EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST: PHILADELPHIA NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF THE EAST-WEST DIVIDE IN EARLY AMERICA

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The prominent division in early America between the established eastern populations and communities in the West is evident when viewed through the lens of eighteenth-century Philadelphia newspapers, which themselves employed an East-West paradigm to interpret four events: the Paxton Boys Incident, Regulator Rebellion, Shays’s Rebellion, and Constitutional Convention. Through the choices of what words to use to describe these clashes, through oversights, omissions, and misrepresentations, and sometimes through more direct tactics, Philadelphia newspapermen revealed a persistent cultural bias against and rivalry with western communities. This study illustrates how pervasive this contrast between East and West was in the minds of easterners; how central a feature of early American culture they considered it to be.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Americans enjoy reflecting on the grandeur of the history of their country's founding years: the unlikely victories of their troops, the incredible feats performed by their heroes, and the great unity and patriotism exhibited among the citizenry. Many historians and much evidence, however, suggest that this nationalist image is inaccurate when applied to early American society. One of the most prominent divisions in colonial and early national America—a division that manifested itself also in times of war—was the conflict between the established eastern populations and communities in the West. This cultural and political conflict between metropolis and periphery is not merely a feature of early American culture uncovered by modern historians; rather, it was a prominent component of easterners' worldview in the eighteenth century.¹ This is apparent in the Philadelphia newspapers' coverage of the Paxton Boys Incident in western Pennsylvania (1763), the Regulator Rebellion in western North Carolina (1765-1771), Shays's Rebellion in western Massachusetts (1786), and the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia (1787).

In early American history, this conflict between metropolis and periphery manifested itself in tensions that arose along the geographic division of East and West. This tension was persistent; at times blatant (leading even to open violence and

¹ See Kenneth A. Lockridge, A New England Town: The First Hundred Years (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985). Lockridge describes how Dedham, Massachusetts, disintegrated from a strong community to an acrimonious area with many individual communities and factions as the village grew and expanded. While not an East-West clash, this story of tension and disintegration serves as a microcosmic study of conflict between metropolis and periphery.
organized rebellion) and at times subtle. Historians of the American Revolutionary era disagree over whether Americans of this time period viewed themselves as acting together or if they saw themselves divided into groups. An examination of the views of selected historians of the American Revolution reveals a division between those scholars who see the social and political atmosphere of the time as exhibiting a sense of nationhood and those scholars who see the atmosphere as one of divisions between various societal groups, including the conflict between established communities in the East and frontier towns in the West.

These differing interpretations are, in fact, as old as the United States. Thomas Jefferson saw the American Revolution as a time in which the people of a new nation acted together for a common cause, whereas John Adams saw powerful and threatening divisions within American society, which is why he distrusted and feared Jeffersonian populism. Much like Jefferson, Historian Frederick Jackson Turner suggested that the circumstances of American history created a distinct national identity. Although Turner discussed the impact of the evolution of American society as a whole, rather than simply concentrating on the Revolutionary era, Turner’s thesis (first put forth in 1893) has provided a Jeffersonian framework for American Revolution scholars to utilize in their theories and interpretations. Turner stated that American society and American history developed as they did because of the uniquely American experience of frontier life. He argued that as Americans (first colonists and then citizens) settled across the continent, continually facing frontier conditions, they were forced to adapt their culture and their institutions in a unique way. Turner did not speak only of one group of Americans, but of all Americans. He claimed that this unique situation created
a cohesive, unique society that valued individualism, social mobility, and popular government.²

Like Turner, Gordon Wood endeavored to show that the Revolution was a product of a society developing in a way that was radically different from its European counterparts. The colonies developed with little early supervision from the mother country, helping to create colonists who were more independent, more individualistic, and more suspicious of the imperial government. He also suggested that Americans lived under a more egalitarian and less socially stratified system, which allowed them greater social mobility than their contemporaries in England. The class rivalries, tensions, and fears that characterized English society, therefore, were not as prevalent in America. Wood explained that the colonists were willing to blur dividing lines in order to work together for a national cause. Wood found that the sense of nationhood in the colonies made it “primed for republicanism.”³

Other historians have joined Turner and Wood in painting a picture of national unity. James Thomas Flexner’s biography of George Washington asserted that a sense of nationhood existed in the colonies and that Washington recognized and utilized that fact.⁴ Pauline Maier’s study of the buildup to the Revolution, Edmund and Helen Morgan’s analysis of the Stamp Act Crisis, and Linda Kerber’s examination of the role of


women during the Revolutionary era also highlighted the sense of nationhood during the era.\(^5\)

The assertion that Americans at the time of the Revolution shared a common sense of nationhood is not, however, accepted by all scholars. One major source of discord seen by historians, and the topic of this study, is the difference between people of the eastern and western parts of America. Rather than focusing on the tensions and differences between “the Americans” and Great Britain, as do Wood and Morgan, they highlight internal tensions and divisions, which bring into question the very existence of an American nation at the time of the Revolution. Bernard Bailyn argued that it was the political and cultural dynamics within the colonies that led to the Revolution.\(^6\) In America, there existed for most people the possibility of making better lives for themselves. Because of this, the traditional elites living in the East saw the West as representing a constant challenge to the authority and institutions of eastern elites. Bailyn claimed that this made colonial politics particularly acrimonious, confrontational, and volatile. This characteristic of American political life, in turn, led to extreme and paranoid reactions to British attempts at centralization in the 1760s and 1770s. The adversarial and conspiratorial nature of politics in colonial America led to an enthusiastic embrace of republican ideas and, thus, made a tense situation revolutionary.


In his examination of farmers and artisans of western Massachusetts, Ray Raphael also discussed this regional conflict and demonstrates the differences between western colonists and those in the East.\(^7\) He explained how these westerners rose against the established colonial governments of the east in response to government actions that had particularly frustrated rural colonists. Some historians, including Jackson Turner Main and Thomas Slaughter, have examined this persistent conflict between East and West in the early national period. In his analysis of Antifederalist contributions to the dialogue over ratification and to American political dialogue since that time, Main explained that Federalists tended to be from commercial areas (primarily in the East), while Antifederalists typically came from rural or frontier areas.\(^8\) Slaughter similarly described the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion as much more than an isolated uprising.\(^9\) He portrayed it as the culmination of years of tension and frustration between easterners and westerners over taxes, Indian policy, land speculation by easterners, lack of control of the Mississippi River, and the unwillingness of the government to satisfactorily address western concerns.

Although the Paxton Boys Incident, the Regulator Rebellion, Shays’s Rebellion, and the Constitutional Convention of 1787 all demonstrated the conflict between eastern and western populations, historians have rarely focused on this aspect of the conflicts. These four events are rarely grouped together, largely because their time


periods are generally discussed separately. The Paxton Boys Incident and Regulator Rebellion may be found in analyses of the late colonial period while Shays’s Rebellion and the Constitutional Convention are generally included in texts on the end of the Revolutionary era. Yet these events represent related episodes in a continuous conflict in American culture, centered on the class and cultural gap between East and West and the continued trend toward greater centralization (under both British and American rule). This is evident especially when viewed through the lens of contemporary Philadelphia newspapers, which themselves employed an East-West paradigm to make sense of and interpret these four events.

Beginning in 1763 and concluding in 1787, these four events span the American Revolution, indicating a persistent tension within America, independent of political tensions with and independence from Great Britain. Omitting the years of the Revolution itself allows for analysis of years in which most Philadelphia printers generally represented the same viewpoint. During the Revolution, the particular politics of war changed the dynamics of printing, as publishers sided definitively with either the Patriots or Loyalists. That conflict, big enough to stand alone as a topic, is outside the scope of this paper. Additionally, the years and events studied here have not received nearly the same amount of attention as has the Revolutionary era press.¹⁰

The sources used in this research project were English-language newspapers published in Philadelphia during the relevant time periods.\textsuperscript{11} The largest city in the colonies, and one of the most important, Philadelphia was home to arguably the best newspapers (in professionalism, consistency of appearance and variety of content) available for this entire time period. These publications have been better preserved than many others as well. Pennsylvania was home to two of the events studied (the Paxton Boys Incident and the Constitutional Convention), Philadelphians were well informed on the other two events, and other papers across the colonies/country reprinted many stories from the Philadelphia papers.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} Established by Samuel Keimer, who soon sold it to Benjamin Franklin, the \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette} existed from 1728 to 1815. For the time period of this study, various combinations of William Sellers, David Hall, and Hall’s sons published the \textit{Gazette}. William Bradford established the \textit{Pennsylvania Journal} in 1742. It later came under the management of Thomas Bradford, who published the paper until its final issue in 1763. The \textit{Pennsylvania Chronicle}, published from 1767 to 1774, was published by William Goddard. Established in 1771 by John Dunlap, the \textit{Pennsylvania Packet} was published by Dunlap, David C. Claypoole, or both until its last issue in 1790. Francis Bailey’s \textit{Freeman’s Journal} existed from 1781 to 1792. Mathew Carey created the \textit{Pennsylvania Herald} in 1785 and later formed a partnership with Christopher Talbot and William Spotwood. Spotwood was the sole publisher at the time of the Constitutional Convention. The paper ran until 1788. See Clarence S. Brigham, \textit{History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820}, vol. 2 (Worcester, Massachusetts: American Antiquarian Society, 1947). For this study, available newspapers were examined from November 1763 to April 1764 (Paxton Boys Incident), from 1765 to 1771 (Regulator Rebellion), from August 1786 through February 1787 (Shays’s Rebellion), and from May to September 1787 (Constitutional Convention). Thirty-six articles were found regarding the Paxton Boys Incident; thirty-nine regarding the Regulator Rebellion; eighty-three regarding Shays’s Rebellion; and ninety-two regarding the Constitutional Convention. In all, 250 articles were found that related in some way to one of these four events.

\textsuperscript{12} For an interesting and concise discussion of the format and nature of America’s early newspapers, see Frank Luther Mott, “The Newspaper Coverage of Lexington and Concord,” \textit{The New England Quarterly} 17 (December, 1944), 489-505.
This study closes with the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention, which represented a culmination of the East-West conflict in that eastern elites desired and achieved a greater consolidation of political power in their hands, and does not extend into the debate over ratification because divisive political strife in newspapers began almost immediately after the proposed new Constitution was published. Newspapers quickly began to gravitate to either the Federalist or anti-Federalist camps. As the 1790s began, so, too, did a fiercely partisan press. The partisan divide of the 1790s and beyond began a new era of American journalism, one which historians have studied extensively and have dubbed “the dark days of American journalism” because of the intense partisanship and bias.¹³ One can no longer assume, at that point, that the press was fairly unified in representing the elite.

