The Society for Political Inquiries: The Limits of Republican Discourse in Philadelphia on the Eve of the Constitutional Convention

The Society for Political Inquiries was formed February 9, 1787, to promote the study of the "science of government." Interestingly enough, despite the Society's name and the imminent meeting of the Constitutional Convention, the members at meetings of the Society for Political Inquiries virtually never discussed theories of government. Instead, the Society's members turned toward topics of republican interest and little partisan significance (at that time).¹

I would like to thank Neil Longley York, who first suggested the Society for Political Inquiries as a topic. I also want to thank the History Department of Brigham Young University for research funding, and the helpful staffs of the American Philosophical Society and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹ The lower-case word "republican" is used by some historians to describe the sometimes political, sometimes reform-minded, and sometimes economic ideology of early Americans. Robert E. Shalhope notes that the difficulty of identifying specific attributes of republicanism stems from its ambiguous usage by early Americans: "republicanism represented a general consensus solely because it rested on such vague premises. Only one thing was certain: Americans believed that republicanism meant an absence of an aristocracy and a monarchy. Beyond this, agreement vanished." See Shalhope, "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in Early American Historiography," William and Mary Quarterly (hereafter, WMQ) 29 (1972), 72. Ruth H. Bloch has questioned the attempt by historians to "encompass all revolutionary culture" within the debate over classical republican theory. Bloch notes that republicanism, "broadly speaking," had multiple intellectual roots in liberalism, Scottish moral philosophy, Puritanism, evangelicalism, and classical republican theory. See Bloch, "The Constitution and Culture," WMQ 44 (1987), 552-53. It is in this broader sense that I use the term "republican" in this paper. I use the capitalized word only when referring to the Pennsylvania political party of the same name. For more on this subject, see Bernard Bailyn, The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge, 1967); Gordon S. Wood, The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787 (Chapel Hill, 1969); J.G.A. Pocock, The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition (Princeton, 1975); Lance Banning, The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology (Ithaca, 1978); Joyce Appleby, Capitalism and a New Social Order (New York, 1984); Ruth H. Bloch, Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes
The Society’s purpose in promoting knowledge and discussion had European antecedents in learned societies or société savante.\(^2\) Carl Bridenbaugh studied the American version of these voluntary associations in Philadelphia before 1776 and concluded that they embodied the philosophy of the eighteenth century in their search for knowledge and ways to promote it.\(^3\) These societies, followed later by the American Philosophical Society, all helped to “propagate the enlightenment” in Philadelphia.\(^4\)

After the War for Independence, voluntary associations concerned with problems of political theory and practice began to take shape. The partisan version of these political societies appeared in the Whig societies of the 1780s. The Whig Society of Philadelphia, which later changed its name to the Constitutional Society, organized to defend the Pennsylvania state constitution. (Several provisions of the state constitution came under attack in the late 1770s and early 1780s, but most important to the Constitutionalists was the unicameral legislature.) At the same time, a partisan group of Philadelphia elites established the Republican Society to lobby for a bicameral legislature (among other activities).\(^5\)

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\(^{4}\) Ibid., 70. Adrienne Koch sees the Society for Political Inquiries as another attempt to study practical political theory in the age of the American Enlightenment. See Koch’s “Pragmatic Wisdom and the American Enlightenment,” WMQ 18 (1961), 313-29.

\(^{5}\) The most complete study of the conflict between the Constitutionalists and the Republicans is Robert L. Brunhouse, The Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania, 1776-1790 (Harrisburg, 1942). For a thorough discussion of these groups as political parties, see Jackson Turner Main, Political Parties Before the Constitution (Chapel Hill, 1973), 174-211. I believe Main’s model to be valuable for identifying divisions, but limited in acknowledging the
The Society for Political Inquiries was one of several non-partisan political groups of the 1780s known to have formed to study and examine new theories of government. The preamble of the Society, written by Thomas Paine, stated that Americans had "grafted on an infant commonwealth the manners of ancient and corrupted monarchies." The Society resolved to undertake the "arduous and complicated science of government" which had previously been left to either "practical politicians" or "individual theorists." With this in mind, the members agreed to associate themselves under the title of the Society for Political Inquiries and to abide by the Society’s laws and regulations.

