

Introduction

The *Americans* will have no *Center of Union* among them, and no *Common Interest* to pursue, when the Power and Government of *England* are finally removed. Moreover, when the Intersections and Divisions of their Country by great Bays of the Sea, and by vast Rivers, Lakes, and Ridges of Mountains; – and above all, when those immense inland Regions, beyond the Back Settlements, which are still unexplored, are taken into the Account, they form the highest Probability that the *Americans* never can be united . . . under any Species of Government whatever. Their Fate seems to be – A DISUNITED PEOPLE, till the End of Time.

–Josiah Tucker (1781)¹

What then is the American, this new man? . . . He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.

–J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1782)²

America was born at the very moment that the definition of “nation” was being reimaged. In an age in which such a significant word was adopting new meanings, citizens in the newly established United States cultivated novel forms of national politics and federal belonging. This new sense of

¹ Josiah Tucker, *Cui Bono? Or, an Inquiry, What Benefits Can Arise Either to the English or the Americans, the French, Spaniards, or Dutch, from the Greatest Victories, or Successes, in the Present War, Being a Series of Letters, Addressed to Monsieur Necker, Late Controller General of the Finances of France* (London: T. Cadell, 1781), 117–119. (Emphasis in original.)

² J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782; London: James Magee, 1783), 51–53.

political order, they believed, would introduce a stable and consistent national society. America was destined, in Thomas Paine's famous words, "to begin government at the right end." This was a tumultuous process of anticipation, angst, and anxiety. Casting allegiance to a broader government and conceptualizing a larger culture was a trial-and-error project that produced as much disappointment as it did success. To form "America" as a political body, many believed it was first necessary to define "Americans" as a people.³

Among those most concerned about national identities was printer Noah Webster. In 1787, only four years after the Treaty of Paris confirmed America's independence, Webster bemoaned how "the people of every country, but our own . . . bear a patriotic preference to their own laws and national character." America's troubles stemmed from the fact that they possessed "no pride in the glorious distinction of freemen, which elevates the American beggar above the despots of Asia." Two years later, while attempting to introduce a distinctly "American" language, he wrote, "every engine should be employed to render the people of this country national, to call their attachments home to their own country, and to inspire them with the pride of national character." To Webster, the lack of this identity was the cause of, and the implementation of it the remedy to, all of America's problems. In order to "fix the commencement of national corruption," he wrote in 1787, "we must first prove the national character throughout." These ideological seeds bore political fruits. The primary reason for the federal Constitution, he explained, was because "it was found that our national character was sinking in the opinion of foreign nations." He happily quoted David S. Bogart in 1790 that an education based on America's exceptionalism would better "inform us . . . of the distinguishing traits in [our] national character."⁴

Webster was far from alone in his anxiety. James Madison argued in his *Federalist* essays that a major reason for America's struggles was the "want of a due sense of national character." He queried, "What has not America lost by her want of character with foreign nations; and how many errors and follies would she not have avoided?" An anonymous poem found in

³ Thomas Paine, "Common Sense" (1776), in *Paine: Political Writings*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–46, p. 35. (Emphasis in original.)

⁴ *The American Museum*, October 1787, LCP. Noah Webster, *Dissertations on the English Language: with Notes, Historical and Critical* (1789), in *Creating an American Culture, 1775–1800: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Eve Kornfeld (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 102–108, p. 106. *The American Museum*, September 1787, December 1787, December 1790, LCP.

The Columbian – another early American magazine focused on celebrating and defining “America” – wrote, “a love of liberty, a spirit of enterprise, fortitude in difficulties, and a military turn of mind, are conspicuous traits in the American character.” And neither were Americans the only ones to address such a dilemma: as no less a figure than Rousseau had proclaimed, “the first rule which we have to follow is that of national character: every people has, or must have, a character; if it lacks one, we must start by endowing it with one.” To advance to the status of other successful nations, America must discover and embrace its unique “character.”⁵

Yet conceptions of “character” were inherently problematic. Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* defined it both as “personal qualities” and as a “particular constitution of the mind.” Webster’s own dictionary, not completed until 1828, defined it as “the peculiar qualities, impressed by nature or habit on a person, which distinguish him from others.” Thus, to presume a *national* character is to assume both homogeneity and consistency within a larger group of people – a belief that the entire nation shares a “particular constitution of the mind” or “peculiar qualities” despite geographic, economic, gender, or racial differences. Such a belief promised to overlook and downplay distinctions within the broader culture, whether consciously or not. As one historian has noted, any depiction of a “national character” is an imaginative construction and “requires the constant suspension of disbelief because it is at once defined as general and as a distinctive concept of identity.” This was a task bound for contestation.⁶

This was especially the case in America, where diversity was perhaps the defining feature of the early republic. Not only did geographic distance promulgate drastically competing visions of society, but deeply contextual indicators like class, race, and gender instilled varying experiences for the many residents of the new nation. Much of this diversity was masked by a fractured print culture that limited exposure to these contrasting people and voices, but it was also systematically ignored through a willful

⁵ James Madison, “Federalist #63,” in *The Federalist*, ed. Cass R. Sunstein (1788; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 411–420, p. 411. *The Columbian*, October 1786, LCP. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract, or Principles of Political Right* (1762), quoted in Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), 75.

