The Limits of Republicanism: The Reverend Charles Nisbet, Benjamin Franklin Bache, and the French Revolution

For more than two decades, a great transformation has been taking place in our understanding of the nature and evolution of late eighteenth-century American republicanism. Before the late 1960s, historians generally saw early Americans as natural republicans, pragmatically free of ideology. Insofar as philosophical ideas intruded on a republican ethos, they did so primarily through a common Lockean source. It was assumed that ideas were tangible, employed by individuals who consciously and deliberately embraced them in order to resolve real political issues and problems.¹

With the work of the republican revisionists—notably Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, J.G.A. Pocock, Lance Banning, and Drew McCoy—the emphasis on things merely republican gave way to a more encompassing notion of an ideological essence of republicanism. At one level, these scholars substituted for the simplistic Lockean universe that formerly prevailed a complex causal link of republican ideas that ran from Aristotle to Machiavelli to Harrington to Montesquieu and Hume, with many stops in between and many permutations and combinations of ideas. Subsequently, there has been much disagreement at the primary level of essential philosophical roots, comparable disagreement at a secondary level over the influence of bodies of ideas interacting, and still further disagreement at the tertiary level over which holistic republican ideology best explains

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¹ America's non-ideological past is promoted most consistently in the various works of Daniel Boorstin, while Louis Hartz, The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution (New York, 1955), argued that Americans were Lockean by default more than selection.

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American society of the late eighteenth century. Most republican
revisionists have adhered to classical republicanism, "country" op-
positionist ideology formed in seventeenth-century England, or the
even more recent ideological resurgence of eighteenth-century Scottish
common sense philosophy.  

2 The use of the late 1960s as a dividing line is based, of course, on the publication of
Subsequently, Gordon S Wood and J G A Pocock, in various books and articles, broadened
the republican revisionist focus Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion Evolution of a
Party Ideology* (Ithaca, 1978), and Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic Political Economy in
Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill, 1980), further promoted this ideology by stressing its
lingering influence into the 1790s and beyond. The literature on the origins of American
republicanism is so vast that only limited references can be cited here. The best general
surveys of the literature may be found by consulting Robert Shalhope's two articles "Toward
a Republican Synthesis The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American
Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly* 29 (1972), 49-80, and "Republicanism and
Early American Historiography," ibid., 39 (1982), 334-56. See also Donald S Lutz, "The
Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth Century American Political
Thought," *American Political Science Review* 68 (1984), 189-97, and, especially, Daniel
Walker Howe, "European Sources of Political Ideas in Jeffersonian America," *Reviews in
American History* 10 (1982), 28-44. After Bailyn, Wood, and Pocock introduced a new
richness to the sources and types of republican ideas available, more recent authors have
either uncovered a further plethora of sources or have attempted to locate the proper recipe
of combined ideas to explain the true essence of early republican America. Thus, Garry
Wills has emerged as a champion of Hume and Scottish philosophy in the ideas of Jefferson,
Hamilton, and Madison. See his *Inventing America Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*
(New York, 1978), and *Explaining America The Federalist* (Garden City, 1981). John Patrick
Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics Virtue, Self Interest, and the Foundations of Liberalism*
(New York, 1984), correspondingly denies the influence of classical republican ideas and
Scottish moral philosophy in favor of a theory of self interest and Calvinist morality as the
vague motive forces in American ideas. Recently, Forrest McDonald,* Novus Ordo Seclorum
The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution* (Lawrence, 1985), 57-96, has rearranged the
intellectual furniture again, offering a brilliant view of American political theory in which
some republican thought was reduced to ideology and some was not. He argues that republican
ideas which became ideological could be broadly labelled as either "puritan" (classical) or
"agrarian" (modern), while he treats "country party" opposition thought as a separate ideology
altogether.

The difficulty in teasing out of this republican complex the individual elements or
combined ideas behind republicanism has led some historians to take a more general, common
sense view of the origins and nature of American republican ideas. For example, Howe,
"European Sources," 41, claims "that instead of country ideology constituting a consensus
within which all Jeffersonian political debate occurred, it was one intellectual option among
several. These options ranged from Burkesian and the court party on the right through
the country party and Smithian liberalism to Christian and secular radicalism on the left.
All of these options made extensive use of Scottish ideas." McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum,*
Equally important to a general growth in the concept of republican ideology has been the influence of modern scientific and anthropological concepts. Thomas Kuhn’s concept of dominant ideological paradigms—bounded systems of accessible ways of thinking in any historical era—encouraged scholars to see American republicanism as a vortex engrossing all ideas and behavior. As Linda Kerber has noted, “‘Republicanism’ has become so all-embracing as to absorb comfortably its own contradictions.” Historians have been equally drawn under Clifford Geertz’s broad anthropological umbrella. On a simple level of definition, Geertz explained ideology as something more than a mere coherent set of ideas, or as a vague collection of symptoms (such as reductionism), declaring that “formal ideologies tend first to emerge and take hold” when “a political system begins to free itself from the immediate governance of received tradition” (as in the American Revolutionary era). On a complex level, Geertz has dealt with how ideology worked culturally in face-to-face communities, where received ideas and their direct expression are only part of a larger integrated social process of language, symbols, and
rituals. Coupled with Gordon Wood's observations about the dynamics of belief and the emotions of ideology, the Geertzian model of ideology has suggested the pervasiveness and inevitability of ideology in changing societies (which would seem to include all societies), where social inheritances and culturally conditioned collective and individual behavior supplanted rational choice and conscious ideas. In contrasting our earlier world of ideas with the new world of ideology, Joyce Appleby has noted: "Where the decision-making individual once stood at the center of our analysis of politics, ideology has pushed to the fore the social forces that presumably have shaped the consciousness of the individuals we study."

Appleby and others have recently attempted to crack the Kuhnian paradigm of the republican revisionists, while denying that Geertz's small communities are the same as the pluralistic early American republic and that socially molded ideas are beyond challenge or reshaping through assertive, ascriptive human thought. Thus, a competing set of ideas has been proposed (or reasserted) of Lockean liberalism, based on a vision of possessive individualism, economic liberalism, the primacy of private man, and the promise of "utilitarian liberty," to oppose the republican revisionist insistence on culturally permeable classical republican ideas with their emphasis on the necessity of civic virtue, the danger of large republics, and the balancing of orders. Yet, the new theory of Lockean liberalism, when fully defined, appears as ideologically paradigmatic as classical republicanism. It too seems to engross and encompass all before it, leaving free individuals making rational choices out of some marketplace of ideas or other ideological systems a difficult thing to conceive. Some his-

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torians have further suggested that the two paradigms might work in tandem to explain early America.

Thus, we now comprehend an intellectual and historiographic view of early American republicanism that suggests several axioms. First, Geertzian principles of cultural context and ideology have established the near inevitability that Americans would share republican ideological emotions and understandings at some primary, symbolic level, and that no matter where Americans acquired their republican ideas, the fermentation of those ideas into republicanism as a faith occurred through an exclusive, American cultural process. Second, paradigmatic thinking has encouraged us to conceive of republicanism as so inclusive and elastic that either the classical republican paradigm or the Lockean liberal paradigm would easily absorb even the most idiosyncratic of individual ideologues. In other words, the general sense is one of republican hegemony, of republican emotions irresistibly shared, of the centripetal forces of ethnocentric republicanism. While republican ideas might have their origin in England, Scotland, or Europe, republicanism as ideology was an all-embracing American faith that successfully focused the American public throughout the Revolutionary and early national periods.

For a few Americans, this bond of American republicanism came unglued, resulting in disenchantment, alienation, or rootlessness. Among the few who challenged this parochial bond of republican inclusiveness, albeit from opposite ends of the republican ideological spectrum, were the Reverend Charles Nisbet (1736-1806) and Ben-

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9 For example, Kerber, "Republican Ideology." McDonald, Novus Ordo Seclorum, viii, defines the paradigmatic borders brilliantly in charging that ideological historians "have inadequately addressed the counterpart tensions between communitarian consensus and possessive individualism and those between the concepts of liberty to participate in the governing process and liberty from unlimited government."

10 A few works do address the issue of those Americans who ultimately found themselves out-of-touch with the prevailing ideological tendencies of the times. For example, see Linda K. Kerber, Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America (Ithaca, 1970). For an excellent work that looks most specifically at Charles Willson Peale, Hugh H. Brackenridge, William Dunlap, and Noah Webster, see Joseph Ellis, After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture (New York, 1979). Lawrence J. Friedman, Inventors of the Promised Land (New York, 1975), traces the attempt of early advocates of "the rising glory of America" to fashion a patriotic ethic in the face of persistent localism and profound personal rootlessness.
jamin Franklin Bache (1769-1798). Nisbet, recruited by Benjamin Rush to become principal of fledgling Dickinson College (1786-1806), was one of America’s early promoters of higher education. His robust intellect, his wide reading and vast knowledge, and his compulsion to comprehend contemporary events in relation to timeless truths also made him one of the most relentless analysts of early American republicanism. Bache, grandson of Benjamin Franklin and editor of the Philadelphia General Advertiser and Aurora from 1790 until his early death in 1798, was one of Nisbet’s ideological adversaries. Renowned less for his philosophical introspection than for his political activism, Bache nevertheless promoted a consistent radical ideology to an extensive readership. For some time after Nisbet emigrated to America in 1786, and after Bache returned with his grandfather in 1785, both men believed that an American republican ethic, agreeable to their respective ideological understandings, would be formed. But, in the 1790s, both men became nearly hysterical in what they saw as the growing bankruptcy of that ethic. In private correspondence, Nisbet occasionally identified Bache as culpable in that bankruptcy. Bache did not reciprocate, except in one early private encounter, but remained aware of the Carlisle Calvinist’s opinions, and devoted his own career to attacking Nisbet’s conservatism and identifying all that Nisbet stood for as the enemy of a new liberal order.