transience of individuals between parties. For example, Thomas Paine was a Constitutionalist for the first part of the 1780s, yet he later aligned himself by the middle of the decade with Republicans such as Robert Morris and Benjamin Rush. Richard Alan Ryerson has synthesized the scholarship of Owen S. Ireland and Douglass McNeil Arnold in "Republican Theory and Partisan Reality in Revolutionary Pennsylvania: Toward a New View of the Constitutionalists," in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., Sovereign States in an Age of Uncertainty (Charlottesville, 1981), 95-133. Ryerson suggests that Constitutionalists tended to be outsiders, poorer economically, and by religion either Scotch-Irish Presbyterian or German Reformed. Republicans tended to come from within the state, be wealthier, and of more tolerant backgrounds, such as Episcopalian or Quaker. The result was that Republicans were liberal in coalition building, while the Constitutionalists were more exclusive and had to rely on a much narrower base of rural support. See also Douglass McNeil Arnold, "Political Ideology and the Internal Revolution in Pennsylvania, 1776-1790" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1976); and Owen S. Ireland, "The Crux of Politics: Religion and Party in Pennsylvania, 1778-1789," WMQ 42 (1985), 453-75.


7 Rules and Regulations of the Society for Political Enquiries (Philadelphia, 1787), 1-2. Confusion over the name of the Society for Political Inquiries among historians can be traced to two sources: the Pennsylvania Packet announced a meeting of the Society, but erroneously called it "the Society for Promoting Political Inquiries" (probably because a society for promoting agriculture did exist—see the edition of April 2, 1787); J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott’s History of Philadelphia, 1607-1884 (3 vols., (Philadelphia, 1884), 1:445, has one paragraph on the Society, but calls it “The Society for Political Inquiries, for Mutual Improvement in Knowledge of Government, and for the Advancement of Political Science.” Scharf and Westcott apparently lifted this name from the second paragraph
Among the original members of the Society were Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Francis Hopkinson, David Rittenhouse, Robert Morris, Benjamin Rush, Tench Coxe, and James Wilson. It is sig-


> Another society has recently been established here [Philadelphia], which concerns itself with political inquiries. Its objects will be the elucidation of the science of government and the furtherance of human happiness. This society is regulated on the norm of the European philosophical societies; its papers and contributions will be published annually so as to preserve many valuable contributions which would otherwise be lost in the public prints. The honorable Dr. Franklin is President of this society.


The other participants (those who either attended a meeting, signed the by-laws, or presented an essay) were: John Armstrong, Jr., Richard Bache, Charles Biddle, William Bingham, Robert Blackwell, John Bleakey, William Bradford, Edward Burd, Benjamin Chew, George Clymer, Nicholas Collin, Thomas Fitzsimons, George Fox, William T. Franklin, William Hamilton, Robert Hare, Henry Hill, Jared Ingersoll, William Jackson, John Jones, Adam Kuhn, Samuel Magaw, John F. Mifflin, Thomas Mifflin, Robert Milligan, Jacob Morgan, Gouverneur Morris, John Nixon, Timothy Pickering, Samuel Powel,
significant that even though most of the forty-eight members of the Society were Republicans (the Pennsylvania group that disapproved of the state constitution of 1776), at least six of the members were Constitutionalists (those who supported the 1776 constitution). This mix suggests that the Enlightenment impulse, which favored diverse opinions as well as the belief that reasonable men should be able to gather together, was strong enough to overcome temporarily the factional dispute otherwise dividing the two parties during the previous decade. The members of the Society gathered to preserve, strengthen, and enhance the social and political virtues necessary to improve republican forms of government. To divide the Society along partisan lines would have been inconsistent with the anti-party attitudes of republicanism.  

The Society met twice a month, usually in Franklin's dining room or library, from October to May (with a summer recess). Attendance at Society meetings was highest in the first year, when the Constitutional Convention set out to propose a new system of government. From February to May of 1787 the Society's attendance ranged from thirteen to twenty-three members. The following winter, 1787-1788, twelve to fifteen members attended the first few meetings, but after Pennsylvania's ratification of the Constitution, attendance declined to six to eight members for the remainder of the year. The next winter, 1788-1789, four to eight members attended, and they agreed to meet monthly beginning in November. The meetings were never resumed after May 1789.