⁶ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Vol. 1 (London, 1766), cf. “character.” Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (Hartford, CT: Sidney’s Press, 1828), cf. “character.” Martin Brückner, *The Geographic Revolution in Early America: Maps, Literacy, and National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 171.

suspension of knowledge that enabled elites to imagine that they could conceptualize the best interests for all American residents. The very absence of this shared cultural character was what drove the deep anxiety to create one in the first place.⁷

These national debates had a transnational context. Ideas concerning national belonging underwent revision throughout the Atlantic world during the eighteenth century. Swiss jurist Emer de Vattel's *The Law of Nations* (1758), one of the earliest and most influential attempts to capture the shifting meaning of political bodies on the cusp of the Age of Revolutions, exemplified the nebulous relationship between society and government. "Moral persons who live together in a natural society," Vattel explained, were expected to construct sovereign governments that were based on "the law of nations" and also reflected a society's "state of nature." That is, political structures were meant to adhere to international legal codes as well as fulfill society's inherent purpose; law was exterior to but also dependent upon the body of the governed. "Whenever any form of government becomes destructive" to these inalienable rights, Thomas Jefferson penned in the Declaration of Independence, "it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it." The idea that national allegiance and federal structures were malleable was a revolutionary concept, and it led to both political upheaval and cultural anxiety over the tenuous balance between government and society.⁸

This tension was amplified with modernity's democratic promise. This new political idea introduced an added dimension of representative government as citizens expected those who govern them to properly reflect their own interests. When a nation is meant to match the ideas, assumptions, and cultures of those within its borders, then conceptions of that government, and the principles it is meant to promulgate, are essential to its political practice. The evolution of the idea of nations from something

⁷ For competing accounts of the different regional cultures in place since the colonization period, see David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Daniel Richter, *Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁸ Emer de Vattel, *The Law of Nations, or, Principles of the Law of Nature, Applied to the Conduct and Affairs of Nations and Sovereigns* (London: J. Newberry, 1760), 5–7. Thomas Jefferson, "The Declaration of Independence," in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), 235–241, p. 235. See also David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Eric Slauter, "Rights," in Edward G. Gray and Jane Kamensky, *The Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 447–464.

that was inherently stable and outside the reach of the populace to something that was manmade and culturally constructed – or deconstructed – by humans through political free-will transformed the exercise of nationalism: rather than being something that vindicated the government body, it was now a tool through which citizens could assent to or protest against their national institutions. In short, nationalism became a political practice fraught with political possibilities.⁹

Given that United States independence came at the cusp of what Benedict Anderson called the origins of “imagined political communities,” the development of American nationalism has been a common focus for scholars. Yet while historians have dissected and interred the notion of a homogenous identity, many have perpetuated the nationalist assumption that correlates cultural nationalism with the political nation-state. In other words, scholars have retained a connection between nationalist expression and the federal government. However, the unexamined combination of the two is a contemporary phenomenon, and it merely perpetuates an ideological construction that was certainly present, but far from dominant, in these early-modern debates. Indeed, a “nation” during this period could, at various times, describe a community, a state, a mindset, and of course, a federal body. It was hardly ever systematic and was rarely consistent. Nations emerged both within and without a federal state, and states often emerged within a coherent nationality.¹⁰

This was a common problem throughout the Atlantic empires during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Britain, three nations (England, Scotland, and Ireland) produced proud and competing conceptions of the “nation” within a single nation-state. In Germany, numerous independent political bodies that were stretched across different empires and sovereignties struggled to find a cultural form of nationalism that they still held in

⁹ See David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 199–200. For the debate over deciphering a nation’s interests, see Gordon S. Wood, “Interests and Disinterestedness in the Making of the Constitution,” in *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 127–170.

¹⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 1991), 11–12. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 6–7. See also Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence*, 19–20. For the general trajectories of nationalisms within these various national contexts, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Hagen Schulze, ed., *The Course of German Nationalism: From Frederick the Great to Bismark, 1763–1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France*.

common. In France, an energetic and deadly rejection of a particular form of nation gave way to another – and then another. Nationalities were more often divorced from their political sovereignty than married to it.