The years covered in this study were free of major strife among printers in the East. In Philadelphia, printers appeared to have shared common perspectives on the major events of the time; they all represented eastern viewpoints. Indeed, historian John K. Alexander notes that during the Constitutional Convention the press acted with “a stunning single-mindedness.”¹⁴ While these newspapers may have had slight differences or disagreements regarding particular issues, the fact remains that the major body of newspaper print coming out of Philadelphia in peacetime between 1763 and 1787 lends credence to the larger argument that eastern elites were interested in increased centralization and were not sympathetic to pleas of westerners.

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Twentieth-century journalist Benjamin Bradlee suggested that “news is the first rough draft of history.” His assessment of the importance of the media in influencing history is correct in the sense that publications printed during any particular time period provide a first-hand account of events, issues, and attitudes of that era. Thus, newspapers and other media offer historians primary accounts from which to begin historical analysis. Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, historians of Philadelphia, suggest that the city’s printers “more than any other [group] typified the spirit of their day.” The nouns, adjectives, and verbs they used to name and describe certain events, acts, political camps or persons should be crucial analytical tools for historians. Indeed, the form and tenor of news coverage in eighteenth-century Philadelphia newspapers suggests that there was an East-West conflict within American society and that the belief the young nation would be better off with a stronger centralized government in the East was a product or symptom of that enduring conflict.

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Printers, publishers, and editors of eighteenth-century newspapers had tremendous ability to influence opinion or give preference to certain viewpoints simply by what they chose to print in their publications. Because no satellite bureaus or news agencies existed, a great deal of news was merely reprinted from other newspapers, official publications, or even personal letters. Newspapermen chose what stories to cover, what sources to reprint, and –in original pieces– what terminology to utilize. This allowed them to offer readers pieces that expressed viewpoints with which they agreed.

Word choice in news items was of the utmost importance in shaping public opinion, since newspapers were not openly biased and the usage of the obviously partisan editorial was still some years away. Publishers’ and editors’ opinions were often expressed through the connotation of words chosen to depict certain types of people or discuss certain events. Analysis of rhetoric, therefore, is a critical tool in any attempt to identify political bias in eighteenth-century Philadelphia newspapers. Such analysis reveals a persistent cultural bias against and rivalry with western communities, as well as a distinct advocacy for the consolidation of centralized power in the East.

It is difficult to discern whether Philadelphia publishers and printers had a systematic agenda that they wished to advance through a conscious choice of certain stories and loaded words or if the words and suggestions that came through were simply manifestations of the worldviews held by these men. What is clear, however, is that bias was expressed. On the most basic level, rhetoric used in the coverage of the
Paxton Boys Incident, the Regulator Rebellion, Shays’s Rebellion, and the Constitutional Convention characterized them as clashes between forces of civilization and savagery. The friction and violence of the first three events in particular demonstrated to contemporary editorialists (as they do to modern historians) a substantive cultural and political gap between East and West. While coverage of these events depicted easterners as intelligent, civilized, and peaceable people, westerners were often vilified as crazy, uncivilized, and violent.

The 1763 Treaty of Paris brought the French and Indian War (Seven Years’ War) to an end, but it certainly did not signal an end to conflict and hostilities in the American colonies. In the summer of 1763, Pennsylvania’s frontier settlements found themselves in a chaotic and dangerous position due to Pontiac’s Rebellion. The Pennsylvania legislature raised militia companies in an attempt to show support for frontier communities, but they also protected groups of allied Indians by giving them refuge and protection in Philadelphia. Historian Alden T. Vaughan notes that “[i]n Pennsylvania, as elsewhere, frontiersmen rarely distinguished between friendly and enemy Indians, especially when wartime tensions gave way to hysteria.”16 Since Indian tribes exhibited unprecedented unity under Pontiac, the Assembly was viewed by some as offering support to Indian insurgents or, at least, enabling this Indian insurgency. Western settlers were convinced that easterners’ failure to comprehend the security crisis in the West resulted in bad policy and exacerbated the crisis due to the dominance of eastern counties in the assembly. Many westerners believed that they were in danger and that

eastern governments were not doing enough to ensure their safety. Anger and hatred toward Indians and frustration with eastern governments led to the outbreak of the “Paxton Boys” Incident in December 1763.

Paxton, Pennsylvania, was a Lancaster County village located on the east bank of the Susquehanna River. A frontier community, it was inhabited largely by Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who had issues with the eastern elites, many of whom were of German or English heritage and practiced the Anglican or Quaker faiths. On December 14, 1763, at least fifty armed men from Paxton rode to Conestoga Manor, an Indian community west of Lancaster, setting fire to the town and killing six inhabitants (two men, three women, and one child). Fourteen remaining Conestogas were soon taken by officials to the workhouse in Lancaster for protective custody. Thirteen days later, however, an even larger group of men from Paxton rode to Lancaster and brutally killed the remaining Conestoga men, women, and children. The frontier community closed ranks regarding the incident, and no one was punished for the acts.¹⁷

Eastern voices quickly expressed vehement disapproval of the massacres at Conestoga Manor and Lancaster. Benjamin Franklin declared the participants in the violence to be “CHRISTIAN WHITE SAVAGES.”¹⁸ Eastern horror intensified in early


February when news circulated that hundreds of Paxton Boys (estimates ranged from 250 to more than 500) were headed toward Philadelphia to attack 140 Moravian Indians who had sought refuge in the city.

The mob was stopped at Germantown on February 7, 1764, and never made it to Philadelphia. They were met by a government delegation, led by Franklin, and informed that almost 200 royal soldiers and 500 armed volunteers were standing by to stop them. The crowd returned home, leaving behind Matthew Smith and James Gibson to plead their case. The two men prepared a Declaration and a Remonstrance for the governor and the Assembly in an attempt to defend the actions of the Paxton Boys against the Indians and as a means of protesting against the government’s treatment of some Indians, the lack of manpower and supply support for the frontier, and the inequitable distribution of representatives in the colonial assembly which underpinned both these governmental offenses.19 Although the frontiersmen were able to voice their grievances, nothing was done to address their concerns. Smith and Gibson soon left Philadelphia and returned home. The Paxton Boys continued to terrorize Indian communities in their vicinity and cause disruptions for the next year or more, but the situation never again reached the same level as the events of late 1763 and early 1764.20

The Paxton Boys Incident is seen today, as it was then, as a classic example of conflict between East and West. Although both parties involved consisted of white Pennsylvanians, they understood that there was a world of difference between the

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19 Western counties were indeed underrepresented in the Assembly, holding only ten of the thirty-six representative seats (Illick 237).

disgruntled westerners and the horrified easterners. Westerners were shocked and dismayed by easterners' callousness toward their suffering, while easterners such as Benjamin Franklin were disappointed and embarrassed to find “that our Frontier People are yet greater Barbarians than the Indians.”

Similar differences of opinions between eastern and western communities in the Carolinas regarding representation, security, and government policy in the West also led to the Regulator Rebellion (sometimes referred to as the Regulator Movement or the War of the Regulation), which lasted from 1765 to 1771. The term “Regulator” was used because the western protestors wanted the right to regulate their own affairs. The uprising stemmed primarily from frustration with and resistance to perceived corruption in the government in the Carolinas. County officials, appointed by the governor, were seen as oppressive and abusive. Settlers found it very difficult to obtain titles to land, many farms were seized for debt due to taxes, and poll taxes restricted voting. Another problem was a lack of investment in frontier defense during the Seven Years War and the local Indian Wars that accompanied it. As with the Paxton Boys in Pennsylvania, western Carolinians were upset with the distribution of seats in the legislature. In North Carolina, only seventeen of the colony’s seventy-eight assemblymen came from the backcountry, even though more than half the colony’s white population lived there.


22 South Carolina experienced a Regulator movement of its own from approximately 1767-1769. This paper deals with the North Carolina movement because it was on a larger scale, received more press coverage in Philadelphia, and had more of an East-West causation.
In 1764, residents of North Carolina’s Anson, Granville, and Orange Counties lodged various grievances, including the high and often illegal fees being imposed by local officials. Governor Arthur Dobbs responded by prohibiting the collection of illegal fees. The practice ceased only briefly, however, and officials soon resumed the collection of such fees. As perceived grievances mounted, support for the Regulators increased in North Carolina’s western counties and the geographic scope of Regulator incidences increased, as well as the number of attacks on courts and individual office holders and the level of violence employed.23

Eventually Governor Tryon, with the support of most easterners, raised militia units with volunteers from eastern counties to head west into Regulator territory. They clashed with a poorly armed, poorly supplied, and poorly organized group of Regulators at Alamance Creek near Hillsborough. The Regulators were defeated in a matter of hours. With the exception of six men who were eventually tried and hanged, most of the participants on the Regulator side were pardoned. The colony’s militia then circulated in Regulator areas, getting residents to sign loyalty oaths and destroying property belonging to prominent Regulators. Most leading Regulators either left the colony or went into hiding.

Although the Regulator Rebellion failed completely in its objectives, its place in history is a significant one. It represents yet another episode in a long-standing conflict between two groups in American society. Historians William S. Powell, James K. Huhta,

and Thomas J. Farnham state that, like Bacon’s Rebellion in Virginia (1676), Shays’s Rebellion in Massachusetts (1786), and the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania (1794), “[t]he Regulator movement must be viewed primarily as one of a series of clashes between east and west.”

As with the Paxton Boys Incident and the Regulator Rebellion, Shays’s Rebellion began when citizens grew increasingly frustrated after the Revolution with their government’s inattentiveness to their grievances. Many residents of western Massachusetts complained that their state government was oppressing them instead of helping them because of the dominance of eastern interest groups in the Assembly and Council. They were further frustrated when the Massachusetts legislature adjourned in 1786 without addressing westerners’ concerns over taxes, debts, and paper money.