Nisbet and Bache challenged the prevailing central tendencies of the American ideological paradigms as we have come to define them. First, they staked out radical republican faiths on the extreme opposite ends of the republican spectrum in a manner that severely tests the idea of a hegemony of classical republicanism and Lockean liberalism. Second, both were transatlantic men who, while considering themselves Americans, were never fully socially acculturated. Instead, social alienation was their plight. Social alienation heightened ideological alienation thereby establishing a symbiotic cycle of rootlessness.11 Third, unhappy with the weak character of the American

11 Alienation as it is used here means a separation of someone (Nisbet and Bache) from something (American culture and society) and not a simple feeling of indifference or aversion. Alienation means estrangement from what they thought they understood. Its symptoms are abstraction and imagination—an other-worldly quality of perception and faith. Useful def-
republican ethic, they shifted their focuses away from American republicanism to the abstract ideological lessons of the French Revolution. Finally, having broken away from the indigenous republican ideological paradigms of their compatriots, Nisbet and Bache reapplied their republican beliefs—reduced and sharpened through their observations on French republicanism—to American events and America’s future.

For the Reverend Charles Nisbet, the process and course of alienation was dramatic and devastating. It began, ironically, shortly upon his arrival in America in 1785, where he was to assume the principalship of Dickinson College. But its beginning was also closely tied to circumstances and events that occurred before he left Scotland.

When Charles Nisbet sailed for America on April 23, 1785, he was already forty-nine years old. Educated at the University of Edinburgh and Divinity Hall in the 1750s, he had obtained his license to preach in the 1760s, and had ultimately become the sole pastor of the parish at Montrose in 1773. He had taken up the cause of orthodox Presbyterian Calvinism, first against Presbyterian moderates and then against the Methodists. He also loved the classics and had a vast knowledge of them, believing the lessons of antiquity were applicable to all ages. But while Nisbet consistently defended these orthodoxies, he confidently embraced progressive hopes and opinions, enjoyed deep attachments and loyalties from his parishioners, and held his pastorship securely. A physically and mentally vigorous

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12 Biographical facts about Nisbet are found in several works Samuel Miller, Memoir of the Rev Charles Nisbet (New York, 1840), remains the standard life and letters style of biography, it was written by an admiring former student of Nisbet’s James H Smylie, “Charles Nisbet Second Thoughts on a Revolutionary Generation,” Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 98 (1974), 189 205, gives a brief but basic introduction to Nisbet’s religious and political beliefs Several works on Dickinson College useful in regard to Nisbet are, in order of importance Charles Coleman Sellers, Dickinson College A History (Middleton, 1973), James Henry Morgan, Dickinson College The One Hundred and Fifty Years, 1783 1933 (Carlisle, 1933), and Boyd Lee Spahr, “Charles Nisbet, Portrait in Miniature,” in Bulwark of Liberty Early Years at Dickinson (The Boyd Lee Spahr Lectures in Americana, 1947 1950) (New York, 1950), 55 73
man, he maintained an insatiable appetite for books—being known by many as a "walking library"—and indulged himself in spirited conversations with a large coterie of friends, acquaintances, and fellow intellectuals.

Most importantly, Nisbet had become attached, in a fashion not fully known, to an image of the promise of America. In the 1760s, he had developed a friendship with John Witherspoon—so closely, in fact, that Witherspoon recommended Nisbet for the presidency of the College of New Jersey in 1767 when Witherspoon himself had been the person initially invited to assume the post. Nisbet, only thirty-one years old, declined and Witherspoon finally accepted. A decade later, Nisbet came out squarely in support of the American Revolution, apparently feeling the colonies had just cause and were fighting for legitimate rights. He openly criticized the British government and the Crown, insulting the Town Council of Montrose in the process, and risking prosecution for seditious libel. What he got instead was an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from the College of New Jersey, granted in absentia in September 1783 at a ceremony attended by George Washington. Undoubtedly flattered by American attentions, Nisbet took a practical interest in America as well, encouraging industrious men threatened by Scotland's economic distress to emigrate, and writing letters of introduction on their behalf. Furthermore, his consistent faith in old Calvinist theology and the lessons of antiquity did not prevent him from being sympathetic to at least the more conservative side of the American republican spectrum. By 1783, he was securely attached to republican America, albeit from a distance.

In late 1783, with Nisbet's having received word that he would be asked to become principal of newly formed Dickinson College, attachment from afar gave way to heightened expectations for his own possible contributions to America's rise. The central figure in these expectations was Dr. Benjamin Rush. Rush had studied medicine

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13 On Nisbet and Scottish emigration, see Whitfield J. Bell Jr., ed., "Scottish Emigration to America: A Letter of Dr. Charles Nisbet to Dr. John Witherspoon, 1784," *William and Mary Quarterly* 11 (1954), 276-89. One cannot think of Nisbet's strong beliefs without thinking of how John Adams combined love of the classics and conservative Calvinism in his republican political views. On the role of Calvinism in republican ideas, see Diggins, *Lost Soul*, passim; and McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, 70-73.
in Edinburgh and learned of Nisbet by reputation. Rush also had heard Nisbet’s praises sung by Witherspoon in 1767, and the honorary degree granted Nisbet in September. 1783 occurred the same month that a charter for Dickinson College had been granted. Rush was undoubtedly attracted by Nisbet’s scholarly reputation and his staunch religious views. But Rush also cast the opportunist’s eye on Nisbet as a celebrity and a warm friend of the Revolution, credentials which Rush could use to promote his new school for his own purposes, for it was Rush’s complex ego and fervid desires that were behind Dickinson’s founding. On the abstract, moral level, Rush saw Dickinson (conveniently named to yield John Dickinson’s political and financial support) as a means of continuing a cultural revolution that the political revolution had put into motion. On the practical level, Rush wanted to undermine the University of Pennsylvania and its governing “conspirators,” who had, in his mind, abused religion, right learning, and political decency.14

Although, as Samuel Miller put it, neither “resources” (of which Dickinson had few) nor “literary wants” dictated any need for Dickinson College to exist at all in 1784, Rush offered a vision of the school and Nisbet’s importance to it and America that was unrestrained. In his opening letter to Nisbet, Rush declared with characteristic hyperbole that the college would soon “be the first in America. It is the key to our western world.” More than that, he promised Nisbet a Promethean role of human agency in shaping the future:

Here everything is in a plastic state. Here the benefactor of mankind may realize all his schemes for promoting human happiness. Human nature here (subdued by the tyranny of European habits and customs) yields to reason, justice, and common sense. Come, Sir, and spread the influence of science and religion among us.15

14 The welter of internal self-contradictions, radical and conservative tendencies, and visionary versus cynical impulses that made up Rush’s character almost defy analysis and leave conclusive statements on his motives in the founding and early promotion of Dickinson College complex at best. On Rush and the founding, see Sellers, Dickinson College, 51-76; Miller, Memoir, 101-3; Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., “Bulwark of Liberty,” in Bulwark of Liberty, 27-54; and David Freeman Hawke, Benjamin Rush: Revolutionary Gadfly (Indianapolis, 1971), 296, 307-8, 312-13.

Nisbet was seduced by the call but did not approach his removal to America in stunned infatuation. His coming was decided after balancing strong negative arguments against Rush’s rhapsodic entreaties. Rush’s staunchest foes got word to Nisbet early that doctrinal factionalism was rife, that political division over the college existed, and that there were grave problems in funding a new college. On his own, Nisbet sought Witherspoon’s advice on “a thousand questions . . . on the state of religion, morals and politics in America,” while lamenting the distressed state of Scotland, the poor future awaiting his family if they remained, and noting how “common people” yearned for American “liberty.” Witherspoon was apparently discouraging. Furthermore, Nisbet’s friends and patrons also urged caution. Lady Leven noted that all encouragements originated from Rush, whose temper was “warm and lively.” She wondered how long forty trustees would be unanimous rather than squabbling. In a later letter, after Nisbet had apparently described America as a virtual tabula rasa, she queried, “Are not your long settlement in a charge; your age; your wife and family; your happy connections; all detaining arguments of some weight?” His friend, Lord Buchan, would note how Pennsylvania’s disrupted political scene would not allow Nisbet much opportunity to shape the future; he urged Nisbet to stay and work on Scotland’s youth. Even John Dickinson himself, chairman of the trustees, would write Nisbet after the 1784 elections, claiming prospects for the college did not look good and warning Nisbet to reconsider since the charter for the college might yet be revoked.

It was a tribute to Rush’s persuasiveness, and to Nisbet’s will to believe, that Nisbet ever left for America. After the formal approval of Nisbet’s appointment on April 6, 1784, Rush surveyed Nisbet’s prospects: the opportunity to “live with people of principles congenial to your own in religion and government . . . , to form the opinions,

17 Lady Leven to CN, July 26, 1784, in Miller, Memoir, 105.
18 Lady Leven to CN, Nov. 20, 1784, ibid., 109.
19 Lord Buchan to CN, n.d., ibid., 121-23.
20 Dickinson’s letter was written Oct. 25, 1784. See Spahr, “Charles Nisbet,” 57-58; Morgan, Dickinson College, 28; and Sellers, Dickinson College, 69.
morals and manners of the rising generation of half a state," and "to
diffuse the blessings of science and religion over a tract of country
many hundred miles in extent." Assuring Nisbet that Carlisle was a
pastoral community of pious, "orderly people," he went on to plead,
"To you, sir, it lifts up its feeble hands. To you, to you alone (under
God), it looks for support and nourishment." A month later Rush
would add that, "the public mind is more filled than ever with
expectations from your character. They destine our College to be
THE FIRST IN AMERICA under your direction and government."
And, having learned of Nisbet's absolute terror of the sea, Rush
enlisted Christ to plead on his behalf.

Remember the words of the Saviour—"It is I"—"I, who govern both
winds and waves. . . . I, who by Providence have made your name
known and dear to people of America. . . . It is I who call you to
quit your native country and to spend the remainder of your days in
that new world in which the triumphs of the Gospel shall ere long be
no less remarkable than the triumph of liberty." 

Back in the practical world, stripped of revolutionary passion and
emotion, Rush worked to reverse Dickinson's duplicitous actions, to
rally other trustees to his side, and to raise money to pay for Nisbet's
passage and high salary.

For his part, Nisbet apparently convinced himself that if America
lacked some of the straightforward virtue and potential Rush prom-
ised, the basic premise of shaping the morals and wisdom of a new
people still existed.

