase of the Louisiana Territory, "a useless foreign country." The institution of military despotism by Jefferson and Madison is also deplored as is such "novel legislation" as the embargo and the non-intercourse acts.

As for the extravagance of the Republicans, they are blamed for spending 200 million dollars on officers' salaries without improving the worth of the country's military force and of giving 15 million dollars "to fill the coffers of Bonaparte" in exchange for some "worthless terrain." Finally the foreign policy of both Jefferson and Madison is held accountable for the continuation of the wars with Tripoli, Algiers, and the Indians, and most significantly for the declaration of war on Great Britain, a war which has only led to the destruction of American commerce and to increased taxes while securing none of its objectives.

It is interesting to note that in describing the errors of their opponents the Federalists neglected to point to parallel problems initiated under the administrations of Washington and Adams. For example, the Republicans are accused of proscribing men for their opinions and repressing the rights of freedom of petition and of free debate; yet the furor caused under the Adams administration by the passage and implementation of the Alien and Sedition acts is not recalled. Similarly, the abuses directed against American involvement in the War of 1812 are not balanced by an appraisal of a foreign policy which involved the United States in a naval war with France. Nor, when the Federalists accuse the Republicans of "overawing elections" and of changing the Constitution so that the larger states could control the smaller ones do they recall the rather partisan use of political power of a newly-elected, Federalist-controlled New Jersey state legislature in 1812 which called for a division of the state into three districts and the election of congressmen on a district basis rather than on the traditional general ticket format, a ploy which resulted in the election of four Federalist congressmen.¹² It is not surprising that the Friends of Peace chose not to elaborate or even to mention these problems of the "past" for this was a campaign piece. Nevertheless it is significant to note that this document is as important for what it omits about the "past" as for what it includes about the "present."

The diatribe against the war with England concludes the barrage directed at the Republicans, leaving only the need for a final appeal for change as the remedy for the country's problems.

It is our duty to be plain. — We repeat our unfeigned belief that there must be an entire *removal* of visionary men and the friends of this war . . . before blessings of peace can be restored . . . freedom of suffrage shall finally re-establish the Friends of Peace and the Policy of Washington.

This plea is followed by nine pages of resolutions passed by the convention. The resolutions urge the people of the state to hold county meetings to nominate candidates for all elected positions on all levels of government in the state. In a passage somewhat reminiscent of the Declaration of Independence and of John Locke the

¹² McCormick, *The History of Voting in New Jersey*, p. 108.

citizens of New Jersey are given justification for turning the Republicans out of office.

The *people* who *elect* men to office for the good of the country, may, if their measures prove injurious to the commonwealth, or if believed incapable or corrupt, *turn them out* of office for the good of their country and choose again.

The *means* to effect this necessarily make a part of their rights. These means are the liberties of opinion, of speech, of the press, and of suffrage.

Here, in this particular passage, and in the pamphlet in general, only peaceful, orderly, and legal change within the structure of the Union is called for; this only five months before the Hartford Convention.¹³

The remainder of the resolutions merely echo the attack launched against the Republicans in the address. Once again the root of Republican misrule is attributed to a "baneful, visionary and headlong course of passion" and its most devastating fruit regarded as the war with England. Recommending "patience with suffering" until a change of government can be accomplished, the resolutions end.

Unfortunately for the Federalists, neither their campaign literature nor their political organization was sufficient to achieve victory. Although the Friends of Peace polled over 48% of the vote, the Republicans won all of the congressional seats and majorities in both houses of the state legislature in the 1814 elections.¹⁴ The last great effort of the party of talent had failed. Nevertheless the minutes, address and resolutions of their party convention remains a valuable historical source. Its emphasis on an appeal for a new government to replace a misguided leadership of visionaries represents a view of American politics that seems to have been sustained throughout our brief history as a nation. At the same time, however, the Federalists of New Jersey must have felt a bit uncomfortable in attacking the "specious innovations" of their opponents for certain of these, as have been indicated, were quite similar to precedents established under the administrations of Washington and Adams. Indeed some striking parallels can and have been made between Federalist and Republican rule during these initial years of the Republic in terms

¹³ *Trenton Federalist*, May 22, 1814, also emphasizes this patient approach.

¹⁴ Prince, p. 207.

of their interpretations of the Constitution, their use of presidential power and the formation of their political organizations.¹⁵

This situation is not surprising, however, if one remembers that no party or group in America before the Federalists had ever been in power over so large and diversified a structure nor had any party or group before the Republicans ever challenged to take over that power. Again, once the transfer of power had been made in 1800 the Republicans for the first time were faced with the problems of running a still new country while the Federalists, for the first time, were faced with the dilemma of regaining control. Thus between the early 1790's and 1816 a situation existed in which a strange exchange of attitudes, policies, and techniques between the Republican and the Federalist parties took place; an exchange directly determined by the relationship these groups had with the control of the federal government. The Republicans, as the first party of opposition, and the Federalists, as the first party in power, set the patterns for how other groups in their positions might react and operate. Thus when their situations were reversed, these two first national political opponents, unfamiliar with the realities of their new positions, relied on the immediate and only precedents that presented themselves: each other.

¹⁵ David H. Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism* (New York, 1965), *passim*, deals with aspects of this phenomenon.