As was the case in the Carolinas, the catalyst for rebellion was the government’s and the courts’ support for a string of property confiscations and foreclosures (because of failure to pay taxes and court fees) in the West. By 1786, peaceful uprisings were occurring around western Massachusetts, primarily with the aim of getting debtors released from prison. Soon the unrest became more organized under the leadership of Revolutionary War veteran Daniel Shays. The situation escalated when Shays and his supporters began to prevent courts from conducting business. A group of around 1,200 armed farmers eventually attacked the federal arsenal at Springfield. The government had trouble raising a militia because most westerners were sympathetic to Shays. Finally, however, enough mercenaries and militiamen were raised to meet the farmers

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at Springfield. The militia killed four Shaysites and scattered the inexperienced and disorganized army. When General Benjamin Lincoln arrived with reinforcements, he followed Shays’s “army” to Petersham and defeated it on February 3, 1787. Daniel Shays and other prominent figures in the insurrection fled to Vermont and were sheltered by Ethan Allen and others. The circumstances of their whereabouts and their plans figured prominently in Philadelphia newspapers for many months afterward.26

These conflicts, as well as other lesser clashes and disagreements, were indicative of clear tensions between East and West. The newspaper coverage illustrates that contemporaries also saw these discrete/local events as representing a larger, more significant clash of civilizations between East and West. Proprietors and editors of Philadelphia newspapers, part of the eastern establishment, demonstrated this worldview through their coverage of these clashes and helped to perpetuate this interpretive model of American society in the minds of readers.

Commending or attacking the leadership of either side in these clashes was a common thread running through press coverage in the Philadelphia newspapers. Both government leaders and leaders of the various rebellions were frequently mentioned in

26 Shays’s Rebellion had a number of very important consequences. Shays and his men had more success in getting their goals accomplished than did the Paxton Boys or the Carolina Regulators. Some Shays sympathizers were elected to the state legislature and, consequently, the next legislative session lowered court fees, eliminated direct taxes, and made changes to the debt process. On a larger scale, the rebellion was a major impetus for the calling of the 1787 Constitutional Convention. Shays’s Rebellion is considered a prominent event in American history, and the basic facts of the event can be found in almost any American history overview or textbook. See also George Richards Minot, The History of the Insurrections, in Massachusetts, in the Year MDCCCLXXXVI: and the Rebellion Consequent Thereon (Worcester, Massachusetts: Isaiah Thomas, 1788); David P. Szatmary, Shays’ Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Richards, Shays’s Rebellion.
the newspapers. The Paxton Boys Incident was the exception, in which newspapermen expressed their worldviews in a different way (see Chapter Two). While the eastern leadership was applauded, leaders of western disturbances were consistently described as filthy, crazy, and savage, and received the large share of blame for these incidents.

As the ultimate head of government during both the Paxton Boys Incident and the Regulator Rebellion, His Majesty the king was always referred to in glowing terms. It was the governor, however, not the monarch who was usually the prime representative of eastern establishments and governments. Pennsylvania governor John Penn, North Carolina governor William Tryon, and Massachusetts governor James Bowdoin almost always received favorable coverage and descriptions in the press.27 Of the eighty-eight mentions of the governors found in the coverage of these three events, 75 percent were neutral, 21.6 percent were specifically positive, and only 3.4 percent (three mentions) could be considered negative.28 These chief executives were portrayed as strong and as good to their people. The papers clarified, for example, that the conflicts surrounding the Regulator Rebellion were not the fault of Governor Tryon or those operating within his government. The words chosen to describe these governors – showing “[m]agnanimity,” offering “lenient measures,” possessing an “amiable disposition,” so “worthily and happily” governing their states, and demonstrating “ardent Zeal for the Happiness of His Majesty’s Subjects” – gave readers

27 The term “His Excellency” is used many times to refer to the governors. See, for example, Pennsylvania Chronicle, 15-22 July 1771; Pennsylvania Gazette, 3 November 1763.

28 The three negative mentions were all of Governor Tryon during the Regulator Rebellion. All three were small mentions in personal correspondences that were printed in the newspapers.
the impression that they had tried to work with the dissenters in each event.\textsuperscript{29} The praise and respect governors received from Philadelphia newspaper coverage buttressed the belief that these conflicts were the fault of agitators in the West, rather than policies of eastern governments.

Governor Tryon also received praise for his military prowess. The victory over the Regulators at the Battle of Alamance was frequently accredited to his military leadership. Newspaper articles pointed out that the governor’s “cool, intrepid, and soldier like behavior” made him the “chief Instrument” in the victory.\textsuperscript{30} Such statements implied that the governor single-handedly took on the Regulators. Of the ten editions of Philadelphia newspapers that discussed the Battle of Alamance, eight (80 percent) specifically credited Governor Tryon with the victory.

The leaders or perceived leaders of the western rebellions did not fare as well in the press. While authority figures in the eastern establishment were praised and exalted by the press, western leaders received scorn and mockery and were labeled in extremely unflattering terms. These “principal authors of . . . insurrection,” “first rate villains,” and “turbulent formenters of the rebellion” received the bulk of the blame for the unrest.\textsuperscript{31} In all, Shays, Husbands, and other possible members of the leadership

\textsuperscript{29} Pennsylvania Gazette, 18 July 1771; Pennsylvania Gazette, 24 November 1768; Pennsylvania Gazette, 24 November 1768; Freeman’s Journal, 4 April 1787; Pennsylvania Gazette, 18 July 1771.


\textsuperscript{31} Pennsylvania Journal, 11 July 1771; Pennsylvania Gazette, 28 February 1787; Freeman’s Journal, 28 February 1787; Pennsylvania Journal, 28 February 1787; Pennsylvania Journal, 17 March 1787.
were addressed by twenty-three definitively negative words or phrases, totaling thirty-nine separate occasions.

The Philadelphia press took particular interest in the comings and goings of Daniel Shays during and after the rebellion in Massachusetts. For over a year after the beginning of Shays’s Rebellion, Shays remained a regular mention in the newspapers. They reported on his activities, decried his motives and, eventually, speculated heavily on his whereabouts, his companions, and his intentions. While historians commonly agree that Daniel Shays was actually the primary leader of the 1786 Massachusetts uprising (followed closely by Luke Day and Eli Parsons), it is generally thought by modern historians that Hermon Husbands, of Regulator Rebellion fame, was not actually a strong leader in the North Carolina disturbance. Nevertheless, contemporary newspapers made Husbands out to be an important leader, and a sinister character to boot.

Putting a good deal of emphasis on the negative qualities of the leadership had the effect of making it easier to interpret and portray the disturbances as the brainchild of one or more crazed leaders, rather than a widespread sentiment among vast numbers of people and communities. For example, both the Gazette and the Pennsylvania Journal printed pieces referring to Husbands as “the Cataline of this province,” a reference to Lucius Serguis Catilina, the first-century Roman politician who attempted to overthrow the Roman Republic. Educated readers doubtless understood the metaphor as an accusation of unjust and violent usurpation.

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According to the press, these men possessed low intelligence and unpleasant lifestyles. Daniel Shays, for example, was “a fool as well as a madman;”\textsuperscript{33} his home was “crowded with insurgents, and of course, on account of the filth and nastiness, it resembled a stable, or a den, rather than a human dwelling, and stripped of provisions for man or beast.”\textsuperscript{34} Such descriptions dehumanized these leaders, helping to counter any sympathy readers might have had for them, their men, or their causes and making it easier to view them as enemies of society and civility, not only in their locales, but in America in general.

Sometimes the papers were even more direct in their suggestions that the leadership alone was to blame. Although they disparaged the common people as well, the impression given was that such people did not really have grievances with the government or a desire to protest. Press coverage suggested that in the beginning, the rank and file protesters were “led into the mischief by artful and designing men.”\textsuperscript{35} Rather than being, or feeling, truly aggrieved, they were simply “deluded followers.”\textsuperscript{36} Such depictions downplayed the seriousness of the various protesters’ complaints, reflecting, shaping, and reaffirming eastern perceptions that their system of government

\textsuperscript{33} Pennsylvania Gazette, 31 January, 1787, and Pennsylvania Journal, 3 February 1787.

\textsuperscript{34} Pennsylvania Gazette, 31 January, 1787, and Pennsylvania Journal, 3 February 1787.

\textsuperscript{35} Freeman’s Journal, 11 October 1786 and Pennsylvania Gazette, 11 October 1786.

\textsuperscript{36} Pennsylvania Gazette, 14 February 1787; Pennsylvania Journal, 17 February 1787; Pennsylvania Journal, 21 February 1787.
was equitable and that dissatisfaction was merely a ruse and a product of false and malevolent propaganda.

The press also created the impression that rank and file followers were glad to get out of the disruption and that they were sorry to have been critical of the government. Thousands of former Regulators were reported to have “happily returned to their farms and plantations,” saying that they were “now perfectly contented, and express much satisfaction at the event of the late battle, which has opened their eyes, and fully convinced them of the wrong measures they were pursuing.”

Former Shaysites, similarly, were “lamenting their cullibility, and convinced of the folly of their enterprise” as the incident wound down. They also were “extremely humbled and ashamed” by their part in the uprising.

In addition to opinionated descriptions of the leadership involved in the various conflicts, the press used biased word choices in referring to the masses of people on both sides. The participants in the three uprisings and the general populace of the frontier areas were both depicted in very disparaging terms. Easterners, conversely, were routinely described in a positive manner.

While the participants in these events may have viewed themselves as concerned citizens or even patriots (much like the glorified participants in the American Revolution), the papers certainly did not portray them as simply voicing their opinions or


38 *Freeman’s Journal*, 8 November 1786.

trying to improve their lives. Many of the descriptions created the impression that the participants were lawless troublemakers who had no sense of loyalty and who lashed out violently and randomly, rather than programmatically, in an attempt to establish order. The most common label used for the Paxton Boys, the Regulators, and Shays’s followers was “insurgents.” In fact, the word was used at least sixty times in the coverage of these events in the sampled newspapers. “Insurgents,” however, was only one of a variety of negative epithets used to describe the people involved in these incidents as troublesome. They were also described as “banditti,” “riotous Assemblies,” “turbulent and evil minded persons,” “unlawful,” “lawless,” and as having a “seditious nature.” One newspaper article said one of these groups of westerners was in “Conspiracy” against the government. Presenting western activists as bandits and outlaws reflected an eastern sense of bewilderment at the cause that motivated and energized western opposition to eastern administration. Blind to the structural, political,

40 The word “insurgents” refers to one who participates in an insurrection. According to Samuel Johnson’s famous eighteenth-century dictionary, insurgents were participants in “[a] seditious rising; a rebellious commotion.” “Sedition,” in turn, was defined as “[a] tumult; an insurrection; a popular commotion; an uproar.” These definitions come from Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language, 10th edition (London: Luke Hansgard & Sons, 1810). First published in 1755, Johnson’s dictionary was the best and most famous of its time. The complete dictionary has been out of print for well over a century. See E.L. McAdam, Jr. and George Milne, Johnson’s Dictionary: A Modern Selection (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963).