Further, the very dichotomy between “civic” and “ethnic” nationalisms, categories which have been used to explain Western political development, has been challenged of late. “Civic” nationalism typically focused on citizenship, political rights, and individual obligations within a broader federal body, and had often been associated with France, Britain, and the Netherlands. “Ethnic” nationalism, on the other hand, often referred to myths of historical ancestry and the organizational power of common cultures in the face of polyglot empires, and was embodied in Germany, Italy, and Russia. Given its British political lineage and disparate cultural communities, America has traditionally been understood to fit within the “civic” category. Yet recent work has disintegrated the distinctions between these two categories, as scholars have located strands of ethnic capital in Western countries and sophisticated civic commodification in Eastern nations. This book will show similar convergences in the early American political experience. New Englanders at the start of the nineteenth century, for instance, appealed to both hereditary and natural rights as they tried to conceive of a national body capable of representing their interests. In tracing the inchoate and inconsistent process of nationalism during the Age of Revolutions, the United States thus provides a potent case study for this broader phenomenon.¹¹

American Nationalisms examines how this process took place in three specific contexts – Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina – between the conclusion of the American Revolution in 1783 through the Nullification Crisis in 1833. Though some historians have argued that the “American Revolution, in short, gave birth to whatever sense of nationhood and national purpose Americans have had,” nationalism was never a set of static, self-dependent principles that were agreed upon by a majority of citizens. Rather, conceptions of national identity – and even the “nation” itself – varied dramatically during the early republic period, and a homogenized understanding distorts a dynamic and diverse reality. American nationalisms should therefore be understood as plural. These theoretical constructions of nationalism were often tethered to personal backgrounds, regional cultures, parochial concerns, and localized political

¹¹ For the scholarly challenge to the “ethnic” and “civic” division in nationalist studies, see the various essays in Timothy Baycroft and Mark Hewitson, eds., *What Is a Nation? Europe 1789–1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

systems. While interregional and international connections indeed influenced many ideas, events, and policies, they were still interpreted, appropriated, and understood within a predominantly provincial framework. They also went through constant revision. New England was home to the earliest formulations of a sectionalized nationalism that critiqued federal control, only to witness a reversal decades later when they condemned South Carolina for doing the same thing. By focusing on the local culture for these productions, cultural continuity is more easily comprehensible.¹²

Further, by contextualizing these debates with those that were taking place across the Atlantic Ocean, both the unique and concomitant elements of America's political discourse take on a new light. These foreign examples are not used as determinative sources, but as a reminder of the porous boundaries between nations during the Age of Revolutions. Thinkers from this period may not have exemplified a cohesive "republic of letters" assumed by a previous generation of transnational historians, but they were responding to many of the same cultural tensions that urged change at the eve of modernity. Developments in Europe, the Caribbean, and Latin America provided touchstones, examples, and threats to America's sense of self.¹³

It is impossible to find examples that perfectly represent these broader cultural tensions. It is especially misguided to posit cultural elites – who are most often white, educated, and male – as indicative of wider societal ideas.

¹² Gordon Wood, *The American Revolution: A History* (New York, 2003), xiii. Bernard Bailyn similarly claimed that the "American Revolution not only created the American political nation but molded permanent characteristics of the culture that would develop within it." Bernard Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence* (New York, Vintage: 1992), 200.

¹³ As Rachel Hope Cleves has written, "early national citizens viewed themselves as participants in a transnational community, drawn together by sinews of trade, migration, and information." Rachel Hope Cleves, *The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3. See also Joyce Chaplin, "Expansion and Exceptionalism in Early American History," *Journal of American History* 89 (March 2003): 1431–1455; most especially, Chaplin notes how an Atlantic framework helps the scholar to avoid historiographical exceptionalism because "an illusion of uniqueness" is most often the result of "ignorance of what is going on in parallel fields" (1433). Rosemarie Zagari similarly wrote that it "challenges the [early American] field's basic organizing principle: the primacy of the nation-state." Zagari, "The Significance of the 'Global Turn' for the Early American Republic: Globalization in the Age of Nation-Building," *Journal of the Early Republic* 31 (Spring 2011): 1–37, p. 5. For the broader Atlantic context of these national discussions, see, especially, Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); David Armitage, "The Declaration of Independence and International Law," *William and Mary Quarterly* 59 (January 2002): 39–64.

Historians of the past decades have successfully unearthed the practices, beliefs, and anxieties of everyday Americans through a variety of sophisticated approaches. *American Nationalisms*, however, will focus on a series of individuals and groups who, while not especially illustrative of the common citizen, are particularly adept at displaying the concerns and apprehensions of political belonging during the Age of Revolutions. Their ideas concerning the “nation” were born out of a particular political culture that was rooted in a specific societal context. Therefore, their words depicted the state cultures that simultaneously created and were created by their efforts. These individuals sought to speak for state and national bodies, an activity that required imaginative creativity and contextual sensitivity. Tracing the intricacies of this dialogue, then, while not able to capture the entirety of the early American experience, still reveals many of the deeper cultural underpinnings. Determining the mindset of a larger range of people in early America is indeed a very worthwhile project and has been ably mined by the most recent generation of nationalist scholarship, but for this book to do so would require fundamentally different interpretive and research methods. The focus of this study is to capture the *process* through which those who attempted to think nationally (and internationally) coped with these new problems posed by an important shift in American politics.¹⁴