The members at the Society's meetings discussed far-ranging topics, including the relevance of Latin usage and study, prison reform, freedom of the press, a system of taxation, and commercial policies. An underlying theme informing members' concerns about these topics


10 Minutes of the Society for Political Inquiries, Feb. 9, 1787 to May 9, 1789.
was the general republican concern to improve the social and economic virtues of Americans.

Questions about the usefulness of Latin and Greek studies had been raised as early as 1769, when John Wilson, a teacher at the Friends' Latin School in Philadelphia, wondered about the propriety of teaching Latin to boys who were intended for employment as either mechanics or merchants.\textsuperscript{11} At the Society's March 28, 1788, meeting, members agreed to consider the question: "Whether the study of the Latin and Greek languages is proper in the degree in which it is now pursued?" On April 11 and 25, 1788, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Hill (merchant), Samuel Magaw (minister and vice-provost of the University of Pennsylvania), John Jones and Adam Kuhn (both doctors), Nicholas Collin (minister), and George Fox and George Clymer (merchants) gathered in Franklin's library to discuss the issue.\textsuperscript{12}

Shortly after these evening discussions, Francis Hopkinson, a member of the Society who taught at the University of Pennsylvania and who may have heard about the conversations from Samuel Magaw, wrote and delivered two speeches on the Latin-Greek debate at the graduation ceremonies of the university; the presentations were later reprinted in the *American Museum*.\textsuperscript{13} Hopkinson wrote the first essay with a slight trace of wit, but he rendered the second essay in a satiric


\textsuperscript{13} The *American Museum* was a magazine published by Mathew Carey, an Irish immigrant who came to Philadelphia from Dublin in 1784. The *Museum* was published monthly, and it usually reprinted pieces, although it also printed original contributions. For more information, see Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1850* (Cambridge, 1966), 100-3. For the essays, see Francis Hopkinson, "The Use and Advantages of What are Called Learned Languages in the Education of Youth," *American Museum* (hereafter, *AM*) 3 (June 1788), 540-41; and Hopkinson, "Answer to the Preceding Speech—written by the same gentlemen as the former—and delivered by another student," *AM* 3 (June 1788), 541-44.
manner, revealing his own contempt for the classical languages. Likewise, Franklin was opposed to the teaching of Latin and Greek. In a conversation with Benjamin Rush about a year after the discussion at the Society, Franklin called the classical languages the “quackery of literature” and said that although he had spent one year in Latin school as a boy, he found study of the Romance languages Italian and Spanish easier primarily because he had first learned French.

Certainly Rush saw no need for the study of Latin and Greek. In a letter written to John Adams shortly after his visit with Franklin, Rush summarized his own recent essay, published in the American Museum. Rush posed two rhetorical questions to Adams:

Who are guilty of the greatest absurdity—the Chinese who press the feet into deformity by small shoes, or the Europeans and Americans who press the brain into obliquity by Greek and Latin? Do not men use Latin and Greek as the scuttlefish emit their ink, on purpose to conceal themselves from an intercourse with the common people? Indeed, my friend, I owe nothing to the Latin and Greek classics but the turgid and affected style of my youthful compositions.

Rush’s comments on concealing “an intercourse with the common people” reveal his republican aversion, shared with Hopkinson and Franklin, against elitism in the national language. But while Rush, Hopkinson, and Franklin promoted equality in the national language, they were uncertain about the liberties that could be taken with such egalitarianism, particularly with regard to the press.

During the debate over ratification of the Constitution, some newspapers (e.g., Eleazer Oswald’s Independent Gazetteer) began to attack...
prominent persons in the state and country. This was an era when public attacks in newspapers were something just short of invitations to duels, but it was also a time when many people were attracted to the conception of personal freedom. So the question of what constituted freedom of the press was an important one. It was in this climate that, in 1787 in the *Independent Gazetteer*, the authors who signed themselves as “A Centinel” characterized Benjamin Franklin as being as much a “Fool from age” as Washington was “a Fool from nature.” Oswald had overstepped proper limits of gentlemanly behavior in publishing the piece. Indeed, Tench Coxe sent a clipping of the newspaper attack to a friend, with a note that it had “astonished many people here.” A spirited defense of Franklin and Washington immediately appeared in three different editions of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, but the debate so impressed Franklin that he proposed it as a topic of discussion at the Society.