41 Pennsylvania Journal, 6 December 1786; Pennsylvania Journal, 20 December 1786, and Pennsylvania Journal, 27 December 1786; Pennsylvania Gazette, 9 February 1764; Pennsylvania Gazette, 9 February 1764; the word “unlawful” appeared several times in the papers, including Pennsylvania Journal, 19 December 1763; the term “lawless” was used numerous times to describe the Regulators. See, for example, Pennsylvania Gazette, 20 June 1771; Freeman’s Journal, 8 November 1786, and Pennsylvania Journal, 15 November 1786.

42 Pennsylvania Journal, 11 July 1771.
cultural, and economic causes of western distress, eastern commentators presented to
their readers what they perceived as unruly disturbances motivated not by specific
critiques regarding policy and representation, but by crazed savagery, stupidity, and
gullibility. Using terms like “butchered” and “cruel and inhuman” to describe the attack
of the Paxton Boys on the Conestogas suggested to readers that this was an act of
savagery, not war.43

An interesting point to note is that the Philadelphia press took the opposite
stance regarding the Native Americans during the Paxton Boys Incident. The Native
Americans were actually presented much more peacefully than they generally had been.
Normally, during times of non-rebellion, Native Americans were portrayed in a very
unflattering, derogatory light in the Philadelphia newspapers. They were accused of all
sorts of atrocities, and conflicts were almost always blamed on them. A November
1763 piece in the Pennsylvania Journal told the story of an Indian attack on a home in
Allenstown, Pennsylvania. The story noted that the Indians “rob’d and plunder’d” the
home, scalped the home’s owner and “tomhawk’d” his wife and children.44 It even
included the fact that the wife lived for four painful days before succumbing to her
wounds. Stories of that nature were commonplace in the Philadelphia papers, but
descriptions changed when the Paxton Boys began to take matters into their own hands.
During the Paxton Boys upheaval, accusatory representations of Indians gave way to

43 Pennsylvania Gazette, 19 December 1763, and Pennsylvania Journal, 19
December 1763; Pennsylvania Gazette, 5 January 1764, Pennsylvania Gazette, 12
January 1764, and Pennsylvania Journal, 5 January 1764.

44 Pennsylvania Journal, 10 November 1763.
references to people who lived “peaceably and inoffensively.”45 Some Indians, possibly the Conestogas, were even declared to be “willing and desirous to preserve and continue the ancient Friendship.”46 While these Indians were on better terms with whites than other groups, it was still highly unusual for the Philadelphia press to refer to a relationship between whites and Indians as a friendship and to use such benign terms to refer to Indians. This portrayal reinforced the notion that white westerners’ violent behavior was unwarranted, unreasonable, and random; a product of savagery rather than legitimate grievances.

This image of irrational crowds lashing out in a disorderly and purposeless spree of violence was reinforced in the battle descriptions. In the case of Shays’s Rebellion in particular, papers derided the rebels’ military prowess in addition to their character.47 At least eight different descriptions, totaling eleven separate mentions, malignned their military capabilities. No descriptions ever praised their military talents or military behavior. Narratives painted an almost comical picture of “rebels [firing] in very great disorder and in different directions” and fleeing “with the greatest precipitation and disorder.”48 Contrasting with the pitiful picture painted of the various rebel efforts at armed resistance, the government’s troops were regularly praised. The words used to


47 See Chapter Two for a discussion of the press’s portrayal of the Regulators’ military abilities at the Battle of Alamance.

48 Freeman’s Journal, 21 March 1787; Pennsylvania Journal, 21 February 1787.
describe these men portrayed them as loyal, brave, and skilled. Additionally, all
descriptions of the troops implied that they were enthusiastic about their cause and
proud to serve their government. In all, sixteen articles contained praise for the
attitudes of eastern soldiers and officers. No articles criticized eastern military
establishment or the troops' conduct. A reprint of a letter from General Benjamin
Lincoln to Shays told the protest leader, "[y]our resources are few, your force is
inconsiderable, and hourly decreasing, from the disaffection of your men; you are in a
post where you have neither cover nor supplies, and in a situation in which you can
neither give aid to your friends nor discomfort to the supporters of good order and
government. Under these circumstances you cannot hesitate a moment to disband
your deluded followers." The battle scenes readers found in the Philadelphia press
led them to believe that Lincoln’s assessment was correct and that, unlike government
units, Shays and his followers were incompetent and ill-prepared. In addition to easing
their minds about the seriousness of the situation, this type of portrayal also
downplayed the abilities and strengths of the people from the West, thereby allaying
fears about future disturbances.

The portrayal of easterners as “prudent” and “respectable” stood in sharp
contrast to such depictions of western rebels and served the same purpose. Indeed,

49 See, for example, Pennsylvania Gazette, 7 February 1787; Pennsylvania Gazette,
20 June 1771.

50 Pennsylvania Gazette, 14 February 1787, and Pennsylvania Journal, 17 February
1787.

51 Pennsylvania Gazette, 9 February 1764, and Pennsylvania Journal, 9 February
1764; the adjective “respectable” was used many times to refer to law-abiding citizens.
For example, see Pennsylvania Gazette, 11 October 1786.
one reprinted letter went so far as to state that “the government party are all men of property and of respectable character. This gives us a superiority over the mob.”

During these crises between western “mobs” and eastern governments, the newspapermen presented those in the East as living in harmony with their governments and supporting them. They were repeatedly referred to as “loyalists” during the Regulator Rebellion. The term appeared at least ten times in the publications of 1771 alone. After the Revolution, when this term had already been tainted by negative and treasonous connotations, similar praise was conferred during Shays’s Rebellion on easterners in the Massachusetts with the term “friends of government.” The newspapers used celebrities such as Benjamin Franklin and George Washington to compound such praise and inspire patriotic loyalism. During Shays’s Rebellion, the Gazette combined the star power of several Revolutionary heroes and stated, “This surely is a very respectable authority: But we have the authority of our own sages: of our Franklin – of our Washington – of our Morris – all in their several stations, dear to the true friends of this country, have they –have either of them, ever brought forth this

52 Pennsylvania Gazette, 22 November 1786.

53 The term “loyalist” appeared numerous times during the period of the Regulator Rebellion. See, for example, Pennsylvania Gazette, 20 June 1771.

54 Pennsylvania Gazette, 11 October 1786; Pennsylvania Gazette, 13 December 1786; and Pennsylvania Gazette, 7 February 1787. Interestingly, during Shays’s Rebellion, the phrase “every friend to our present excellent constitution” described people who were happy as the rebellion wound down. This was interesting because Shays’s Rebellion actually provided a catalyst in the press and in public opinion for the calling of a constitutional convention. It seems, however, that it was acceptable for loyal easterners and patriots to call for a new and stronger system of government, but it was not acceptable for people from the West to use more dramatic means to protest against the current system as long as it was in place.
curse of curses – this treason against public faith, common sense, and common honesty? No. their patriot breasts burn with fires!“

Name dropping as a political tactic reached unprecedented proportions during the Constitutional Convention, another contest between East and West. George Washington, the “great patriot” and “late worthy Commander in Chief,” got top billing, followed by the likes of Franklin, John Dickinson, Eldridge Gerry, Edmund Randolph, and Gouverneur Morris. Over 16 percent of the articles discussing the Convention or the idea of a new system of government printed during the months surrounding the Constitutional Convention mentioned Washington’s name. A fictitious, forward-looking article suggested that Americans would look back at 1787 with the same fondness as 1776 and remember that “we beheld [George Washington] at the head of a chosen band of patriots and heroes, arresting the progress of American anarchy, and taking the lead in laying a deep foundation for preserving that liberty by a good government.”

There were times, however, when not even George Washington sufficed and publishers and editors called upon the Almighty Himself to support or disparage a cause. When the North Carolina government defeated the Regulators at the Battle of Alamance, accounts of the battle implied that the outcome was inevitable because the hand of God was with the righteous government. Newspapers in Philadelphia recommended that readers offer prayers of thanksgiving because, despite being outnumbered by the Regulators, the government achieved victory “through the immediate hand of divine

55 Pennsylvania Gazette, 25 April 1787.
56 Pennsylvania Herald, 12 May 1787; Pennsylvania Journal, 25 August 1787.
57 Pennsylvania Journal, 25 August 1787.
The protestors involved in Shays’s Rebellion received even worse spiritual condemnation in the Philadelphia press. Not only were these westerners defeated thanks to “the Supreme Disposer of all events,” but “[t]he malice of the rebels can be equalled by no order of beings but devils.” Coverage of the Paxton Boys Incident, the Regulator Rebellion, and Shays’s Rebellion in Philadelphia included the name of God eight times, five times, and six times, respectively. Other religious terms and references were used at least seven times, thirty-one times, and ten times, respectively.

Creating an image of the tensions between East and West as almost a metaphysical contest between good and evil indicated how deeply this conflict was ingrained in the worldview easterners had constructed of themselves and others. Philadelphia newspapers made certain literary and stylistic choices that reflected and confirmed this image and perspective. This came through both directly and subtly in their coverage of three western rebellions in the Revolutionary era and, eventually, informed and influenced these publishers’ and editors’ support for political reform in 1787.

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59 Pennsylvania Journal, March 10, 1787; Pennsylvania Gazette, March 21, 1787.

60 These “other” religious words included Almighty, Divine, Providence, Heaven, Christian, Supreme Disposer, Lord, prayers, eternal, devil, and Gospel.
Chapter one discussed the usage of rhetoric and word choice to convey bias in news items that appeared in eighteenth-century Philadelphia newspapers. To historians, with the benefit of hindsight, it is just as important what the press chose not to publish or to publish incorrectly. Newspaper coverage, in general, was spotty at best and often contributors did not have information and certain events. However, sometimes publishers and printers did not publish information that they normally would have printed. Additionally, there was occasional printing of wrong information in a manner that demonstrated and confirmed the worldview of most of the eastern establishment.

By its very nature, this type of bias by omission is more difficult to analyze than bias through commission. A few examples, however, stand out as appearing to be important omissions and inaccuracies. These include the failure to identify the origin of the Paxton Boys, the absence of coverage of the defenses or grievances of the “other side,” and the reporting of incorrect information regarding the Battle of Alamance.