Nisbet arrived in Philadelphia on June 9, 1785, with his wife, a nineteen-year-old son who had a degree from Edin-

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1988 THE LIMITS OF REPUBLICANISM 513

21 BR to CN, April 19, 1784, Butterfield, ed., Letters of Benjamin Rush, 1:322
22 BR to CN, May 15, 1784, ibid., 323
23 See, for example, BR to John Montgomery, Nov. 13, 1784, and, BR to Trustees of
Dickinson College, May 23, 1785, ibid., 1:341
24 Some of this reassurance came from Samuel Stanhope Smith, Witherspoon's son in
law and a professor of moral philosophy at Princeton. In a series of letters designed to answer
Nisbet's many questions about American politics, society, and religion, Smith suggested that
Americans were too prudish, haughty, and self-assured, and too prone to luxury, religious
toleration was too much the consequence of indifference by communicants and governments
alike. Yet Smith seemed to hold hope in a republican system of elections and laws, and in
the independence of a free people. S. S. Smith to CN, Nov. 26, 1784, and Feb. 4, 1785,
in Michael Kraus, "Charles Nisbet and Samuel Stanhope Smith—Two Eighteenth Century
Educators," Princeton University Library Chronicle 6 (1944), 17

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burgh, three younger children, and the vast library that Rush had recommended he bring with him. The next month was Nisbet’s happiest in America. He stayed with Rush, met important persons, and commented favorably on American culture and commerce.²⁵ Rush found Nisbet’s preaching “sensible and elegant,” and believed Nisbet’s “whole soul is set upon doing good.”²⁶ To get things off to the best start, and to get some free publicity for the college in Philadelphia newspapers, Rush arranged for a public celebration of Nisbet’s arrival in Carlisle.²⁷

But what began so auspiciously collapsed almost immediately. Nisbet and his family were very early disappointed with the dirtiness and crude conditions of Carlisle. And it would have taken a man with Nisbet’s perceptions only a few days to discover the coarseness of frontier society, and the obstacles to “improvement” as he understood that word.²⁸ The Public Works (a brick building loaned to the college by the federal government) may have pleased the Nisbets as a residence later, but its location near a swamp and its being surrounded by mud in rainy weather were not welcome prospects at the start. Nor could the college facilities, two rooms shared with the grammar school in an unadorned building, inspire much hope for higher education’s future in Carlisle. The college’s tenuous financial circumstances became obvious as well. Oppressive summer heat, the prospects of contracting fevers and agues, an unhappy wife and homesick children, all conspired to weaken the resolve of a man who easily verged toward pessimism and who always relieved his pessimism by sharply criticizing the irritants around him. By mid-July, Nisbet told Rush that his wife and children wanted to return to Scotland.

²⁶ BR to John Montgomery, June 14, 1785, Butterfield, ed., *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, 1 356 57
²⁷ BR to John Montgomery, June 9, 1785, ibid., 1 55 56 Rush later commented that the “friends of liberty” had treated Nisbet as an “ambassador” while the “friends of religion” treated him as an “apostle.” BR to John Erskine, Oct. 25, 1785, ibid., 1 373 See also Miller, *Memoir*, 137 38, on Nisbet’s welcome
²⁸ Nisbet’s early months in Carlisle, as considered below, are discussed in detail in Miller, *Memoir*, 137 54, Sellers, *Dickinson College*, 77 91, Morgan, *Dickinson College*, 35 52, Spahr, “Charles Nisbet,” 57 73, and Hawke, *Rush*, 312 17
Perhaps all emigrants are uneasy for a time, even those who recover afterward. The low state of your funds and the present condition of this country fill me with alarm . . . When I consider my present condition I am often filled with melancholy thoughts and consider myself a deposed minister, or a deserter of my charge.29

No clinical evidence is necessary to understand that Nisbet was under severe stress and near panic. Collapse came in early August, and when catharsis had ended, an alienation remained that would only be enhanced and reaffirmed, but seldom lessened, during Nisbet’s lifetime. While Carlisle’s natives saw Nisbet’s illness as nothing more than a bout with malaria and a “seasoning,” Nisbet and his wife saw it as an omen and punishment. Nisbet complained that,

Since ever I landed in this country I have felt a constant progressive decay of strength and natural spirits, accompanied with a dullness and bluntness of the intellectual faculties, and a perpetual sensation of lassitude without exertion. My night’s rest has almost gone from me, and my memory and recollection has become weak and indistinct.10

This was during the fever’s onset. After it, he claimed a loss of strength in the right side of his body and “a confusion of thought which I never formerly experienced.”11

The constraints of the frontier, an impoverished college, and physical debilitation were not the whole of Nisbet’s dramatic decline. During the early days of August, when he had just contracted the fever, Nisbet realized something worse—that Rush’s promises of support and friendship, and his own anticipation of authority and leadership over a pliant society, were chimerical deception. On August 9 and 10, Rush attended what would be his last trustees’ meeting at Carlisle. For unknown reasons, he avoided the now ill Nisbet, which prompted Nisbet to write a sarcastic note on the 10th with the heading, “Tomb of Dickinson College,” and which implored, “And is this thy

29 CN to BR, July 23, 1785, in Morgan, Dickinson College, 37.
10 CN to BR, Aug. 1785, in ibid., 42.
11 CN to BR, Sept. 1785, in ibid., 43. Sellers, Dickinson College, 86, rightly identifies Nisbet’s malaise as “nervous prostration.” The ailment was severe and deep: “He lost all energy, his mind wandered childishly, and on into the winter pain and trembling of the under jaw still afflicted him.” One source speculates that Nisbet suffered a small stroke as well: Morgan, Dickinson College, 43.
kindness to thy friend? to have been two whole days in this place without a single moment's tete-a-tete."

The Rush-Nisbet friendship was over, never to be restored. Rush felt personally abused whenever Nisbet attacked the college or the peculiar republican ethos Rush held so dear. He discarded Nisbet quickly as weak and "insane," a man governed by a "whining" wife. He attempted to dismiss Nisbet as an "unfortunate speculation," but when Nisbet remained and continued to criticize the college and the society, Rush swore, "I will never quit him till I subdue his spirit." In 1787, when Nisbet's criticisms made the collection of subscription money difficult, Rush even declared, "My only hopes now are that God will change his heart or take him from us." Nisbet felt betrayed by Rush, an opinion not ill-placed considering the precipitous decline in interest Rush showed the college after the fall of 1785.

Nisbet lost more than friendship and support; he lost authority. Although Rush had once said that Nisbet should be included in decisions regarding college policies, he showed no inclination in this direction by early August. As Nisbet lay ill, a plan for curriculum was initiated without Nisbet's advice, and the course was set for Nisbet's twenty-year estrangement from trustee authority. Nisbet understood early what this said about American society in general and his status with the college in particular. In a rambling letter written in December, he predicted America's eventual greatness but noted Americans' lack of virtue, industry, and confidence, pointedly remarking, "I know not when or whether these things will be altered, as the Americans seem much more desirous that their affairs be managed by themselves than that they should be well managed." So

32 CN to BR, Aug. 10, 1785, in Morgan, *Dickinson College*, 36.
34 BR to John Montgomery, Jan. 21, 1787, ibid., 1:410.
35 See, especially, Hawke, *Rush*, 316-17. Much of Rush's declining interest had to do with being forced to accept Nisbet as principal and to work to raise Nisbet's salary, even though Rush had attempted to lower that salary in 1786 when Nisbet was reinstated. It was also based on Nisbet's inflexibility in refusing to agree to Rush's direction.
much for Rush's vaunted promises for Nisbet's leadership. Nisbet saw insult added to injury when viewing the relationship of trustees and teachers. "The power of the trustees is absolute and without appeal," he complained. Trustees collected all money, paid the teachers when they wanted, and worse, conferred degrees as they liked. Teachers were "day-labourers" in the trustees' eyes, or served "only as clerks for drawing up and signing the diplomas."36

The events and realizations that followed this crisis—Nisbet's resignation from the college in the fall of 1785, his recovery from illness by the spring, his realization that his position in Scotland would not be open to him again, the trustees' realization that no better replacement could be found, and Nisbet's eventual reinstatement as principal—all were the denouement. Most mundane matters that henceforward impinged upon Nisbet's life only reinforced the sudden estrangement that had overwhelmed him in late 1785. The tendency was toward constriction and narrowed authority, toward isolation rather than involvement. The center of his life, the college, remained a source of grief. Called upon to be a fund-raiser, Nisbet failed miserably. But the college failed him more. His salary was usually in arrears and the college owed his estate over six thousand dollars at his death in 1806.17

By his own admission, he remained estranged from the trustees, "as none of them will inform me of what they are about, nor even talk to me of Business in any Shape." What the trustees and society wanted were young men who could speak lucidly (before, or instead of, being able to think) while, "Simplification, Brevity & a superficial Knowledge of things is what they chiefly aim at, so that their Students are Jacks of all Trades & Masters of none at all."38 In the late 1790s

36 CN to Lord Buchan, Dec. 15, 1785, in Miller, Memoir, 139-41. Sellers, Dickinson College, 7, notes that Rush believed, "the Presidents of Dickinson must be—and were—subject to control." Yet, at a June 1785 trustees meeting, Rush had told the trustees to wait until Nisbet had arrived and been consulted before making curricular decisions. Ibid., 74. Evidence suggests Rush changed his mind on Nisbet's authority after Nisbet began to criticize the college, Carlisle, and America.

17 On Nisbet's salary difficulties, see Miller, Memoir, 288; Sellers, Dickinson College, 113; and especially Morgan, Dickinson College, 88-90, 118-24.

18 These comments are part of a long critical letter on American education from Nisbet to Alexander Addison, May 11, 1792, Alexander Addison Papers (University of Pittsburgh).
Nisbet’s hope of educational excellence was further shattered when, after a student strike for easier degrees in 1798, the college trustees brought in a one-year degree over Nisbet’s protest (and to the almost utter ruin of the college’s reputation as Nisbet had predicted).  

If the college was a constant disappointment, matters of home and community were not much better. He frequently referred to his wife’s illness in his correspondence. But it was his eldest son’s alcoholism, and his attempts to help him combat it that were Nisbet’s greatest trial, resulting in shame, guilt, loss of face in the community, and pecuniary expense. As for the town of Carlisle, Nisbet found few, if any, friends (outside the students he befriended as mentor). He complained of “Prejudices against Strangers,” and the threat of “Difficulties & Persecutions in a Country where I have no friends to support my Interest.” “I live alone,” he once complained, remembering the friendships and conversations he left in Scotland, “and neither pay nor receive visits.”

