A Frontier Federalist and the War of 1812

The fact that the great majority (fourteen out of sixteen) of Pennsylvania's delegation in the House of Representatives voted in favor of the War of 1812 is apt to be misleading, particularly since the two dissenting votes were cast by members elected from Philadelphia. Far to the west in Washington County, however, there was a strong Federalist center which has been generally overlooked. These Federalists not only opposed the War of 1812, but formed one of the strongest nuclei for the later coalition against the Democratic Party. From an early date the leader of this group was Thomas McKean Thompson McKennan of Washington, Pennsylvania.¹

McKennan's political career offers a valuable thread by which to trace the evolution of the Whigs in Western Pennsylvania. After being graduated from Washington College in 1810, McKennan studied law for a time, and then in 1815 secured his first political post as Deputy Attorney General of Washington County. During the next fifteen years he played a leading role in the efforts to organize an effective opposition against the Democrats. McKennan's efficiency and leadership were rewarded by his election to Congress as an "ardent Whig" in 1831.² His success marked the first real break in the Democrat's control of southwestern Pennsylvania.

Re-elected for the next four terms, McKennan remained in the House of Representatives until 1840, when he served as a presidential elector for William Henry Harrison and John Tyler on the Whig ticket of that year. In May, 1842, he was appointed to serve out a

¹ The writer wishes to acknowledge his debt to Charles M. Ewing, Director of the Washington and Jefferson Historical Collections, who called his attention to the manuscript printed below.

Whig vacancy in the House of Representatives and was particularly active in securing the upward revision of the tariff later in that same year. McKennan closed out his term in 1843, after he helped push through a $25,000 subsidy bill for the construction of an experimental telegraph line from Washington, D.C., to Baltimore by one Samuel F. B. Morse.

During these years McKennan developed close friendships with such National Republican and Whig leaders as John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, William Henry Harrison, General Zachary Taylor, and Daniel Webster. In 1844, Clay brought strong pressure to bear on McKennan to offer himself as Whig candidate for governor in Pennsylvania, arguing that the move would insure his own election as president. McKennan, however, declined to accede to Clay’s overtures (a refusal that Clay later used to help explain his own defeat) and turned his attention to the development of various economic and educational projects. In 1830 he had been a vigorous “promoter,” and later a director, of the Monongahela Bridge Company; after his retirement from active politics he became the “chief promoter” and the first president of the ill-fated Hempfield Railroad Company, which planned a line to connect Wheeling, West Virginia, and Washington, Pennsylvania, with the Pennsylvania system.3

It was during the press of this latter venture that President Millard Fillmore, acting with the “unanimous” approval of his cabinet, asked McKennan to serve as Secretary of the Interior.4 Despite his strong inclination to decline, McKennan finally accepted the nomination and took the oath of office on August 16, 1850.5 Daniel Webster’s assurance that the office would be “an easier place than you think” was not borne out, however, and McKennan suffered a nervous collapse which necessitated his resignation within ten days.6 “I could not and would not,” he told his wife, “endure the clamor for public office.”7 After a brief rest he assumed his responsi-

3 B. Crumrine, “McKennan,” 12, 13, Crumrine Papers, WJC, File XV-a-14.
4 Tom Corwin to T. M. T. McKennan, Aug. 8, 1850 (telegram), copy in Crumrine, “McKennan,” ibid.
5 Millard Fillmore to T. M. T. McKennan, Aug. 15, 1850, copy in Crumrine, “McKennan,” ibid.
6 Daniel Webster to T. M. T. McKennan, Aug. 9, 1850 (telegram), copy in Crumrine, “McKennan,” 2, ibid.
7 Quoted by Crumrine, “McKennan,” 7, ibid.
bilities as president of the Hempfield project, but its collapse for want of funds shortly thereafter contributed in no small measure to a relapse which ended in death on July 9, 1852.

The manuscript printed below is indicative of western Federalist opposition to the War of 1812, and suggests that the New England wing of the party was by no means the only section that publicly expressed its opposition. There is every indication that McKennan delivered this manuscript as a public address. Not only does the style support this conclusion, but so also does the fact that it was preserved in his own files and contains neither salutation nor closing. 8

Ohio State University

William A. Williams

Thursday, 25th Jany 1813.

An honorable peace is the end to which the views of all parties and classes of people are directed—in this centres all their hopes, their desires, and expectations. What a high source of gratification it must be to the people of the United States to hear some of the strongest advocates for war (even the hon. D. R. Williams) now declare that their minds are bent on peace. In the annals of this government the last six months commencing with the declaration of war will be found the most interesting, the most deplorable. Lamentable experience has convinced us that the declaration of war was precipitate and premature—that we engaged in it without being in such a state of preparation as to be able to prosecute it with energy and success. The prosecution of it has, in our military operations, been every where and on all occasions attended with defeat, disaster, and disgrace. Under such gloomy circumstances an important question naturally presents itself. Is there no possibility of putting an end to the controversy without further bloodshed? Are there no means of restoring America to the peace, tranquillity and happiness she once enjoyed. To the unprejudiced enquirer it must appear evident that if a spirit of reconciliation pervaded both the contending parties an adjustment of differences might take place honorable and advantageous both to Great Britain and America. When I speak of a reconciliation conducting to the honor and advantage of the United States, I mean of the

8 T. M. T. McKennan, "The War of 1812" (dated Jan. 25, 1813), Miscellaneous Papers, WJC, File XV-e-64.
community at large. I refer not to any individuals who have been particularly instrumental in the declaration of war. Perhaps by a reconciliation a feather may be plucked from their lofty plumage—perhaps the adoption of peace may affect their honor and reputation for political fame.

However justifiable we may have been in the declaration of the present war—however aggravated may have been the injuries which we have received—however provoking the insults with which we have been heretofore assailed, the only existing cause of war between G. Britain and America is a dispute concerning a mere matter of right. The question of contest is now reduced to this single point, the impressment of our seamen. The blockade of 1806 has long since ceased to exist. The affair of the Chesapeake has been settled to the satisfaction of our government. The orders in council obnoxious to our neutral rights were repealed three days after the declaration of war on the part of the United States. So that the impressment of our seamen is the sole avowed cause for prosecuting the war against Great Britain. This has been a subject of contest and has engaged the attention of both nations for a number of years. It has afforded a theme of loud declamation against Great Britain by numberless writers and speakers of the age. But however well grounded our complaints have been on this head, candor must acknowledge that the causes of complaint have been in a high degree exaggerated. Notwithstanding the unwillingness evinced by Great Britain to yield the abstract right of impressing her own seamen on board American vessels, I may be permitted to observe, (without betraying any partiality for that country) that she has manifested a disposition to enter into such an arrangement with our government as would place this matter of dispute on grounds both honorable and advantageous to the United States. A person may be clearly satisfied of the truth of this assertion by reading the correspondence between Messrs. Pinckney and Monroe and the British Commissioners previous to the treaty of 1806 which was rejected by the then President. By this correspondence it will appear that, (in the opinion of those gentlemen) the question of impressment was placed on such a footing as was calculated to secure our seamen against the abuses to which they were exposed and against which they ought to be protected. The British then at one period manifested a disposition to settle this matter of contest, and
as there has been no change in their principles we may conclude that our present differences may be adjusted without further effusion of blood. I might pursue the subject much further and shew from motives of policy that British seamen should be excluded from our vessels—that inducements should be held out for our own citizens to enter the navy—I might shew the importance of having our battles fought by our own native citizens, &c. But I shall conclude by observing that the glory of the achievement of the brave Captain Hull was in a considerable degree tarnished by the consideration that a large proportion of the seamen were natives of Great Britain.