Protest groups were often referred to in the newspapers by the names that are still used for them today. They were generally spoken of in derogatory terms (see Chapter One), to the point that their group names became synonymous with insurgency, chaos, and so forth. For example, the label “Shaysites,” given to the followers of Daniel Shays, quickly became a nasty description used in the press to invoke a negative connotation. Sometimes, however, an entirely different, though equally effective,
approach was used. Sometimes, most notably in the case of the Paxton Boys Incident, the newspapers avoided using individual or group names altogether.

It was well known that the people who rode to Conestoga Manor and Lancaster in December of 1763 to attack the Conestogas came from the town of Paxton. It was also no secret who many of these men were, particularly the leaders. However, no mention of the participants’ names nor the name of their town was printed in the newspapers at the time of the events. At first glance, it seems strange that no such information would be included. As a point of reference, it should be noted that it was common for place names to be listed in news pieces. For example, a piece printed in October of the same year (two months before the incident), announced that the “Paxton Volunteeres are returned.”61 It went on to describe how a group from Paxton had gone looking for Indians. The group reportedly found no Indians, but were able to destroy some homes and crops and were still out on their expedition. In this case, the actions of the people from Paxton were supported. In the case of the Paxton Boys incident, the actions of the men from Paxton were not condoned. The men, therefore, were not given an identity. They were never called “Paxton Boys,” “Paxton Volunteers,” or “men from Paxton.” At best they were referred to as “persons,” “men,” or “men, from the Frontiers.”62 At worst they were called a variety of degrading epithets, as discussed in Chapter One.

61 Pennsylvania Journal, 20 October 1763.

62 Pennsylvania Gazette, 5 January 1767; Pennsylvania Gazette, 12 January 1764; and Pennsylvania Journal, 5 January 1764; Pennsylvania Gazette, 5 January 1767; Pennsylvania Gazette, 12 January 1764; Pennsylvania Journal, 5 January 1764; Pennsylvania Gazette, 9 February 1764; Pennsylvania Journal, 9 February 1764.
The fact that this information was not printed in the newspapers would have contributed to the way in which readers viewed the Paxton Boys. Excluding the names of the involved parties and their home location had the effect of keeping them as faceless enemies from the rude and brutal “frontiers.” Rather than being real people, with whom readers could possibly identify or sympathize, they were anonymous members of a barbarous mob. People tend to identify with people they know, know of, or view to be like themselves. Similarly, they tend to more easily sympathize with people coming from a place they know or recognize. If any readers had been to Paxton or knew people from there, the newspapers’ method of coverage kept them from associating the situation with a real place that they might have known to actually be normal. This exclusion allowed or even encouraged eastern readers to imagine the involved parties as less than civilized and less like themselves.

The identity of the Paxton Boys was not the only bit of available and known information that did not appear in the pages of the Philadelphia newspapers. Also absent from the publications were reports on the frontiersmen’s motivations and justifications. Many condemnations of the “men from Frontiers” appeared in the papers, and many pieces sympathizing with the plight of allied Indians, but very little was printed in defense of, or from the perspective of, the protestors. During the Regulator Rebellion as well, the protesters were continually harangued in the press, with very little mention of their side of the story. The same was true in the case of Shays’s Rebellion as well. Finally, from September, 1786, when the call for the Constitutional Convention was issued by the Annapolis Convention to September, 1787, when the Convention was adjourned, almost nothing was printed in opposition to amending the constitution except
where Rhode Island was concerned (see Chapter Three). The opposition in each of these conflicts had specific grievances, complaints, and arguments, which were part of the public record (in the form of petitions, lists of grievances and the like). These, however, were given almost no exposure in the Philadelphia newspapers of the time.

Although the formally expressed grievances the Paxton Boys had offered to explain and justify their actions and to initiate political and tax reform would have constituted an important part of the story, the Gazette did not print anything sympathetic to the Paxton Boys or any communication from their side. The Pennsylvania Journal was slightly more fair, as two editions of the publication contained correspondence from the side of the aggrieved westerners. On March 15, 1764, the Journal printed “A DECLARATION and REMONSTRANCE of the distressed and bleeding Frontier Inhabitants of the Province of Pennsylvania.”63 This document, presented by the westerners to the Governor and the Assembly, expressed their loyalty to the government, listed some of their grievances, and gave some justifications for the incident at Conestoga Manor. On April 19, 1764, a petition from the Inhabitants of Cumberland County (written to the governor) also appeared in the paper.64 This document again listed grievances of the frontier inhabitants and reiterated their claim to be loyal subjects of the King. Both of these documents appeared in the Pennsylvania Journal without any accompanying remarks or commentary. The fact that Pennsylvanians were offered only two news items on the protestors’ concerns and motivations (and the Gazette’s readers received no information at all on this) shows a

63 Pennsylvania Journal, 15 March 1764.

64 Pennsylvania Journal, 19 April 1764.
conspicuous lack of interest in frontier communities’ perspective and, perhaps, even a conscious effort to delegitimize and undercut western grievances and reform efforts.

The Regulator Rebellion was the subject of thirty-nine newspaper pieces in Philadelphia. Only eight stories, however, (including duplicates in more than one publication) attempted to communicate to readers the plight of the Regulators or at least report on their point of view. A *Pennsylvania Journal* article, for example, suggested that “[n]o man will believe that the people would rise in arms against the government there, without some reason for it” and urged people to “[h]ear both sides.” It then proceeded to print a letter from James Hunter, in which Hunter defended Herman Husband and himself, answered charges made by the letter’s recipient, and raised counter-questions in return.65

Other pieces were printed in tandem with a response or a rebuttal, which showed the folly or error of the Regulator arguments. Both the *Pennsylvania Journal* and the *Gazette* printed “The Petition of the Inhabitants of Orang-County [sic]” (also seen as “The Petition of us the Inhabitants of Orange county”) that was sent to the governor just before the Battle of Alamance. This brief petition primarily asked the governor to listen objectively to their complaints and requests. Immediately following in the text, however, the newspaper published the reply from Governor Tryon. The reply pointedly stated that the governor had always expressed great interest in his colony and every person in it. It also accused the Regulators of forcing him into the situation of having to discipline them, and it said they needed to lay down their weapons and surrender in order to

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65 *Pennsylvania Journal*, 11 June 1771.
“prevent Rebellion against your King, your Country, and your Laws.” 66 The petition and the reply combined to create the impression that the protestors had nothing real to complain about and that the government would have gladly tried to redress any perceived grievances had the Regulators not resorted to violence and defiance. Essentially, very little was printed in the Philadelphia press that was sympathetic to the Regulators. Much of the little that was printed was presented in such a way as to undercut sympathy toward the protesting westerners.

Another example of this bias was in their reporting of the casualty counts from the rebellion’s culminating conflict at the Battle of Alamance. While there is some variance in the casualty rate estimates even today, most historians agree that the two-hour battle saw nine government soldiers killed, with approximately sixty-one wounded, while the Regulators suffered nine fatalities and an undetermined number of wounded. 67 Yet contemporary newspapers greatly exaggerated the number of Regulators killed. Both the Gazette and the Journal reported accurately that no more than ten government soldiers were killed and about sixty were wounded. They also reported, however, that “of the Regulators, 300 were found dead on the field next day, and very great number wounded.” 68 The same publications printed the next month that the “loyalists” had nine dead and about sixty wounded, but that the “rebels must have had killed in the battle

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about one hundred men, two hundred more wounded."69 Accurate reporting on government casualties and inflated reporting on enemy casualties is common even in modern wars and modern media outlets. The intended effect of such reporting is to inspire confidence in the government’s competence, to assure the public that all is well at the front, and to assure the status quo on the home front. Reporting that both sides lost nine men could have given readers the impression that both sides performed equally. Indeed, claiming that the Regulators lost a significantly higher number of men reinforced the notion that the Regulators were incompetent, disorganized, incoherent, and weak, not to mention also the notion that God was on the side of the government’s troops.

The protesters involved in Shays’s Rebellion suffered from the same lack of attention from the Philadelphia press to their grievances as did the Paxton Boys and the Regulators. Although the coverage of the Rebellion and its aftermath went on for many months, there was never any discussion of the grievances of Daniel Shays and his followers. A few pieces of communication from Daniel Shays were printed, such as military correspondence with General Benjamin Lincoln, but never anything that truly explained his point of view.70 As was the case in the Regulator Rebellion, there was an instance in which a communication from the protesters was printed seemingly to make them look bad. The Pennsylvania Journal printed an “intercepted letter” from Eli Parsons in which Parsons attempted to motivate people to support his cause. The letter

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70 Pennsylvania Gazette, 14 February 1787; Pennsylvania Journal, 17 February 1787.
also included the suggestion that the “first step I would recommend, is to destroy Shepard’s army, then to proceed to the county of Berkshire, as we are now collecting at New Lebanon, in York state, and Pownal, in Vermont state, with a determination to carry our point, if fire, blood and carnage will effect it.”71 That statement would not have endeared Parsons to the established eastern cities.

The Journal seemed to realize that the Parsons letter was an inflammatory piece, as it printed a statement from Ephraim Breed testifying that the letter was indeed from Parsons. Although it might have appeared that the Journal was trying to print something from both sides, the actual effect was to make Parsons look bad and further denigrate the side of the protesters. Other than the Parsons piece and the Shays letters, which were few and far between, no attempt was made by the Philadelphia press to represent the Shaysites at all. By failing to publish the westerners’ petitions and formal letters of grievances, the press created the impression that there were neither any specific and legitimate grievances nor any valid reasons for the rebellion. This confirmed assumptions and suggestions about wild and savage westerners lashing out violently for no apparent reason or purpose (see Chapter One).

The most compelling evidence that newspapers excluded information that challenged publishers’ and printers’ worldview can be found in the coverage of the Constitutional Convention (see Chapter Three), but even in the three instances discussed above, there is a strong case for distortion-by-omission as a public relations tactic on the part of the Philadelphia press. One could argue that the public was kept in the dark regarding westerners’ true motivations, justifications, and objectives because

71 Pennsylvania Journal, 10 March 1787.
the newspaper owners, printers, and editors were themselves blinded to these by their own cultural prejudices, preconceptions, and political interests.