How did Nisbet relieve his isolation and estrangement? How did he conceive order out of what he experienced as American disorder? He did so partly by directing his attention to Dickinson’s students. Highly respected by students like Roger Taney and others who would become men of influence, Nisbet won the affection of those who understood how much he cared for their welfare. Nisbet was as open with his students as he was closed to society outside the academy. His critical comments on American republicanism made in lectures, which students politely but pointedly refused to copy down, apparently

19 In 1798 arrangements were made to grant Nisbet and the faculty some consultive power and degree certification power, but these were more than offset by the one-year degree decision. See Miller, Memoir, 283-87; Sellers, Dickinson College, 119-24; Morgan, Dickinson College, 137-40; and Smylie, “Charles Nisbet,” 198-99.

On his son’s many problems, see David W. Robson, “ ‘My Unhappy Son’: A Narrative of Drinking in Federalist Pennsylvania,” Pennsylvania History 52 (1985), 22-35. See also Nisbet’s sad and poignant letters to Alexander Addison, Aug. 12, 31, Sept. 9, Oct. 30, Nov. 5, 27, 1797; Feb. 17, 14, March 10, April 30, Nov. 19, Dec. 15, 1798; May 3, Nov. 9, 1799; and June 7, 1802, Addison Papers.

CN to Alexander Addison, Dec. 7, 1787; Mar. 11, 1792, ibid.

CN to Charles Wilson, Sept. 1790, in Morgan Dickinson College, 64. He also later declared that he was “like a pelican in the wilderness . . . without friends or society.” CN to Charles Wallace, Aug. 19, 1791, New York Public Library Bulletin 1 (1897), 183.
did not result in a lessening of student respect. Outside the classroom, stripped of social influence and removed from the practical world of political affairs, Nisbet hardened and buttressed his internal ideological beliefs, gratuitously warning others of threats to social order, especially as exemplified in the universal yet negative lessons of the French Revolution.

Samuel Miller—Nisbet’s student, biographer, and occasional correspondent—noted that there was “no one subject on which he [Nisbet] poured out so much weight of thought; so much fervid eloquence,” as the French Revolution. Frustrated by the wrong-headedness of Carlisle’s citizenry in celebrating the supposed benefits of that revolution, Nisbet embraced almost any occasion to speak against the pernicious effects of it. Nisbet also took advantage of every opportunity to rail at enormous length on the subject, employing sarcasm, wit, and every rhetorical device he could manage.

As his correspondents noted, Nisbet was unyielding about the real and potential dangers of the French Revolution from the beginning. Religious convictions clearly formed the basis of his reaction. Even before what Nisbet would have considered the sacrilege of the Fête of the Supreme Being, he summarized the calamitous effects of religion’s end:

The Progress of Infidelity and Atheism in France is more than sufficient to account for all the Wonders that have happened there. Consider a Country without Religion, law or Order, a furious Mob pillaging and murdering without the least fear of the Gallows. Men without Faith, Conscience or moral Principle of any kind, intoxicated with imaginary Rights & Privileges, intent on Gain & the favour of the Mob, & these will abundantly account, both for the Confusions & Murders in France,

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43 On Nisbet’s devotion to scholastic excellence and the college’s students, as well as the success of early Dickinson graduates and their respect for Nisbet, see Miller, Memoir, 161, 163-65, 168, 175, 210-15; Sellers, Dickinson College, 11-12, 95-106, 131-32; Morgan, Dickinson College, 55-61, 98-117, 145-49; Smylie, “Charles Nisbet,” 198-99; Bell, “Bulwark of Liberty,” 28. For Nisbet’s commitment in his own words, see CN to Alexander Addison, May 11, 1792, Addison Papers; Charles Nisbet, An Address to the Students of Dickinson College (Carlisle, [1786]); and Charles Nisbet, The Usefulness and Importance of Human Learning (Carlisle, 1786).

44 Miller, Memoir, 177.

45 See Rev. Dr. Ashbel Green to Samuel Miller, April 30, 1839, in ibid., 306.
& the Approbation that has been given to these Doings by Persons of the same Character in America.\footnote{CN to ?, [fall-winter 1792?], in Victor Hugo Paltsits, ed., \textit{Letters of American Clergymen, 1711 to 1860} (New York, 1917), 510-11.}

Those “well disposed people” who saw the Revolution as an opportunity “to lessen the Interests of Popery” were self-deceived.\footnote{Ibid., 511.} He later condemned those “ignorant clergy” who actually saw the millennium in the French Revolution, as if “the reign of Atheism should be called the reign of Christ.”\footnote{CN to Rev. Dr. Paton, Oct. 1799, in Miller, \textit{Memoir}, 263. One of those who did, undoubtedly to Nisbet’s consternation, was his fellow minister, faculty member, and vice-principal, Robert Davidson. Sellers, \textit{Dickinson College}, 118.} Nisbet, a firm opponent of what he once called “anythingarians” and “nothingarians” in religious doctrine, was opposed to Presbyterian universalist principles which joined Protestantism to the American nation and which saw as well, in the French Revolution, the defeat of Catholicism and the hegemony of Protestantism. Nisbet demanded a religious commitment and a sense of religious urgency from the individual that was primary, that stood above state or universal Protestantism.\footnote{For a further and better elaboration of these points, see James H. Smylie, “Protestant Clergymen and American Destiny: I. Promise and Judgment, 1781-1800,” \textit{Harvard Theologian} 56 (1963), 223-28; and, Smylie, “Charles Nisbet,” 200-2.} This commitment had to be unwaveringly steady, moral, and principled. And this, the French Revolution undercut.

Religious order and the steady adherence of the believer to the glorification of God, to industry, to honesty and credibility were given principles in Nisbet’s ideology. Therefore, he warned constantly and repeatedly of the twin dangers to religious and social order he identified in the French Revolution: liberty and equality. Previously, he had seen the American revolutionary quest for liberty as a rational pursuit—honest, noble-minded, and reformist while maintaining a moral obligation for order and government.\footnote{Miller, \textit{Memoir}, 249-50.} But with his near complete social alienation from Carlisle’s citizenry by the 1790s, and his faith shattered in the capacity of Americans to follow God and virtue rather than their own wills, Nisbet denied whatever attachments he had held to the ideology of republicanism. From the 1790s to his
death in 1806, he condemned the infatuations of republicanism while avoiding any entire rejection of republican institutions. Increasingly, a Burkean ideology emerged from his rhetoric. Edmund Burke's world was associated with habit, "sentiment," "unexamined prejudices," and "untaught feelings." It appeared to resist the intrusion of visionary ideas as opposed to inertial elements such as the history and character of a society which might be strong enough to confuse the progress of society but too weak to guide it. By the 1790s, this apparently non-ideological traditionalist sentiment had abandoned its passive voice and become as abstract or ideological as other ideologies as it passionately emphasized the limits of rational choice and the benefits of an ordered, cohesive society.\footnote{The text for Burkean ideology was (and still is) Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* ([1790] New York, 1955). While Burke seemed to embrace a glib, superficial traditionalism based on the organic working out of laws of nature, he in fact demanded adherence to rigid ideas of historical and behavioral determinism which made *Reflections* a book of ideology. Nisbet's views mesh thoroughly with Burke's when Burke declares that "no name, no power, no function, no artificial institution whatsoever can make the men of whom any system of authority is composed any other than God, and nature, and education, and their habits of life have made them," or when Burke declared that "all men have equal rights, but not to equal things." Ibid., 45, 67. Aside from his desire to see Christian religion established in general, Nisbet would not, however, have followed Burke's anti-republican resolution "to keep an established church, an established monarchy, an established aristocracy, and an established democracy, each in the degree it exists [in Britain], and in no greater." Ibid., 104. For the ideological context of Burkean ideas, see Geertz, "Ideology," in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 218; and Reinhard Bendix, "The Age of Ideology: Persistent and Changing," in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York, 1964), 300-1. Burkean ideology was undoubtedly subscribed to by others besides Nisbet. As Daniel Walker Hower points out, Burke "was more widely admired in this country [the United States] than most historians realize." Howe, "European Sources," 39.}

Thus, when Nisbet realized that the French Revolution had stripped liberty of its modesty and of any checks, he declared that "the People of Europe are going Liberty mad," and equated liberty with disease rather than rationality.\footnote{CN to Alexander Addison, Nov. 5, 1790, Addison Papers.} "The Great Pox of Liberty," he declared in 1793, "has been sent from America to France, and the Small Pox of Equality is likely to be sent over to us in Exchange."\footnote{CN to William Young, March 16, 1793, in Kraus, "Charles Nisbet," 34.} Perfect liberty produced perfect equality, and perfect equality obliterated moral distinctions. Nothing and no one could be of measurable
value against someone or something else; chaos and anarchy replaced Burkean agreements and relationships.

Reductionist that he had been, Nisbet was terrified at the way liberty and equality disguised man's baser self-interest, his love of power, and his avarice. "The Desire of Plunder easily disguises itself under the Visor of Liberty," he said of the French Revolution. And "the world has always been mad, but the love of plunder & a thirst for power, disguised under the precious name of Liberty, seems to be the reigning Madness of our times." In fact, liberty meant an end to justifications or lasting arguments; will was all that counted.

With moral obligations and civic virtue gone, liberty became hypocrisy, behind which lurked brutality, murder, theft, and despotism. Early on, he eagerly demonstrated how French and American spokesmen of liberty curiously failed to extend the privileges of liberty to West Indian blacks or American slaves, concluding "that there are black as well as white Opinions, & that the love of Liberty is a very black one, whenever it is adopted by anything in black." Even before the Terror, he claimed that men were to be known only by their actions. As for French revolutionary republicans, "That they are desirous to preserve their own Liberty, I doubt not, but the Liberty of Robbers and Assassins must be the Slavery & Misery of all honest People." France was a despotic state since its rulers, in the name of liberty, disposed "at Pleasure of all Property of the Nation, & the Lives of Millions of innocent Persons." The Thermidorean Reaction was no better; it was just another swing of the pendulum.