Accordingly, on November 23, 1787, fifteen members of the Society gathered in Franklin’s library to discuss three questions:

What is the Extent of the Liberty of the Press consistent with the Public Utility? If it should have limits what are they? Is the Liberty

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20 Unfortunately, I do not know (but would appreciate finding out) the exact date the *Independent Gazetteer* carried the insult, although I do know that it was in either late September or early October 1787. The response (and defense) appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* Oct. 10 and 31, and Nov. 7, 1787. The topic was proposed Nov. 9, 1787; see Tench Coxe to David S. Franks, Nov. 24, 1787, Tench Coxe Papers (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).
A few months later, in a letter to the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Franklin revealed his own thoughts on the subject: “Nothing is more likely to endanger the liberty of the press, than the abuse of that liberty, by employing it in personal accusation, detraction and calumny.”

To support his contention, Franklin appealed to the national sense of honor. He mentioned that as he travelled abroad, he once confronted an editor who was known to publish derogatory things about Americans and who justified himself by saying “That he had published nothing disgraceful to us, which he had not taken from our own printed papers.”

Two key republican points appear in Franklin’s remarks: first, the failure of the individual to exercise self-restraint and moderation, and second, the danger the irresponsible individual posed to American virtue by damaging the national sense of honor.

Another republican concern expressed by members of the Society was the influence of public institutions on moral character. At a meeting of the Society in March 1787, Benjamin Rush addressed that concern in “An Inquiry into the Influence of Public Punishments upon Criminals and upon Society.” His essay dealt with the public works law passed in Philadelphia in 1786. This law replaced capital

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21 The questions were proposed at the meeting of Nov. 9, 1787: Minutes of the Society for Political Inquiries, Nov. 9, 1787.


24 The Society promoted discussion on other topics dealing with political economy and social virtues. See, for example, the Minutes of the Society for Political Inquiries, April 20, 1787. An essay on integration may be found in the William Rawle Family Papers (Historical Society of Pennsylvania) in the three volumes, 1775-1835, entitled “William Rawle’s essays on philosophical, scientific, historical, political, and social subjects.” Paine’s essay, “The Incorporating of Towns,” discussed the disadvantages of corporations and charters to the economies of municipalities. While the original essay given at the Society has not survived, essentially the same, or at least similar, message is found in the second part of *The Rights of Man* in the fifth chapter. See William M. Van der Weyde, ed., *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine* (10 vols., New Rochelle, 1925), 7:21-25. Nicholas Collin read a paper, entitled “An essay upon the advantages resulting to a nation from the cheerful temper of its inhabitants,” which was reprinted in the *Memoirs of the Pennsylvania Historical Society* 2 (1830), 48-49.

25 Minutes of the Society for Political Inquiries, March 9, 1787.
punishment for burglary, robbery, and sodomy with a term not to exceed ten years of employment at the public thoroughfares.\textsuperscript{26}

The "Wheelbarrow Law," as it came to be known, provided that convicts not only had to work at repairing the streets, they also had to be dressed in a "peculiar style" and had to be constantly guarded while working in public.\textsuperscript{27} Public humiliation of other persons was hard enough on Philadelphians' sensitivity. Indeed, one observer remarked that "Pardons, so destructive to every mild system of penal laws, were granted with a profusion."\textsuperscript{28} One Jacob Dryer, for instance, was convicted of burglary, but rather than undergo public humiliation, he told the Council that he preferred the previous punishment of hanging. Out of sympathy for his humiliation, Dryer was pardoned and paroled by the Supreme Executive Council. Dryer violated the conditions of his pardon, however, and was sentenced to be hung, but he escaped the gallows by being pardoned a second time.\textsuperscript{29}

There were other disadvantages to the public punishments law. Many of the convicts were professional thieves, and pick-pocketing of passersby was common. The more malicious thieves were required to have a large iron ball chained to their legs which had to be lifted from place to place after they had finished sweeping or scraping their area. This ball could be thrown down so that it injured pedestrians, to the amusement of the convicts and the detriment of the citizens.\textsuperscript{30} Escapes and riots became more common as prisoners voiced their opposition to the wheelbarrow law. Just two days before Rush gave his paper on public punishments, the \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette} reported that "18 criminals broke out of gaol," all of whom had been