Perhaps a few of the aforementioned omissions and inaccuracies were due to simple mistakes or oversight. As noted, eighteenth-century newspaper printing and reporting were much less mature and comprehensive than that of today. When grouped together, however, they seem to represent a pattern of reporting that functioned to reinforce existing cultural stereotypes of westerners and to generate resistance to western agitation for bureaucratic and political reform.
CHAPTER 4

"UNANIMITY HALL": THE BIAS OF THE PHILADELPHIA PRESS IN FAVOR OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

The Philadelphia press covered the proceedings of the 1787 Constitutional Convention from its habitual eastern perspective. As in coverage of the three western rebellions discussed previously, word choices were used to downplay opposing points of view; subconscious word choices gave away true viewpoints, as did glaring omissions of facts and storylines. Moreover, the newspapers adopted an openly partisan mode of coverage in the months leading up to and during the Philadelphia gathering, with the publication of outright denouncements of the Articles of Confederation and straightforward calls for a new, more centralized system of government.

The young United States adopted the Articles of Confederation in 1781. Throughout the 1780s, many citizens increasingly believed that the Articles, which had been written by those with clear memories of British tyranny and oppression and who, therefore, denied powers to the central government, had serious flaws that made it difficult for the United States government to address the numerous problems facing the country. In 1785, delegates from Virginia and Maryland met at George Washington’s home to discuss interstate disputes over commerce and navigation. Encouraged by their successfully mediated compromises, the delegates at the Mount Vernon Conference issued a call for all thirteen states to send representatives to a meeting to discuss similar issues. Only five states attended the resulting 1786 Annapolis
Convention, but New York’s Alexander Hamilton presented a call for a convention of all the states to be held in 1787 in Philadelphia.

With Shays’s Rebellion serving as a political and public relations prod, Congress soon approved the convention and the summer of 1787 witnessed the coming of fifty-five state delegates to Philadelphia for the purpose of devising “such further provisions as shall appear to them necessary to render the Constitution of the federal government adequate to the exigencies of the Union.”72 In order to promote openness of debate and reduce the pressures of public opinion, one of the first orders of business when the Convention opened in late May was an agreement to make the proceedings closed and confidential. The press complained little about this rule, apparently understanding the necessity of confidentiality.73 The public, however, was generally aware of what was taking place at the Convention. It knew the expressed purpose of the Convention according to the official call for a meeting, but also knew that Rhode Island had declined to send delegates, so the Articles of Confederation could not technically be amended.74 It appeared, therefore, that the Convention was designing an entirely new document.

The distinguished group of delegates, led by George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and James Madison, met through the summer and eventually produced and submitted its proposed constitution to the states on September 28, 1787. A spirited political contest between proponents of the new Constitution (“Federalists”) and

72 From the invitation to convene in Philadelphia, issued by the delegates of the Annapolis Convention, 1786.


74 According to the Articles of Confederation, constitutional amendments required the approval of all thirteen states in order to be adopted.
opponents of the document ("Antifederalists") ensued, but eventually the Federalists achieved victory. The Convention had provided that ratification required nine states’ approval, rather than the thirteen needed under the Articles. New Hampshire became the ninth state to ratify the Constitution on June 21, 1788, making it binding on all the states. The Constitution went into effect before being approved by North Carolina or Rhode Island, but both states eventually ratified. On May 29, 1790, Rhode Island finally approved the document, making ratification of the Constitution of the United States unanimous.75

The Philadelphia print community’s desire for centralization manifested itself through direct and forceful denunciation of the Articles of Confederation. Those who had drafted the Articles in the 1770s had done so in the context of, and in reaction to, a centralizing government. Thus, the framers designed for the United States a weak and minimal central government, leaving most governmental powers and jurisdictions in the hands of state governments. Philadelphia newspapers spoke out strongly against the Articles and advocated for consolidating power in the national government. This condemnation was evident throughout the 1780s, but intensified greatly when the call went out for a convention of all the states. Newspaper reports enumerated the flaws of the Articles, generally denounced their ineffectiveness, and predicted disastrous

consequences for the nation if the delegates failed to heavily amend the constitution or replace it with a new governing document.

Most attacks on the Articles focused on the lack of effective powers granted to Congress, often detailing specific problems with the system. Several newspaper pieces provided systematic criticisms of this feature of the Articles. One commentary concluded that Congress “have exclusive right and power for the following purposes, without being able to execute one of them,” then outlined several specific areas in which the legislature had jurisdiction in theory, but in practice was unable to accomplish anything. For example, the author notes that Congress “may ‘make and conclude treaties;’ but can only recommend the observance of them;” it “may make war and determine what number of troops are necessary; but cannot raise a single soldier.”  

These types of factual and analytical arguments described the same flaws in the Articles of Confederation that modern scholars identify in the document.

Some published stories or reprinted letters did not provide detailed discussion of the Articles’ flaws, but simply stated clearly and without elaboration that the weak legislature outlined in the document constituted a major problem, suggesting that “the source of all our misfortunes is evidently in the want of power in congress.” One news item claimed that speaking of Congress brought to mind “weakness,” “instability,” and “faction.” The authors did not disparage Congress as an institution or even the

76 Freeman's Journal, 30 May 1787.
77 Freeman's Journal, 16 May 1787.
specific Congress of the time. They, in fact, claimed that it needed more power in order to be effective. “[W]hat true friend to this country can object to the giving more power and efficacy to the laws and ordinances of the only highly respected and honorable Congress of America?”79

During the Paxton Boys Incident, the Regulator Rebellion, and Shays's Rebellion, Philadelphia editors and proprietors used subtle and sometimes fairly direct methods to convey opinions to the public through the medium of newspapers. None of these events, however, saw such direct calls for action or attempts to convince as were seen in the Philadelphia press during the Constitutional Convention.

Philadelphia newspapermen employed very strong rhetoric to describe the political situation under the Articles of Confederation, decrying the "shattered fabric of the original constitution," along with the federal government’s “impotence.”80 At least eleven articles suggested that the nation was nearing or already in a state of “anarchy.” A letter from “A Pennsylvanian” despaired deeply over the situation, questioning “shall the republics of America prostitute themselves at the shrine of avarice and dishonesty? Shall America stand alone amongst the nations of the earth in infamy?”81 Loaded metaphors conveyed that same message to readers. A Pennsylvania Journal article, for example, suggested that the “present confederation may be compared to a HUT or TENT, accommodated to the emergencies of the war---but it is now time to erect a

79 Freeman’s Journal, 30 May 1787.

80 Pennsylvania Herald, 19 May 1787, and Pennsylvania Journal, 2 June 1787; Freeman’s Journal, 30 May 1787.

81 Freeman’s Journal, 25 April 1787.
castle of durable materials."\textsuperscript{82} Whether choosing strong words, issuing over-dramatic statements, or utilizing evocative metaphors, the Philadelphia newspapers made it quite clear that the Articles of Confederation should be considered inferior and in need of major alteration or replacement.

As they had done in the coverage of the three western rebellions previously discussed, Philadelphia newspapermen utilized religious metaphors in 1787 to convey a certain point of view and win hearts and minds. The name of God and the words of Scripture were employed numerous times by newspaper pieces supporting the Constitutional Convention and/or a new system of government. God was mentioned nine times (as a supporter) and other divine and Christian references appear at least twenty times. The story of the Tower of Babel, for example, in which God punished humanity’s arrogance by confusing the languages and scattering the people across the earth was utilized to good effect in both the \textit{Pennsylvania Journal} and the \textit{Gazette} to warn against the prospect of political disintegration into thirteen (or more) small, chaotic segments: “. . . now is to be determined, whether they are to be ranked as slaves or freemen, or left to struggle with darkness and obstinacy, in the paths of anarchy and confusion—God forbid it should be like the building of Babel!”\textsuperscript{83}

Another correspondent likened the situation of the states to that of the biblical prodigal son. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus Christ tells the parable of a younger son who took his share of his father’s estate, went to a distant land, and wasted away his

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Pennsylvania Journal}, 30 June 1787.

\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette}, 22 August 1787, and \textit{Pennsylvania Journal}, 22 August 1787.
inheritance. He eventually returned to his father’s house, where his father welcomed him back into his household and gave him many gifts. In the August 15th edition of the Gazette, the following observation appeared:

> The conduct of the single states (says a Correspondent) has been like that of the prodigal Son in the Gospel. They have taken of the portion of their Independence, that should have been lodged for ever in Congress, and spent it in riotous living in a far country. They now return, burrened with deseases and dets, to their Father's house—that is, to a federal government—in which their independence and liberties received their existence. Their Father no sooner beheld signs of distress and contrition among them, than he opened his arms, to take them a second time under his protection. In a little while, it is to be hoped, the federal robe and ring will be put upon each of them—the fatted calf will be killed—and every city, village, farm-house and cabin resound with joy—since the States that were lost and dead are now found and made alive, in a VIGOROUS, EFFICIENT, NATIONAL GOVERNMENT.  

Biblical references were particularly effective, since the vast majority of Pennsylvanians would have been familiar with the stories of the prodigal son and Tower of Babel, and would have intuitively understood the correspondents’ inferences.

This tactic of creating a literary and emotional linkage between the Federal project and sacred texts is widely used even today. Indeed the Declaration of Independence –the heart of American secular religion– was also evoked in 1787. A patriotic July article discussing Fourth of July celebrations offered hope that the promises of the Declaration of Independence would be fulfilled through the work of the Convention, as the people could “expect with zeal and confidence, from the Federal Convention, a system of government adequate to the security and preservation of those rights, which were promulgated by the ever-memorable Declaration of Independency.”

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84 Pennsylvania Gazette, 15 August 1787.

85 Pennsylvania Journal, 15 September 1787.
An article appearing in early September expected the Convention delegates to adjourn soon, having completing their task to “establish [the United States’] liberty upon a permanent basis, as no time will ever cancel.”\(^86\) An excerpt of a letter from London printed in the *Pennsylvania Journal* and *Gazette* predicted that a favorable outcome of the Convention would make the country the envy of many nations and the destination of many emigrants looking for a better place. The letter’s author predicted: “Union alone will save you, and disappoint your enemies. If your convention gives you a strong government, and you have wisdom enough to adopt it you will half depopulate [England] by emigration, for thousands are waiting only to see whether a Shays will seize your Supreme power by force, of whether you will as an enlightened and free people chuse a Washington—a Hancock—or a Franklin, to be the legal head of your country.” The same letter stated: “The friends of America have been much distressed to hear of the evils which you have brought on yourselves by the weakness of your government . . . There can be no government without a head, and where a head consists of more than one person it is a monster.”\(^87\) The letter implied not only that the United States would fall apart without the necessary changes, but also that –just like in 1775-1783– the outcome of this American political contest mattered to more than just Americans.