In the end, Nisbet believed that liberty destroyed religion and credibility. "The Age of Infidelity & that of Credulity," he argued, echoing Burke, "seems to coincide, & God seems to have set the one against the other, that Mankind might not confide too much in the

54 CN to Alexander Addison, Nov. 5, 1790, Addison Papers.
55 Ibid., March 10, 1792. See also ibid., Sept. 29, 1791; June 11, 1793; and June 14, 1793; and CN to ?, [fall-winter 1792?], in Paltsits, ed., Letters, 511. As Burke put it, "their liberty is not liberal," Burke, Reflections, 90.
56 CN to Alexander Addison, Nov. 12, 1791, Addison Papers. See also ibid., Sept. 29, 1791.
57 CN to Alexander Addison, June 14, 1793, ibid. See also CN to Alexander Addison, Oct. 29, 1793; Jan. 27, 1794; March 4, 1795; and Feb. 24, 1796, ibid.
58 CN to Alexander Addison, Aug. 6, 1795, ibid.
Powers of their boasted Reason."

In 1800, he noted that the French had attempted to substitute liberty and equality for a supreme being. As a consequence, Thomas Paine "discovered that the people have a right to change every form of government every hour, if they please," while "the whole people of France discovered that the body of a naked prostitute was the supreme object of religious worship [Festival of Liberty, November 20, 1793]." Robespierre found the "supreme being" in the sovereign people, while Napoleon stood this on its head and linked liberty and equality with "unconditional surrender."

What worried Nisbet in 1800 was that "though the rage of Liberty and Equality in France has been obliged to succumb into submission to one person, this circumstance has not in the least abated the same rage in America, which may soon perhaps, lead to a similar despotism, or, what is more probable, its subjection to the despot of France." For years before this, Nisbet's correspondents remained curious about his endless perorations on the French Revolution, because Nisbet had predicted such things as Louis XVI's demise so accurately. But before the approach of the Franco-American crisis of 1798, he generally seemed relieved that America was not drawn into the French revolutionary vortex, and assumed, while scoffing at radicals like Bache, that England would repel France, rather than become her victim. By the late 1790s, however, paranoia set in. He feared American democrats, in collusion with France, were already at work igniting fires in homes and buildings in several American towns. He recommended that Samuel Miller read the truths contained in Professor Robinson's "Proofs of a Conspiracy," a work which aroused...
the spectre of a world conspiracy of the Bavarian Illuminati. Well after the hysteria of 1798, he still saw France as a real imperialist threat to Louisiana, with westerners and southerners, at least, ready to join the “Great Nation.”

Territorial conquest, however, was a lesser threat to Americans than doctrinal conquest. He believed that the British government had seen French doctrines for what they were, “whereas our Government, from their total Want of Sense, could not discern that these Doctrines tended to the Destruction of all Governments, & to that of Republics more than others, because the French Revolutionary Mob pretended to be a Republic.” Why didn’t the American government expose French turpitude? Because they feared the people, who “would consider them as Apostates if they should pretend that Liberty & Equality are not good things in America.” At his lowest point, he wailed, “We are a divided People, without Wisdom, Strength or Union, & would be an easy Prey to the Sans Culotes [sic], if they were able to establish their Republic.” Only when the so-called Quasi-War promised to end Franco-American relations permanently did Nisbet see hope for reformation:

It would be happy for America, now that [it] is disengaged from the French, & provoked against them by grievous Injuries, if we would endeavour to be as unlike them as possible, by returning to God, whom they have renounced, & to the Belief & Observance of the Doctrines & Precepts of Religion, which they have proscribed. This alone can make an Separation from France a real Benefit to us, but it will be of no Consequence to resent the Injuries, & repel the power of the French, while we retain their Profanity & Infidelity.

If the threat of French doctrines, and the need for reformation, were so great, how deficient was America? And what would be the remedy? From the outset, he observed that “the general Want of

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65 CN to Samuel Miller, July 6, 1798, in Miller, Memoir, 255-56.
66 CN to Samuel Miller, March 19, 1803, ibid. See also CN to Samuel Miller, Feb. 23, and June 9, 1797, ibid.
67 CN to Samuel Miller, March 4, 1795, ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 CN to Samuel Miller, Aug. 6, 1795, ibid.
Religion is at the bottom of all other public Grievances.”

The Burkean reasons were both moral and social: “The Neglect of the Duties of Religion unhinges Credit, overturns Decency, & destroys the Habits of Order & the Sense of public Spirit.” “In forming our Constitution,” he concluded, “& even in wording our Oaths, no regard was paid to God, & we can not wonder if he should cast us off in our Distress, & bid us cry to Liberty & equality, the Idols that we have made & served.”

Even in pure physical terms, Americans, in Nisbet’s eyes, had revealed their exaggerated libertarian tendencies. They had “weakened themselves by Dispersion, & their grasping Avarice claims an imaginary Property over even unhunted & uncultivated Lands.” This simple fact had boundless consequences. “The Minds of Men separated from Society, increase in Ignorance, Prejudice & Indolence, being deprived of that Stimulation which is necessary to excite their active Powers, & convey Information to their Minds.” In addition, “Science, Virtue, & Religion are all equally Sufferers by this Mis-management as none of them ever yet flourished among a Dispersed People.”

He catalogued “social intercourse,” “the bonds of friendship,” education, and attendance at places of worship as victims of dispersion. His moral solution was “If you could persuade them to love one another, & to live nearer each other, they would be mutual Helpers, instead of distant Enemies to one another.” All of the above sentiments were replete with concern for civic virtue, with Montesquieu’s warnings about large republics, with the classical republican contempt for individual self-interest, and with Burke’s arguments for cohesive society.

Liberty and equality also caused blindness to the needs of natural intellectual, social, and economic classes in society. He frequently hoped that Europe’s disorders would provide America with a steady

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1 CN to Alexander Addison, Jan 26, 1786, Addison Papers. On Nisbet and religion in America, see especially Smylie, “Charles Nisbet,” 200.

2 CN to Alexander Addison, Oct 21, 1786, Addison Papers.


4 Ibid.

5 CN to Alexander Addison, May 25, 1786, Addison Papers.

6 Ibid.

7 CN to Alexander Addison, Oct 21, 1786, ibid.
stream of Europe's most able and better people. But he believed ambition, talent, and the capacity to lead full and rich lives varied greatly among natural orders, with a superior leisure class pursuing knowledge, and an inferior lower order provided for materially and encouraged to industry. Dispersion and denial of social orders went hand in hand with other forms of faithlessness. He suspected that many supported the American Revolution and debtor laws while opposing the Constitution to avoid paying their debts.

Yet the great danger lurked in the infatuation of American citizens with their own sovereignty and the prospect that Americans could go the way of France. Two issues were involved: majority rule and the belief that sovereignty made men superior to constituted authorities and laws. As for majority rule, he believed, "A king, surrounded with guards, ministers and courtiers, is not more inaccessible than the minds of multitudes beset with prejudices and ignorance." As for the latter, he was shocked by the prospect that the people might claim authority above the government and outside the law. Resistance to the Proclamation of Neutrality troubled him, as did the emergence of the Democratic Societies, but it was the Whiskey Rebellion that, next to French conquest, struck the greatest fear in him. He summed that issue up succinctly and sarcastically to Addison:

I hope that your Citizens are still unanimous in opposing the Excise Act, & maintaining the Rights of Man & the Majesty of the People, against the Laws that were only made by Representatives of their own chusing, but not confirmed by them, in a Mob lawfully assembled for that Purpose.

In the midst of the crisis, Nisbet almost incited a riot against himself

See, for example, CN to Alexander Addison, Nov 5, 1790, July 22, 1791, and May 11, 1792, ibid

76 For Nisbet's views on moral philosophy and economy, see Herbert F Thomson and Willard G Bloodgood, "A Classical Economist on the Frontier," Pennsylvania History 26 (1959), 194-212


78 CN to Lord Buchan, June 24, 1786, in Miller, Memoir, 163

79 CN to Alexander Addison, June 11, 1793, Addison Papers
when he preached a sermon (attended by George Washington) arguing that not all men were to be legislators or statesmen, that deference on these matters should prevail.  

The world’s rage for liberty and equality very nearly led Nisbet to renounce republicanism. But beneath his caustic prose, in a manner not unlike the jeremiadic sermons in New England of a century before, Nisbet held out hope for reform. Acknowledgment of God and divine providence could provide lasting social bonds, moral commitments, political and social deference, and a quest for knowledge and learning. Virtue, not liberty, was fundamental to republicanism. As he put it in 1786,

God, in ordering the affairs of the world, has shewn more regard to the order and general peace of society, and the preservation of justice, than to the liberty of state and individuals. Liberty is a blessing which has always been bestowed with a sparing hand and for short periods, on the children of men; and no wonder, because it requires wisdom, a gift still more rare, to manage it to advantage.

As Nisbet privately railed against revolutionary change, he was not reluctant to single out villains who prompted the new age of liberty and equality, even attacking a young man thirty-three years his junior. In the late 1780s, Nisbet pointed his acerbic pen at an aged Franklin and a still adolescent Benjamin Franklin Bache, upon the latter’s publication of two Latin and Greek readers. Nisbet apparently found fifty errors in Bache’s publications without much effort, and wondered how the boy could hope to sell such literary incompetence to intellectually lazy Americans when his grandfather simultaneously chose to attack classical learning. Enraged, Bache apparently replied that he in fact had little real love of the classics and never planned to publish such works again, while defending Franklin’s condemnation of the classics. In subsequent letters to correspondents in the 1790s,

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81 Nisbet, *Usefulness and Importance of Human Learning*, 25.

84 The Nisbet-Bache exchange is cited in Bernard Fay, *The Two Franklins: Fathers of American Democracy* (New York, 1933), 105-6. I have been unable to locate Nisbet’s letter or Bache’s reply, and believe them no longer extant.
Nisbet occasionally jibed at Bache's editorials and mocked Bache's shallow innocence. Publishing a newspaper subject to libel, Bache did not single Nisbet out during that decade, but he could not have been unaware of Nisbet's hostility and the fact that Nisbet represented the ideology he found anathema.  