\textsuperscript{26} Scharf and Westcott, \textit{History of Philadelphia}, 1:443.
\textsuperscript{28} James Mease and Thomas Porter, \textit{Picture of Philadelphia}, giving an account of its origin, increase and improvements in Arts, Sciences, and Manufactures; Commerce and Revenue. With a compendious view of its Societies, Literary, Benevolent, Patriotic and Religious. . . . (Philadelphia, 1831), 160.
\textsuperscript{29} Scharf and Westcott, \textit{History of Philadelphia}, 1:444.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
condemned "to punishment at the wheelbarrow."\textsuperscript{31} Two weeks later, the prisoners of the Walnut Street jail attempted another general escape, which resulted in an armed force being called in and the death of one prisoner.\textsuperscript{32} In a letter to her father, Susanna Dillwyn, a Quaker offended by the punishments, summed up the feelings of many Philadelphians:

criminals clean the streets . . . with great iron chains around them—at the end of which a monstrous ball of iron is fast'ned to prevent their running away—it is a painful sight and in other respects I believe they find more disadvantages than was expected from it.\textsuperscript{33}

This situation, deplorable to many Philadelphians, prompted Rush to begin his essay by noting that the purpose of punishment was both to reform the prisoner and to prevent further crimes. He argued that public punishments "tend to make bad men worse and to increase crimes."\textsuperscript{34} Rush believed it was difficult to reform a convict through the wheelbarrow law because public punishment destroyed the criminal's dignity and removed all shame, a dangerous course, since shame "is one of the strongest outposts of virtue" and, by implication, an important deterrent to criminal acts. The removal of the deterrent not only permitted similar offenses to recur, but also encouraged revenge. Rush thought another reason that public punishments would increase crime was because future criminals could see the extent of the punishment and would be unafraid. Far better, the doctor thought, that punishments should remain unknown, since the human mind always assumes the worst.\textsuperscript{35} Public punishments, Rush continued, also

\textsuperscript{31} Pennsylvania Gazette, March 7, 1787. The Gazette was a weekly newspaper established in 1728 by Samuel Keimer, who sold the paper in 1729 to Benjamin Franklin and Hugh Meredith. Meredith retired in 1732, and Franklin took David Hall on as a partner in 1748. In 1766 the partnership was dissolved, and William Sellers joined Hall in printing the paper. Brigham, History of American Newspapers, 933-34.

\textsuperscript{32} Scharf and Westcott, History of Philadelphia, 1:444.


\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
damaged society. They made people insensitive and callous to suffering, and, Rush extrapolated, when people ignored the worst part of the human race, they no longer were able to love the whole, causing them to forget the widow, orphan, naked, and sick—as well as the prisoner.\(^{36}\)

The essay’s publication as a pamphlet in April 1787 had a profound effect. The pamphlet was popular in Philadelphia (Susanna Dillwyn purchased one to send to her father), and Rush could write to John Dickinson that “It has made many converts in our city from the assistance it has derived from the miserable spectacle which is daily before our eyes.”\(^{37}\) By the following month, interest had grown enough to support another organization, and on May 8, several members of the Society for Political Inquiries joined with Rush, as well as leading religious figures of Philadelphia, to form the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of the Public Prisons.\(^{38}\) Later that month, Rush wrote to John Coakley Lettsom and acknowledged the influence of John Howard, a well-known advocate of prison reform in Britain, in the formation of the prison reform society. Rather modestly, Rush added that his pamphlet had aided the formation of the new society “in a small degree.”\(^{39}\)

The Society for Political Inquiries was more than a gentlemen’s club or an academic society. It also functioned as a public voice expressing concerns about contemporary issues. In the case of the punishment issue, an essay written out of concern for a local issue was favorably received by Society members, who encouraged its publication. Rush’s access to the resources and members of the Society, as well as the success of his pamphlet, led to the organization of a new society designed to alter the public punishment laws. The actions of the members of the Society for Political Inquiries showed their republican, and Enlightenment, commitment to improve the social character of society.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 7.
\(^{38}\) See the charter of the association, “Constitution of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of the Public Prisons,” *AM* 1 (April 1787), 454.
Another public institution that influenced the character of a republican society was the method of financing government. To the members of the Society for Political Inquiries, the economic system of a republican government was just as important a consideration as was the nation's social character. Financing republican government became one of the major topics of discussion in Society meetings, since the foremost concern for many members was a method of taxation for the new nation.