The above-referenced Englishman was only one of many men whose letters, predicting either destruction or wonderful triumph, were printed for the public to read. A “gentleman in one of the most southern states to his friend in this city” envisioned that

\(^86\) *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 5 September 1787, and *Pennsylvania Herald*, 8 September 1787.

\(^87\) *Pennsylvania Journal*, 15 September 1787.
the Convention would “either form a glorious epocha in the history of America, or, by doing nothing, leave the disease to the violent remedy of curing itself.”\textsuperscript{88}

Either in conjunction with attacks on the Articles or standing alone, many newspaper pieces began to strongly advocate the adoption of a new system of government centered on a stronger national government. The current situation was decried as being thoroughly desperate and unacceptable. A long submission to the \textit{Freeman’s Journal} composed by an author known only as “Z” included the analysis that “our situation appears to be sufficiently desperate.”\textsuperscript{89} Such pieces often directly and strongly suggested that the only viable option to preserving or saving the Union was to abandon the idea of a loose confederation. One such piece, submitted by contributor “Reason”, was announced as “A THOUGHT for the Delegates to the CONVENTION to be held at Philadelphia.” Leaving no room to doubt that an entirely new system should be adopted, it stated that the “notion, therefore, of a government by confederation between several independent States, and each State still retaining its sovereignty, must be abandoned, and, with it, every attempt to amend the present articles of confederation.—No possible amendment will prevent a disunion, and, being wholly separated, we shall be easily broken.”\textsuperscript{90} Such sentiments were printed without qualification or comment. No newspaper printed similar opinions in defense of the Articles or in support of a weak central government. One piece suggested that the crisis of weak government facing the United States in the 1780s was more critical than the

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette}, 8 August 1787, and \textit{Pennsylvania Journal}, 8 August 1787.

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{Freeman’s Journal}, 16 May 1787.

\textsuperscript{90} \textit{Freeman’s Journal}, 11 April 1787.
events leading up to the American Revolution itself, stating that politicians who
questioned whether the people would be inclined to accept and adopt a new system of
government “do not know, or recollect, the good sense of the Americans, who, under
less pressing circumstances [emphasis added], in the year 1775 adopted the
resolutions of Congress, and in the year 1776 the Declaration of Independence. For
neither of these were the citizens of America half so well prepared, as they are now for
a vigorous federal government.”91

In addition to discussing the desperate need for a new system of government,
Philadelphia newspapers also printed many predictions of hope and despair in relation
to the Constitutional Convention. Some pieces chosen for publication focused only on
hope for the young nation’s future, while others often offered contrasting predictions
based on the outcome of the Philadelphia meeting. In other words, they foretold doom
for the United States if it kept on its present path or glorious success if the Convention
delegates succeeded in creating a new, stronger government. As “Reason” stated,
“[o]ur fate, as far as it can depend on human means, is committed to the Convention; as
they decide, so will our lot be.”92 The overwhelming majority of such pieces focused on
hope.

In addition to negative attitudes regarding the Articles of Confederation and
positive ones regarding the potential creation of a new governing document,
Philadelphia newspapers displayed their biases and political leanings in descriptions of

91 Pennsylvania Gazette, 8 August 1787.

92 Freeman’s Journal, 11 April 1787.
the Convention proceedings. Specifically, the press continually suggested that the
delegates were unanimous in their opinions and their actions.

Although the Convention did manage to produce a document that thirty-nine
delegates signed, the four months of deliberations were not characterized by peace and
unanimity. James Madison noted that “[t]here were severe struggles, moments of bitter
doubt and near-breakdown that the Convention had to overcome.”93 Delegates of large
states argued with those of small states; northern delegates disagreed with southern
delegates; and individual delegates held different views about state and federal powers.
The majority of these issues were worked out through discussion and compromise, but
the fact remains that the Convention did have disagreements and dissension. In fact,
some delegates left the Convention, and three of the men who stayed to the end
refused to sign the completed Constitution.94

Suggesting that the Convention possessed a harmonious atmosphere, the
newspapers insinuated that the various states had interacted agreeably in the past and
continued to do so at the Convention. The Pennsylvania Journal reprinted a letter from
the Massachusetts Centinel to that effect. “An American” wrote that “[t]he Convention, I
am told, have unanimously agreed on a system for the future government of the United

93 James Madison, Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787 (Athens,

94 Modern historians have a much better knowledge of the true level of agreement
than did newspaper publishers and editors of the time. Scholars now have the benefit
of insiders’ views and notes on the Convention. The most notable of these are James
Madison’s carefully taken notes of the proceedings. Edmund Randolph, George Mason
and Elbridge Gerry “declined giving it the sanction of their names.” Madison, Notes on
States.95 Although the editors of both these newspapers gladly printed this alleged bit of news, one is left to wonder where this information came from in light of the secrecy of the Convention and the fact that the delegates did not finally agree on a finished document and adjourn the Convention until a month after the letter was reprinted in Philadelphia. The Freeman’s Journal also prematurely announced an alleged agreement among the delegates, reporting on August 1st that the Convention, which had the “universal confidence” of the people, had “resolved upon the measures necessary to discharge their important trust.”96

The Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser chose to reprint an article from New York that actually interpreted the secretive nature of the Convention as a positive sign. “The profound secrecy hitherto observed by the convention, we cannot help considering as a happy omen, as it demonstrates that the spirit of party, on any great and essential point, cannot have arisen to any great height.—No other country, perhaps, can exhibit such an illustrious scene as is now displayed on this continent.”97 In other words, the article suggested that the delegates’ silence was an indicator that factions had not developed within the Convention and that the delegates were in agreement on major questions of government.

95 Pennsylvania Journal, 15 August 1787

96 Freeman’s Journal, 1 August 1787.

97 The importance of the fact that this is from New York will become apparent when reading the later section on the New York delegation. Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser, 22 August 1787.
In mid-July, an article appeared that epitomized the Philadelphia press’s campaign to project the image of a unanimous Convention. The following excerpt appeared in several Philadelphia newspapers:

Great is the unanimity we hear, that prevails in the Convention, upon all great federal subjects, that it has been proposed to call the room in which they assemble UNANIMITY HALL.—In the beginning of the late war, the citizens of America looked up to a federal government, only for safety and protection: they were then powerful and successful at home and abroad. As soon as they set up the idol of State Sovereignty, they forgot the rock from whence they derived their freedom and independence, and confined their allegiance and affections only to their state government: and hence the distress, confusion, debts and disgrace of the United States. Calamities have at last opened their eyes, and they again turn them to a federal government for safety and protection.98

This sentiment employed the use of hyperbole to call to mind the public relations tactics utilized in the coverage of the Paxton Boys Incident, the Regulator Rebellion, and Shays’s Rebellion; it suggested that all the delegates, and that all reasonable people, were in agreement. It is a testament to the prominence and influence of the Philadelphia press that this observation was reprinted by more than two dozen newspapers nationwide within a month.99

The Philadelphia newspapers worked hard to portray an image of unanimity at the Convention in order to strengthen public support for the measures adopted by that body. Through choices of what types of information and articles to print or to suppress, they worked to convince their readership to share their views. Suggesting a wide

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98 Pennsylvania Gazette, 18 July 1787; Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser, 19 July 1787; Pennsylvania Journal, 21 July 1787.

consensus among the distinguished (even heroic) delegates in Philadelphia lent significant force to the Convention’s mission.

Perhaps the clearest example of the Philadelphia newspapers’ campaign for the Convention and its work can be found not in what these papers published, but in what they chose not to publish. The publications rarely included any opinions against the idea of a new constitution, nor did they publish any accounts of, or speculations on, dissension within the Convention itself. This lack of coverage is epitomized in the fact that none of the papers even *mentioned* the early departure of the New York delegation from the Convention.

New York was then, as it is today, one of the republic’s largest and most influential states. It was also one of the states largely responsible for the calling of the Philadelphia Convention. The state’s delegation to the Convention consisted of Alexander Hamilton, already one of the nation’s prominent statesmen, Robert Yates, a state supreme court judge and former Revolutionary politician, and John Lansing, a young lawyer and politician. These three men did not share a common perspective on the Convention, its rightful duties, or the decisions of its delegates. Hamilton, a strong nationalist, became increasingly frustrated by the anti-nationalist views of Yates and Lansing. Outvoted by the other two, Hamilton left the Convention on June 29. Finding their views to be in a small minority and “because of their belief that they were unwarranted in supporting action taken in excess of their instructions,”[100] Yates and

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Lansing left the Convention on July 10. After their departure, Hamilton returned periodically. Hamilton was unable to cast official votes on the behalf of New York by himself, but ultimately he did sign the document and give it his individual approval.\footnote{101}

Philadelphia newspapers did not mention the facts that Yates and Lansing left the Convention and never returned nor that Hamilton left and came back, although that was exactly the type of news usually reported in the papers of the time. Notices of the arrivals of entire delegations or prominent individual delegates to the Convention were frequently seen in the papers during the weeks leading up to the event and in its first weeks of operation. The May 16th edition of the\textit{Packet and Daily Advertiser}, for example, noted that representatives from New York and New Jersey had arrived in town.\footnote{102} Papers also printed (often several times) entire lists of those delegates appointed, those already arrived in Philadelphia, and all those present at the Convention. No mention, however, was made of the fact that the New York delegates left Philadelphia and the Convention. This glaring omission makes sense only in the context of the press’s consistent and conscious efforts to convey to the public an image of wide consensus at “unanimity hall.”

It should be noted that a few negative references to New York can be found in the Philadelphia papers. It is important to understand, however, the context in which these references appeared. As discussed, no mention was made of the New York delegation to the Convention being unhappy with or leaving the proceedings. No

\footnote{101} A majority of a state’s delegation needed to vote for the document in order for it to be officially endorsed by that state. Because two of New York’s three delegates were not there, it was impossible for the state to officially endorse the document.