Yet for Benjamin Bache, a contrasting process of personal alienation and the formation of equally hysterical and abstracted ideological beliefs was in the making. Born in 1769, Benjamin was the eldest son of Richard and Sarah Bache, and the grandson of Benjamin Franklin. Like his parents, Benjamin grew up as a willing captive in his famous grandfather's household. When Franklin died in 1790, the senior Baches inherited Franklin's properties and retired quietly, rarely surfacing as conspicuous members of society, never challenging the conventional conservatism that their "gentry" status accorded them. Young Benjamin, meanwhile, inherited Franklin's metaphysics and a passion to live to the political and moral standards he associated with his grandfather's example.

Most of the reasons behind Benjamin Bache's later radical intensity had beginnings in his atypical childhood. To a large degree, all of young Benjamin's life, from childhood to young adulthood, involved a familial paradox—love, affection, and attention followed by estrangement, isolation, and depression. As a small boy, he was the center of the Franklin household's attention, doted over by proud parents and a loving grandmother. Even his absent grandfather revelled in the promotion of his grandson. Meanwhile, young Benjamin was undoubtedly coached to understand the importance of being adored by the celebrated and famous patriarch of the family. Then, comfort and security began to wash away for the first time. His grandmother died in 1774. Relatives of various sorts came and went. His grandfather arrived home in 1775, but the dislocating effects of the Revolution arrived as well.

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85 For Nisbet's ridicule of Bache, see CN to Alexander Addison, Aug. 6, 1795; June 17, 1796; and Dec. 3, 1796, Addison Papers.

86 All biographical material on Franklin, the Baches, and Benjamin Bache contained herein, unless otherwise noted, is from Claude-Ann Lopez and Eugenia W. Herbert, The Private Franklin: The Man and His Family (New York, 1975); and/or James D. Tagg, "Benjamin Franklin Bache and the Philadelphia Aurora (Ph. D. diss., Wayne State University, 1973)."
Suddenly, in the fall of 1776, he was on board a fast ship for France with his older cousin Temple and his grandfather, not to see parents, brothers, sisters, and other relatives, nor to come to know his native land, for almost nine more years. Loved by his grandfather, but lost in the shuffle of Franklin’s busy life at Passy, young Benjamin adapted to his new conditions by becoming dutiful and “a special good boy.” In early 1777, he was enrolled in Le Coeurs, an upper-middle-class boarding school in Paris, seeing Franklin on Sundays and holidays, and developing even then what would become a lifelong pattern of trying to satisfy his grandfather. Franklin, distracted by other matters, became increasingly inattentive of his uncomplaining grandson, apparently unaware of, or unwilling to recognize, the implications of his central, all-commanding place in young Benjamin’s universe.

Only occasionally was Franklin jolted into action. Troubled that his grandson spoke “French better than English,” Franklin packed the boy off to Geneva, noting, “as he is destined to live in a Protestant Country, and a Republic, I thought it best to finish his Education where the proper Principles prevail.” His mother worried vaguely about the “distance he is removed from you,” but Franklin’s sister hit the nail more squarely on the head, asking, “how will he support the loss of you both [Franklin and his cousin Temple]?"

Bache supported the loss in his Geneva years in natural ways for a ten-year-old boy. Alienated from Franklin’s immediate affection, he turned to his guardian Philibert Cramer as a father figure. When Cramer died shortly after Bache’s arrival in Geneva, Cramer’s widow, Catherine, attempted to fill the emotional gap. But he only saw the

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8 Benjamin Franklin (hereafter, BF) to Mary Hewson, Jan 12, 1777, in Albert H Smyth, ed, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (10 vols, New York, 1905-1907), 7:10

87 See, respectively, BF to Sarah Bache, June 3, 1779, ibid, 7:348, and BF to J Q Adams, April 21, 1779, ibid., 289

89 Sarah Bache to BF, Sept 14, 1779, and Jane Mecom to BF, Sept 12, 1779, [William Temple Franklin], ed, *Letters to Benjamin Franklin from His Family and Friends, 1751-1790* (New York, 1889), 105, 104

90 The Cramer Bache relationship is detailed in Lucien Cramer, *Une Famille Genevoise, Les Cramers leurs relations avec Voltaire, Rousseau et Benjamin Franklin Bache* (Geneva, Switzerland, 1952), 60-64

We can follow Benjamin Bache’s childhood closely because he wrote several letters to his grandfather and others between 1779 and 1783, and left a diary of his activities at Geneva
Cramer family on weekends and holidays, and never discovered much warmth in his tutor, Gabriel de Marignac. In poignant schoolboy letters, he tried to impress on Franklin how hard he worked to win Franklin’s and his parents’ favor, while expressing the desire of reunion. Franklin’s infrequent replies were admonitions to do well. “I shall always love you very much if you continue to be a good Boy [my emphasis],” he once declared, and on other occasions was blunt about how Benjamin had to live up to the virtues of his family and country. Franklin then made estrangement even more painful by breaking his promise to visit Geneva. No one can be certain what the full consequences were. But the person closest to Benjamin, Catherine Cramer, while only concerned that he was shy and insecure in 1779, became more alarmed by his later tendency to become taciturn, indolent, and cold—displaying symptoms of disinterest that accompany depression.

In 1783, alarmed at reports that Bache’s pension had degenerated into a poverty-stricken institution more analogous to a prison than a school, Franklin recalled Benjamin to France. Although he initially tried to send the boy on to England to avoid the cultural degeneracy of Parisian society, young Benjamin literally won Franklin’s affections anew and remained with his grandfather until their departure for America in 1785. Apparently these critical adolescent years of maturation put him more at ease. And, paradoxically, the Geneva years
had strengthened him, making him more competent as an autonomous person. With Franklin at the height of his popularity in France, Bache basked in his grandfather's celebrity and generally came to identify Franklin (as the French had already) as the embodiment of American virtue and morality. In addition, Franklin directed him toward a useful trade—typefounding and printing—suggesting to the young man the equally powerful idea that he was to follow his grandfather's path. By all accounts, Bache's confident emergence into young adulthood proceeded in perfect synchronization with his continued bonding to Franklin from 1783 to 1790.95

In 1785, Bache was instrumental in directing the packing that brought grandfather and grandson home to Philadelphia.96 Young Benjamin believed it was a reunion and a homecoming, but all that was really familiar to him was Franklin and the warm reception Franklin received. In fact, Benjamin was to continue in even closer alliance with his grandfather for the next five years. At Franklin's insistence, he attended the University of Pennsylvania, although unhappy with the poor education he felt he received there.97 With Franklin as his partner, he attempted to open an American typefounding business and finally failed. Also under Franklin's guidance he took up printing, distributing and selling books, with only slightly better success. It was Benjamin who acted as Franklin's secretary, and subsequently aided Franklin in resuming the writing of the Autobiography.98 Through it all, Benjamin could not have been unaffected by Franklin's promotion of liberal views in regard to political

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95 On Franklin's guidance, see especially BF to Richard Bache, Nov 11, 1784, Smyth, ed, *Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, 9 279 For Benjamin's diligence in following his grandfather's wishes, see BFB Bache Diary, Oct 8, 9, 11, 1784, and Jan 21, March 19, April 5, May 14, 1785
96 BFB Bache Diary, May 14, 1785
science in general, the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776, the U.S. Constitution of 1787, and the future of the American republic as a whole.

When Franklin died in 1790, Benjamin Bache, the European schoolboy, undoubtedly interpreted American society through the eyes of his patriot grandfather. Few persons are raised to adulthood so narrowly captive of one figure, and in Bache's case, that figure was of no mere single mortal, but a celebrity who was recognized by many as the symbol of American character, who stood as metaphor for much of what had been, and in some instances still was, American. For Bache, Franklin and America were coterminous.

The effect was more profound than Benjamin Bache's wholesale adoption of Franklin's philosophical views or political opinions. Federalist William Vans Murray hinted at one aspect of this effect upon Bache's death in 1798: "So it is to have had a philosopher for a grandfather, for that idea was the food of much of his extravagance of mind, and placed him in a state of pretence where he was obliged to act a part for which he had not talents."99 If evidence regarding modern radical youth has any application, Franklin represented a parental image of abstract values and morals which Bache not only felt he had to defend but had to promote, implement, and extend.100 Alienation, therefore, only awaited Franklin's death and recognition that America's republican future was not destined to follow what Bache imagined was Franklin's liberal blueprint.

Bache's immediate response to Franklin's death was a repetition of the loneliness and depression he had felt when previously abandoned. The loss was "irreparable," he claimed. He confided to his betrothed: "I have spent a Spring of great uneasiness. Fatigue, Anx-


1 Socio psychological studies of the 1960s, however much distorted by the events and "conventional wisdom" of the decade, suggest with at least some authority that radicals rather consistently became radical by trying to act out in exaggerated ways the humanistic values only rhetorically expressed by their parents. See Kenneth Keniston, Young Radicals Notes on Committed Youth (New York, 1968), 44-77, and Richard Flacks, "The Liberated Generation An Exploration of the Roots of Student Protest," Journal of Social Issues 23 (1967), 52-75
iety, & Fear, Trouble & Grief.” Benjamin would eventually claim some personal happiness through his marriage to Margaret Markoe and the everyday joys of family life. But at the level of attitude, belief, and commitment, responsibility to meet Franklin’s standards now compelled him to discover appropriate responses to events around him without Franklin’s aid and advice.

Material factors coalesced around his grief, enhancing his estranged condition and prompting him to seize upon some vocation. Without having secured a profitable trade, he was about to enter legal adulthood. Franklin’s material legacy to Benjamin was the typefounding and printing equipment that had already failed to promise him a livelihood, and he seemed uncertain how this inheritance, “chiefly in tools that his Industry are to put in Motion assisted by his Fathers Aid,” would be employed. Even the lack of marriage conditions in Franklin’s will was an unsecured benefit. He had proposed to Margaret Markoe in early 1790, only to see her family whisk her off to faraway St. Croix for a long holiday; they were not married until November 17, 1791, a full year after Benjamin had established the General Advertiser.