The particular case studies chosen for this project are highlighted for a number of reasons. First, they were individuals who left textual remnants of their ideas. People who did not write as much are no less important, of course, for history in general or nationalist cultivations in particular. Yet for comparative purposes, it is helpful to draw from individuals who consciously participated in a political discourse captured in the evolving print culture. Further, those who receive critical engagement here, from Benjamin Rush to John C. Calhoun and from Thomas Branagan to James Forten, were either participants in or critics of a particularly nationalist dialogue that consciously engaged America’s role as a federal body within a broader Atlantic network

¹⁴ As Daniel Walker Howe has explained, a study of political culture looks at “not only the explicit [political] analyses and proposals . . . but also the mood, metaphors, values, and style” that represents much more than just political action or belief. Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 1–2. See also J. C. D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660–1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). For works on nationalism that skillfully incorporate common Americans’ perspectives, see David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).

of nation-states. None of them were fully representative of their local affiliations, let alone their respective states, and though they attempted to depict a homogenized American “culture,” they failed on that front, as well. But they were each influential to varying degrees, and what they do reveal is a process of struggling with national and cultural questions that was shared by a much larger number of individuals. It is in that attempt, rather than their finished products, that make them important to this story.

Nationalism was more than just cultural rhetoric, a political by-product, or a partisan tool, though it certainly played all of those roles at various times. More than that, it was also a hermeneutical springboard for thinking about community, a cultural framework for viewing political union, and an ideological instigator for policy and action. Individuals struggled to define an American nation just as they sought to implement national policies. This book, then, focuses on how specific individuals in particular contexts grappled to define America, and how the resulting definitions had tangible consequences. How one conceived America to be, or how one conceived America *should* be, led directly to political conflict and sowed the seeds for later sectional discord. Indeed, tracing the evolving notions of national union connects the “legacies” of the Revolution with the “origins” of the Civil War. How did South Carolina politicians evolve from condemning the Hartford Convention’s sectionalism in 1815 to cultivating their own state-based federalism less than two decades later? While a wide array of elements or, as one historian put it, “catalysts” factored into how distinct regions within the United States moved culturally apart from each other during the early nineteenth century, a growing chasm between how various states understood “nationalism” and “union” was a crucial component. In order to understand national fracturing, then, it is important to chart the early contestations over national belonging.¹⁵

¹⁵ Edward Ayers has argued for historians to become more conscious of cultural “catalysts” for sectionalism in *What Caused the Civil War: Reflections on the South and Southern History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 133, 138. See also Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789–1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 3–5. For nationalism as cultural rhetoric, see Jay Fliegeman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, National Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993). For nationalism as a political by-product, see Richard Beeman, Edward C. Carter, and Stephen Botein, eds., *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). For nationalism as a partisan tool, see Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*.

There is a large and expansive literature on nationalism, both on the practice and theory in general as well as the American experience in particular. No book has been more influential than Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, which argued that the growth of print culture in the mid-eighteenth century introduced "unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars," which he posited as a development that laid the foundations for modern conceptions of nationalism. "The convergence of capitalism and print technology," he wrote, "created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation." The American Revolution was the first movement to take advantage of this development and served, as Anderson put it, as a "Creole pioneer" for the rest of modernity to follow. This connection of print culture and nationalism, what Anthony Smith has termed "classical modernism," has become the standard framework for understanding the rise of nationalist sentiments in the Western hemisphere.¹⁶

Yet this general thesis has been challenged of late. Understanding the nation as a collective reflection of modernity, some historians have argued, oversells the success of nationalist propaganda. It is more fruitful, explained Prasenjit Duara, to "view national identity as founded upon fluid relationships; it thus both resembles and is interchangeable with other political identities." Any conception of "nationalism," Duara continued, is "rarely the nationalism of the nation, but rather represents the site where very different views of the nation contest and negotiate with each other." Similarly, Rogers Brubaker has argued that "we should refrain from only seeing nations as substantial, enduring collectivities," but to instead "think about nationalism without nations" in order to see "nation as a category of practice, nationhood as an institutionalized cultural and political form, and nationness as a contingent event or happening." Nationalism, then, is a form of "practice" of print culture, not a result. Other historians have even questioned the centrality of print to the construction of nationalism. Such arguments force historians to

¹⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 44, 46, 47. Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 3. Nationalism in Eastern contexts has taken a somewhat different approach; see Kosaku Yoshino, ed., *Consuming Ethnicity and Nationalism: Asian Experiences* (Richmond, VA: Curzon Press, 1999).