\footnote{102} \textit{Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser}, 16 May 1787.
suggestions that the New York public might have been against the Convention or been wary of its intentions were made either. The few negative references that can be found implied that there was a small minority of politicians in the state that were against the objectives of the Convention. In July, the *Packet and Daily Advertiser* stated that:

> It is currently reported and believed, that his excellency governor CLINTON has, in public reprobated the appointment of the convention and predicted a mischievous issue of that measure. His observations are said to be to this effect.—That the present confederation is, in itself, equal to the purposes of the union: —That the appointment of a convention is calculated to impress the people with an idea of evils which do not exist:— That if either nothing should be proposed by the convention, of if what they should propose should not be agreed to, the one or the other would tend to beget despair in the public mind; and that, in all probability, the result of their deliberations, whatever it might be, would only serve to throw the community into confusion.\textsuperscript{103}

After making this observation, the *Packet and Daily Advertiser*’s editor offered nine refutations of Governor George Clinton’s alleged opinions. These challenges, which “naturally occur to every considerate and impartial man,” included a simple statement that the Articles of Confederation were in no way adequate to the needs of the Union and a claim that Clinton’s behavior was inappropriate for a public official and showed him to be more interested in his own power than in the public good.\textsuperscript{104}

Possible opposition from New York officials was blatantly condemned in the *Gazette* as well. The August 22\textsuperscript{nd} edition contained a reprint of an article from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, stating that several influential figures from New York were engaged in “nefarious schemes” of opposing federal government reform. The article assured readers that these schemers were no cause of concern, as all of America was

\textsuperscript{103} *Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser*, 26 July 1787.

\textsuperscript{104} *Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser*, 26 July 1787.
united against them. A warning was issued, however, to the influential New Yorkers in question: “tremble ye workers of iniquity, and no longer oppose the salvation of your country, lest speedy destruction come upon you, and you fall into the pit which your own hands have dugged.”\textsuperscript{105}

The glaring failure to report on the departure of the New York delegates from the Convention and the conscious mission of the Philadelphia press to portray unanimity at the Convention naturally brings into question the reporting on Rhode Island. The Philadelphia newspapers did not ignore Rhode Island’s disaffection with the Convention as they ignored New York’s. In fact, they were quite prolific in their coverage of dissension in Rhode Island and in their criticism of that state. The outrage directed at Rhode Island was based on the fact that Rhode Islanders had blocked several pieces of national legislation from passage, that they had declined to send delegates to the Constitutional Convention, and that the state appeared to be in a state of general chaos. Historian Carol Sue Humphrey explained that “Rhode Island’s reputation had suffered during the 1780s because of its refusal to ratify the proposed continental impost and for its paper money laws.”\textsuperscript{106} This reputation declined further in the summer of 1787, as Rhode Islanders suffered continual attacks in the press for their refusal to send delegates to the Convention.

As negotiations continued at the Constitutional Convention, numerous editions of the Philadelphia newspapers repeatedly published derogatory opinions on the state of

\textsuperscript{105} Pennsylvania Gazette, 22 August 1787.

Rhode Island and mocked its “antifederal” disposition. The state was subjected to a variety of epithets and statements of blame. The Gazette, for example, declared that Rhode Island should be cast out of the Union and forgotten because of its obstinacy, perverseness, arrogance and self-importance. The Pennsylvania Journal called the state “delinquent.” The Freeman’s Journal observed that “Rhode Island seems to have run the gauntlet of contempt through all the States; her conduct has been severely reprobated, and the most reproachful epithets bestowed on her.”

The Philadelphia press also expressed the hope that Rhode Island’s behavior would not ruin the Constitutional Convention and that it would cease bringing dishonor to the United States. Several articles expressed hopes that Rhode Island would be removed from the Union or absorbed into the neighboring states. The July editions of all of the newspapers carried reports of various Fourth of July celebration festivities. All reports of toasts made at these celebrations included expressions of hope that Rhode

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107 Freeman’s Journal, 18 July 1787, and Pennsylvania Journal, 14 April 1787.
109 Pennsylvania Journal, 30 May 1787.
110 Freeman’s Journal, 18 July 1787.
111 Pennsylvania Journal, 16 May 1787.
112 “Extract of a letter from a gentleman in one of the most southern states to his friend in this city.” Pennsylvania Journal, 8 August 1787.
Island would discontinue its habit of creating problems and would cease to be such an embarrassment to the United States.\textsuperscript{113}

While writing scathing reports of Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders, the Philadelphia press took care to point out that there were, in fact, some sane people in that state. Reports about these people and letters written by them were frequently published. These reports furthered the assertion that since Rhode Island was too far gone to see its own interest clearly, the only hope of saving Rhode Island stood with the Constitutional Convention. The \textit{Packet and Daily Advertiser} quoted a letter from a gentleman from Rhode Island (writing to a recipient in Philadelphia), who expressed hope that “the other states, for their own safety, will be obliged to take the government from us and divide it.”\textsuperscript{114} The \textit{Pennsylvania Journal} and the \textit{Gazette} both published an extract of a letter from a Rhode Islander with the desperate claim that “[w]e are very anxious to hear what the Convention are doing—for them we look for our political redemption.—Indeed our only hope is in them to save us from destruction.”\textsuperscript{115}

This willingness, even eagerness, of the newspapers to crucify and mock Rhode Island represents a paradox: if the papers intentionally left out information about New York’s delegates to preserve the facade of unanimity at the Convention, why would they openly publicize and emphasize the dissension of Rhode Islanders? Why mention one instance of disagreement with the Convention and not another? The answer is likely

\textsuperscript{113} See, for example, \textit{Pennsylvania Journal}, 18 July 1787, and \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette}, 18 July 1787.

\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser}, 19 May 1787.

practical and political. First, Rhode Island’s dissension was too large to ignore. As noted, some of the earliest coverage of the Convention came in the form of simple lists of delegates who had been appointed or who had arrived. It could not be hidden that Rhode Island boycotted the Convention from the start. Additionally, Rhode Island’s tendency to act apart from the rest of the states and its rather chaotic state of affairs had been growing issues throughout the 1780s.\textsuperscript{116} The Philadelphia press was merely continuing to report on events and opinions surrounding an issue they had been dealing with for years. Its conduct during the summer of 1787 merely confirmed preexisting judgments that Rhode Island was dysfunctional.

This, in fact, is why coverage of Rhode Island’s opposition to the Federal project served the purposes of newspaper editors and proprietors, rather than undermining them. The Philadelphia press chose to report often and at length on the dissension of Rhode Island, but not New York, because Rhode Island had already established itself in the minds of Americans as a laughingstock and an outcast. Trying to keep the Convention from succeeding by refusing to attend was presented as the latest in a series of incidents in which Rhode Island refused to support measures for the good of the nation as a whole. Portraying Rhode Island as a holdout in a country full of Federalist states enhanced the legitimacy and wisdom of Federalist efforts.\textsuperscript{117} It was a tactic designed to undercut opposition; indeed, states and citizens had to be concerned that speaking out against the Convention would somehow place them in the same

\textsuperscript{116} Humphrey, \textit{The Press of the Young Republic}, 4-8.

\textsuperscript{117} Alexander, \textit{The Selling of the Constitutional Convention}, 94.
category with “petty” Rhode Island. This, in turn, explains why suppressing the news of opposition in New York and dissention within the New York delegation was so crucial. The political and cultural stature of New York would have lent credence and legitimacy to the doubts and criticism expressed by Rhode Islanders.

In many ways the adoption of the Constitution was the ending of an era. Through clear denouncement of the Articles of Confederation, strong calls for a new system of government, continued suggestions of unanimity within the Convention, and failure to mention dissent in the form of departure by New York’s Convention delegation, the Philadelphia newspapers continued their habitual presentation of East-coast concerns and perspectives. The established eastern areas already held political dominance in many ways, as demonstrated by clashes such as the three rebellions previously discussed. Their power was effectively challenged, however, in situations like Shays’s Rebellion. The new Constitution allowed for eastern dominance of a national system, one in which the government could more easily override western opinions and suppress western unrest. Citizens in each state could expect a new national system to provide for more representation from the East than the West and to afford more resources —economic, political, and military— to employ quickly and decisively against possible challenges to authority.

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118 Pennsylvania Gazette, 8 August 1787, and Pennsylvania Journal, 8 August 1787.
Analyzing print media content allows scholars to study attitudes and opinions, a type of valuable insight less easily afforded by looking at many types of “hard” sources (census records, court documents, and other official reports). Newspapers, indeed, are a valuable tool in understanding the culture of an era, not just for their face-value content, but also for the hidden indications they contain of cultural norms and assumptions, political tensions, and class divisions. Political Scientist Richard L. Merritt has analyzed symbols, or words, printed in colonial newspapers to examine the idea of a distinct American political community in the eighteenth century. Merritt notes that the intent of an author’s words is irrelevant; the true importance lies in the effect of a communication on its audience. Merritt found that the newspapers’ devoting more space to colonial symbols and events and more frequently describing readers as “Americans,” rather than “subjects” or “colonists,” produced a critical effect, namely that of readers perceiving themselves as a distinctly American community.\(^{119}\) In this study of Philadelphia newspapers, the choices editors and publishers made in “framing” the events they reported on had an effect of revealing, confirming, and perpetuating a bias between groups of Americans.

Although traditional and popular, the image of a unified early American populace falters when examined with legitimate, firsthand sources that reveal the true worldviews

of eighteenth-century Americans. Printers and publishers’ storyline and word choices contributed to an atmosphere of distinct cultural bias against those living on the periphery of American society, in western regions. This bias was also conveyed and displayed through omissions, oversights, and misrepresentations. With the coverage of the era’s culminating event, the Constitutional Convention, these men used these tactics and others in their portrayal of a more centralized government (in the East) as a positive development.

Although newspaper evidence demonstrates that readers of eighteenth-century Philadelphia newspapers received biased accounts of these four events, the true motivations of the men behind these publications remain unclear. John K. Alexander notes that the editors of a New York newspaper later admitted to turning their publication into a “propaganda instrument” while covering the Constitutional Convention.120 Unfortunately, there is no way to know if the majority of instances of visible bias (in word choices, storyline omissions, misstatements of facts, and so forth) were the products of a deliberate attempt to create “wedge” issues and highlight the cultural gap and political enmity between East and West, or whether the opinions expressed were more a subconscious manifestation of an existing eastern hostility to westerners.

Gordon Wood, and other observers who portray an image of unanimity in Revolutionary America do so by ignoring, glossing over, or dismissing the growing and threatening conflicts between East and West; conflicts that eighteenth-century Americans themselves —both easterners and westerners—complained, lamented, and

griped about in newspapers, public assemblies and legislatures, and even fought over on battlefields, such as Alamance Creek. Westerners felt that eastern control was an overwhelming force in their lives, and easterners felt that western savagery and opposition were an intolerable force which threatened their way of life, political institutions, culture, and economic well-being. This study illustrates just how pervasive this contrast was in the minds of easterners in Philadelphia; how central a feature of early American culture they considered it to be.
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