Yet, when Benjamin turned his attention toward newspaper publishing in late 1790, he did so without a keen sense of political or ideological purpose. His great-aunt simply wished: “May he inherit all his grandfather’s virtues, and then He will be likely to succeed to his honours.” Benjamin surely had a similar wish. He even briefly promoted a kind of cult of Franklin, in part to encourage his cousin Temple’s edition of Franklin’s works and to establish a market for a possible printing of the Autobiography. But he apparently recognized early that Franklin’s principles, not his person, were the important object. For almost two and a half years, as Bache filled the columns of the General Advertiser with random expressions of an

101 [B F Bache] to [Margaret H Markoe], May 2, 10, 1790, B F Bache Papers
102 Ibid
103 Jane Mecom to Sarah Bache, Sept 6, 1790, in Carl Van Doren, ed., The Letters of Benjamin Franklin & Jane Mecom (Princeton, 1950), 342
104 Tagg, “Benjamin Franklin Bache and the Philadelphia Aurora,” 222-24, and [Philadelphia] General Advertiser, Oct 2 [“Character of Dr Franklin” from St James Chronicle], 6, 11, 1790, June 7, Oct 14, 1791 All that Bache finally published was William Smith, Eulogium on Benjamin Franklin (Philadelphia, 1792)
ideological creed, the promise of American republicanism also receded. It seemed tarnished by aristocratic vestiges and a lack of evangelical will to push toward logical consequences.

In a letter to his father, Benjamin revealed how events and his own philosophical and moral principles eventually made him a committed ideologue on behalf of the "spirit of republicanism." Remembering that his mother had once remarked on attempts to "strike a line" between republican and anti-republican sentiment in America, and suggesting that true republican values were not yet secured, he pledged, "When it [the line] comes to be struck definitely [my emphasis] I hope I shall be found on the right side of it." For Bache, with Franklin gone and America betraying republican purity in a variety of ways, that ideological pledge fixed on the abstract promises of the French Revolution for its continued impetus and fulfillment. That commitment was so intense that even his parents, who shared Benjamin's hatred of Washington and were compelled by Franklin's will to aid Benjamin's paper financially, apparently abandoned their son entirely in the last days of his life, as the anti-French hysteria of 1798 reached its peak.

Because Benjamin Bache lived in France during his critical formative years, it has sometimes been assumed that he was nothing more nor less than an indiscriminate francophile. But, although he pretended to discover virtue in the French people as a whole (as he did in all people as a sovereign whole), he never expressed any love for the ancien régime he had lived in. Like Nisbet, Bache could claim to being a transatlantic man, having been raised and educated in France and Geneva. Yet, he subscribed to a visionary belief as far to the left as Nisbet's was to the right. A composite of radical Enlightenment

105 BFB to Richard Bache, Feb. 3, 1793, transcript of a manuscript in the possession of Mrs. J. Manderson Castle, Wilmington, Del. (hereafter, Castle MSS).

106 The family's mutual hatred of Washington was noted by a Polish traveller in his journal on April 19, 1798. Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, Under Their Vine and Fig Tree, Travels through America in 1797-1799, 1805, With Some Further Account of Life in New Jersey, trans. and ed. by Metchie J.E. Budka (Elizabeth, 1965), 61. Lopez and Herbert, Private Franklin, 312, claim Benjamin's ultimate estrangement from his parents. The fact that his wife's stepfather was the executor of Benjamin's will and the rumored prop to the Aurora in late 1798 tends to substantiate the claim. See B.F. Bache's Will, Sept. 7, 1798, B.F. Bache Papers; and Porcupine's Gazette, July 8, 1799.
views infused Bache's faith. These views not only denied any legitimacy or authority to monarchy and aristocracy, they also protested virtually any religious or institutional checks to man's self-fulfillment. For Bache, the future promised new social harmony and progress through the liberty of the individual on the one hand and the collective and immediate sovereignty of the people on the other. Bache's radical Enlightenment views, while clearly parroting Franklin's general philosophy and Jefferson's utopian communalism, reflected familiarity with Locke, attachment to Paine's *Rights of Man*, an appreciation for both Condorcet and Rousseau, and even some suggestions of influences from the Scottish common sense philosophers.¹⁰⁷

What produced Bache's magnetic attraction to France was the triangular marriage of his cultural and linguistic acquaintance with France; his immersion in Franklinian morals, political principles, and symbolism; and his devotion to an Enlightenment liturgy which had boyhood roots but flowered during his 1790s publishing years. When the French Revolution fused these three elements, Bache discovered an essential continuity between America and France. Personally, he would henceforward identify the American revolutionary past, which to him had been experienced only through Franklin's being, with an American, French, and even world revolutionary future. Bache's enemies were correct in calling him a consistent apologist for France in the 1790s.¹⁰⁸ But while the French Revolution passed through radically differing stages, Bache's vision of that revolution remained the same. He made events conform to image. The reason was clear, as he asked rhetorically: "Can you seriously suppose that the present struggle of that nation [France] is not the beginning of that universal reformation which is about to take place in the world for the general benefit of the human race, & which will unfold itself into successful

¹⁰⁷ On Bache's political philosophy, see Tagg, "Benjamin Franklin Bache and the Philadelphia *Aurora*," 139-219.

¹⁰⁸ His enemies tended to trip over themselves in their accusation that he was in the pay of France and adhering to a radical political line for reasons of pecuniary advantage, while simultaneously claiming his business was failing and going bankrupt. Tagg, "Benjamin Franklin Bache and the Philadelphia *Aurora*," 129-38 and passim. When events built in 1793 and 1798 toward an anti-French climax, Bache did not change his position for reasons of income and credibility.
France represented the triumph of liberty over tyranny, and he believed that even American liberties ultimately rested on French success. In his optimistic moments he predicted the sovereign people's liberation in Italy, Poland, India, Mexico, Canada, Ireland, and England. Like Condorcet, whom he read and admired, his faith was built on the belief that the tenth epoch of man was at hand.

During the halcyon period, before the crisis of August 10, 1792, and the emergence of the French Republic, as most Americans passively anticipated good effects from the revolution, Bache blithely assumed that others joined him in recognizing the approach of liberty, equality, and progress. "Liberty is a plant of quick growth, takes deep root in a short time, and spreads rapidly," the General Advertiser proclaimed confidently. Whereas factionalism and anarchy in France troubled others, Bache predicted the ultimate extinction of parties and the creation of unity, thereby establishing an ideological response which he would employ again and again. When the Girondists initiated a patriotic war against Europe as a means to rally revolutionary unity, Bache ignored motives and stretched credulity in regard to the Austrian threat to restore the ancien régime:

If it came to this, the French need only say to the German troops—
Had you rather die all slaves than live all free men; and they will turn about and proceed towards Vienna, there to assist in framing a Constitution for themselves—taking a fundamental principle, the rights of men, rejecting the pretended rights of sovereigns when incompatible

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109 General Advertiser, July 17, 1792. For other editorials on this theme, see ibid., Oct. 5, 30, 1790; Aug. 18, Oct. 26, 1792; Jan. 15, 29, March 26 ("Cato"), 1793; March 15 ("corres."), 1798.

110 Ibid., June 22, 1792; Jan. 29, 1793.


112 Ibid., 205-6. His admiration of Condorcet can be seen in BFB to Richard Bache, Jan. 10, 1793, Castle MSS.

113 General Advertiser, Oct. 5, 1790.

114 Ibid., Aug. 22, 1791.
with the first, and teach Leopold, that Sovereignty is in the People, and Kings are only Kings as long as it is the interest of the People that they should be Kings.\textsuperscript{115}

The radical revolution, the rise of the Jacobins, and the fate of the king gave Bache some problems. The Jacobins did not represent Bache's sacrosanct majority, but he weakly excused their intrusion into the revolution on the basis that "a majority of the leading men in the nation belong to the society," and they were "fundamentally republican."\textsuperscript{116} The demise of Louis XVI, who had received sympathetic treatment in the \textit{General Advertiser} as America's benefactor, was justified as a necessary consequence of the evils of monarchy and the needs of republicanism, although Bache privately predicted that the king and queen might die as "martyrs in a bad cause."\textsuperscript{117} As Americans abandoned the French Revolution after 1793, Bache continued to warn his readers: "Upon the establishment or overthrow of liberty in France probably will depend the permanency of the Republic in the new world."\textsuperscript{118} Thus, the war in Europe had to be won by France at all costs. The Terror also was excused as the consequence of counter-revolutionaries and residual aristocratic influence. Danton, and after him, Robespierre, were first victims of anti-republicanism and later enemies of liberty themselves.\textsuperscript{119}

As had happened with Robespierre, Bache's vision of the "people" became more abstract. During Jacobin ascendancy he praised proposals in education and the arts, religious reform, and the new French calendar.\textsuperscript{120} But even the Thermidorean Reaction and the Directory that followed did not strip Bache of the belief that a spirit of republicanism remained aglow in France underneath whatever immoderate government was in power. Robespierre's death, he noted, simply proved "that the French revolution or the liberties of any people do

\begin{verbatim}
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., Oct. 21, 1791.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., June 21, 1792.
\textsuperscript{117} BFB to Richard Bache, Jan. 10, 1793, Castle MSS.
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{General Advertiser}, July 26, 1793.
\textsuperscript{119} Tagg, "Benjamin Franklin Bache and the Philadelphia \textit{Aurora}," 362-69 covers some of these issues.
\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Aurora}, April 7, June 5, July 3, Aug. 1, Sept. 8, 23 ("An American" from New World), 1795. Bache published a copy of the calendar in 1796. \textit{Calendrier republican pour lan 5} (Philadelphia, 1796).
\end{verbatim}
not rest on the existence of any man."121 Furthermore, after the Jay Treaty, emphasis shifted from French inconsistencies to the threat of British despotism. So, contrary to Nisbet, possible French occupation of Louisiana was not a threat, but of "utmost advantage" to Americans "as an exemplary warning against the growing spirit of Aristocracy among us . . . [and] as a safe and free asylum from tyranny in the event of the majority of our fellow citizens being betrayed into so diabolical an alliance as the tame surrender of Republican freedom at the feet of Aristocracy & Kingly pageantry."122 The pretense of Bache's politics and the twists and turns of Bache's rationalizations for France were more than Nisbet could bear. "Mr. Benjamin Franklin Bache has abandoned the Interest of the Convention," he noted with amusement in 1795, "which may be followed by the entire defection of the whole Democratic Society of Pennsylvania."123

Bache's ideological vision, defined in the French Revolution, was monotonously static. Although this ideology depended philosophically on Franklin's utilitarian democracy, Rousseau's general will, and Paine's *Rights of Man,*124 it was the French Revolution that gave practical application of progressive ideas real meaning. Intellectual profundity was not Bache's interest; universal applications of a simple, straightforward ideology was. Thus, men in a liberated state were fully reasonable and educable, easily capable of self-government, and made virtuous instantly through the broad distribution of property among them.125 Secular salvation was condensed into a simple creed:

I believe that no authority can be legitimate but that which is delegated by the free voice of the people; and that the representative system, founded on frequent elections and universal suffrage, is the perfection of political wisdom.126

121 *Aurora*, Oct. 20, 1794.
122 Ibid., Dec. 29, 1796.
123 CN to Alexander Addison, Aug. 6, 1795, Addison Papers.
124 Bache's general ideas, as filtered through his paper, and the tenor and tone of their expression, suggest acquaintance with all four. Bache had access to all of Rousseau's writings, and may have owned them; his father prided himself on having introduced Paine to America in 1774 on Franklin's behalf. Benjamin was a major distributor and promoter of the *Rights of Man.*
125 See, for example, *Aurora*, July 7, Nov. 3, 1791; June 12, 1792; and, Oct. 27, 1797.
126 Ibid., Sept. 8, 1797. For a full analysis of Bache's thought, see Tagg, "Benjamin Franklin Bache and the Philadelphia *Aurora,*" 139-219.
Bache convinced himself that France promised to fulfill man’s sovereign potential, but at home he found American impulses to secure the American Revolution and establish order short of full democracy both incomprehensible and anathema. The Constitution was pronounced good in 1791, but even that early he announced that, “should a majority of the people at any time think that they could enjoy greater political happiness by a change of government, the principles of the Constitution would not be looked upon as fixed principles.” He gradually came to realize two things: that America’s elite was not going to establish the complete sovereignty of the people, and that public servants, particularly Washington, were willing to ignore the popular majority and initiate policies which differentiated rather than united society. After the Jay Treaty, which he felt was an abject denial of France, Bache saw all hopes for America erode. Although he worked feverishly to prove the people’s opposition, he found the administration betraying its trust, and America realigned with a despotic rather than a republican state.

Yet, it was the Whiskey Rebellion and the Sedition Act that really tested the consistency of Bache’s adherence to liberty and popular sovereignty. In both cases, he passed that test. In the former, as both editor and a leading spokesman of the Democratic Society, he denounced the whiskey excise as oppressive and unjust, but consistently criticized violence and extra-legal opposition to the excise, attacked the government for employing heavy-handed tactics out of proportion to the threat, and defended all petitions, elections, and other democratic legal procedures undertaken during the crisis. When the Democratic Society almost disintegrated over a motion sharply chastizing the rebels for undermining liberty and the principle of sovereignty, Bache was not among those offended by the resolution, but assumed the chair for its further debate (it was later dropped as too inflammatory).

In regard to the Sedition Act, which had been adopted in part as

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127 General Advertiser, May 24, 1791.
a means to silence Bache's paper, it is often overlooked that Bache
did not follow other Jeffersonians in condemning the act on the basis
of jurisdictional rights of states versus federal powers, but on its
violation of the principles of liberty and sovereignty, which could not
stand its existence:

If the government is instituted for the benefit of the people, no law
ought to be made to their injury. One of the first rights of a freeman
is to speak or to publish his sentiments; if any government founded
upon the will of the people passes any ordinance to abridge this right,
it is as much a crime as if the people were, in an unconstitutional way,
to curtail the government of one of the powers delegated to it.¹³⁰

By 1798, his campaign against a perceived despotic threat at home
and abroad had reached its crescendo, and his fears about the main-
tenance of republicanism in France and America had become near
hysterical. His remedy for saving France was the success of French
arms, as much as it had been the defeat of them for Nisbet. His
remedy for America was institutional, as he argued briefly in a pam-
phlet primarily written as a scathing attack on Washington. Deeply
troubled by what he saw as a "usurpation" of power by the Washington
administration in the Jay Treaty battle, he groped for an ultimate
solution to executive responsibility, advocating treaty power checks
and recommending greater contact between the people and the pres-
ident. But being unable to convince himself that a single president
could maintain a noble and virtuous bearing, he asked rhetorically,
"what evil is in a plural directory, gradually renewed?"¹³¹ Thus, "the
executive government would no longer exhibit the fluctuating char-
acter of an individual, but approach nearer to the fixed abstract of
the American nation."¹³² He obviously had in mind the French Di-
rectory and the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania (of which
Franklin had been a member). American senates were dismissed as
corrupt vestiges of British colonialism. While not directly denying
John Adams's separate branches of government, Bache radically

¹³⁰ *Aurora*, July 16, 1798. Bache was indicted for federal common law seditious libel before
the new act took effect.
¹³¹ [B.F. Bache], *Remarks Occasioned by the Late Conduct of Mr. Washington . . .* (Phil-
delphia, 1797), 35.
¹³² Ibid., 36.
amended Adams's intent by calling for all branches of government (be there two or three) to be plural, frequently elected, and popularly chosen. In concluding these gratuitously offered reforms, he returned again to the ideology that governed the entirety of his life, proclaiming that history's only lessons were "never to let those who govern have a separate interest from those who are governed; and the other never to trust too much power in the hands of a single man and especially not one of the public choice." 

Nisbet and Bache died committed to beliefs that were diametrically opposed. Nisbet was absolute in his confidence that only through full subjugation to God and glorification of Him could man find peace and order, establish workable class relationships, seek education and enlightenment, and exercise the modicum of liberty of which sinful men were capable. Bache stood all of this on its head. Liberty was the fundamental solution, not a residual benefit. On it depended man's natural improvement. Artificial classes, orders, and divisions slowed and stymied education and progress. Lack of liberty denied man his natural birthright to participate as a part of the sovereign whole.

Both ideologies were naive. Nisbet predicated everything on a Burkean exercise of moral self-restraint, superhuman will and commitment, and the denial of avaricious behavior that perhaps Bache, but certainly no rigid Calvinist, could expect from man. Bache believed that liberty and freedom would lead man to make only the morally right choices that Nisbet demanded, that self-interest of the Lockean-Jeffersonian type would magically become merged with the collective interest, or at least peaceably acquiescent to it.

No wonder Nisbet died a gloomy pessimist, while Bache had corresponding doubts about his civil millennium. "This Century seems to Set in Blood," Nisbet concluded in 1799. In a famous letter to Samuel Miller, he thoroughly condemned the eighteenth century for its "spirit of free inquiry" and "scepticism," its "unrestrained liberty of thought, speech, publication and action," its rationalism and ma-

133 Ibid., 40.
terialist philosophy, and its denial of historical lessons. 135 While Nisbet hinted that a return to an ordered society and the promotion of education might ameliorate the bitter estrangement he felt toward the entire century, there was no eliminating the fundamental alienation inherent in his ideology. He was not advocating merely a Burkean resignation to the way things were; he was demanding wholesale attribution of will and being to an external God.

To the very end, Bache was also drawn to glib notions of education as the chief palliative for society’s ills. His last act was to leave everything to his wife with the sole recommendation “that she will bestow on our dear Children a suitable and enlightened Education, such as shall be worthy of us, and advantageous to themselves, and render them virtuous, generous, and attached to the immutable principles of Civil Liberty.” 136 But as the columns of the Aurora attest, education only improved man in a limited way if all of society were not reformed. In his last letter, written during the yellow fever epidemic that would kill him, Bache seemed ready to step ahead into a kind of pre-Marxian understanding of society. “Is it not heart rending,” he observed, “that the labouring poor should almost exclusively be the victims of the disease [yellow fever] introduced by that commerce, which, in prosperous times, is a source of misery to them, by the inequality of wealth which it introduces?” 137 But Bache did not live to make it to another stage of ideological consciousness, if, indeed, he ever would have. Instead, he satisfied himself with glib generalities about liberty and sovereign people which were as much other-worldly abstractions as Nisbet’s God, and just as alien from social reality.

Standing back to see Nisbet and Bache in full contrast, it is worth noting that at the primary level of the direct influence of specific political philosophical ideas on both men’s lives, it is nearly impossible to discover clear-cut origins of their political philosophies. At the secondary level of ideas and influences in combination—of ideas more generally “in the air”—Nisbet obviously embraced an idiosyn-

135 CN to Samuel Miller, Dec. 16, 1800, in Miller, Memoir, 268-73.
ocratic Calvinist-Burkean focus, while Bache promoted a radical Franklinian-Enlightenment faith in progress. But the discovery of the sources of their ideas in isolation or combination is neither particularly interesting nor productive of significant explanation. What is significant is their processes of ideological evolution in the context of their world at the end of the eighteenth century. As Geertz contends, it is insufficient to consider “ideology as an entity in itself—as an ordered system of cultural symbols rather than in the discrimination of its social and psychological contexts.”

For Nisbet and Bache, the process of ideology was articulated through rejection, not acceptance, of many of the American social realities they saw before them, and their substitution of images of the French Revolution for more immediate American republican lessons. Both men stretched the very elastic paradigms of republican revisionism and Lockean liberalism to their breaking points. When they had reached the extreme limits of prevailing ideological sentiment, they could only satisfy their ideological visions by justifying them through lenses focused on the revolution in France. Only after verifying their beliefs through virtual reification of the French Revolution could they come to terms with what was wrong with the American republic.

To some degree, Nisbet and Bache may appear anomalous, and their ideological positions unique. Yet the evidence is clear that both men, even in the midst of their most intense moments of ideological despair, assumed they were addressing a larger audience that shared the main tenets of their beliefs—Bache through his cohort of political associates and his readership, Nisbet through his correspondents and students. So it may be that close examination of other Americans in the fluid and dynamic first three decades of the republic will reveal other ideologies that stretch or alter the centripetal pull of current thinking on American republicanism. Perhaps through discovery of those on the ideological peripheries we will learn more about the central conceptual ethos of the era.

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138 Geertz, “Ideology,” in Interpretation of Cultures, 196.