In April 1787 Franklin wrote to Abbé Morellet on this subject (in particular referring to import duties), stating that freedom of commerce was preferable where direct taxes could be obtained. But, Franklin complained, in America "they are so widely settled, often five or six miles distant from one another in the back country, that the collection of a direct tax is almost impossible." The fees of the collector would be more than the tax taken in.  

The Society decided to stimulate public debate on methods of taxation by announcing an essay contest. This practice was common; it had been used previously by both the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture and the American Philosophical Society. On Friday, December 14, 1787, the Society for Political Inquiries resolved to offer a gold plate worth ten guineas for the best essay that addressed the question: "What is the best System of Taxation to constitute a Revenue in a Commercial, Agricultural & Manufacturing Country?" Three Society members were instructed to prepare for publication an announcement, which was discussed at the Society's next meeting on December 28. In surprising contrast to the usually bland minutes, the secretary noted that a "long debate [over the form


41 Fifteen awards were offered during 1789 by the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture. See "Premiums proposed by the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture for the year 1789," AM 5 (Jan. 1789), 159; and also E.P. Richardson, "A Rare Gold Medal of the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture," American Art Journal 14 (July 1982), 56-61.
of announcements] arose." 42 Apparently, the debate over form was deep-rooted, because the prize questions were discussed January 25, March 28, April 11, and April 25, 1788. Finally, on May 9, the Society decided to have the announcement printed "in two of the public papers, also in the magazines and the Museum." 43

Although the official winner apparently was never announced, some clues exist to help determine which essay was successful. By February 1789 three essays (two in German, one in English) had been submitted. The two essays in German were translated and read by Nicholas Collin, who determined that they did not "meet the questions entirely." The essay in English was submitted by Peletiah Webster. 44 Webster's essay initially was not considered for the prize because a longer version of it had previously been published in 1783. 45 This objection was overcome because the gold plate was ordered, and Webster's essay was afterward published in the American Museum. 46

Webster's essay began by introducing the basic principles of government and revenue finance. He argued that the underlying principle

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42 Minutes of the Society for Political Inquiries, Dec. 14 and 28, 1787; Jan. 25, March 28, April 11 and 25, and May 9, 1788.
43 The Society also offered a premium for the question, "Whether the imposition of government is beneficial to Agriculture, Commerce, and Manufactures?" AM 3 (May 1788), 446-47.
44 Peletiah Webster to Benjamin Franklin, Dec. 18, 1788, Benjamin Franklin Papers (American Philosophical Society); and Minutes of the Society for Political Inquiries, Feb. 13, 1789. The essay contest drew at least one European's interest. Grouber de Groubentall wrote to Thomas Jefferson asking for information on the "soil, commerce, agricultural produce, manufactures, [and] exports and imports" so that he could submit a treatise to the Société instituée à Philadelphie pour l'examen d'objets Politiques. See Julian P. Boyd, ed., The Papers of Thomas Jefferson (22 vols. to date, Princeton, 1950-), 14:50.
45 Referring to Webster's essay: "The latter had been published before the Society's advertisement had issued, and for that cause its consideration was postponed." Smith and Davidson, "Report of the Committee Appointed to Examine the Minute Book of the Society for Political Inquiries," 50.
46 Peletiah Webster, "Essay on Free Trade and Finance," AM 6 (July 1789), 67-69; (Aug. 1789), 133-36; (Sept. 1789), 190-93; and (Dec. 1789), 451-54. The essay was originally published in pamphlet form as A Sixth Essay on Free Trade and Finance, Particularly shewing What Supplies of Public Revenue may be drawn from Merchandize, Without injuring our Trade or burdening our People (Philadelphia, 1783). How much of Webster's moral vision was embraced by members of the Society for Political Inquiries is not known (although they did award it their gold plate), but Benjamin Franklin favored Webster's methods. In a letter to M. Le Veillard (Feb. 17, 1788) he wrote (referring to an impost): "what is paid in the price of merchandise is less felt by the consumer, and less the cause of complaint." Smyth, ed., Writings of Benjamin Franklin, 9:638.
of taxation was that “the consumption of anything, on which the burden of tax is laid, will always be thereby lessened.” Since taxation reduced consumption, Webster believed that those items should be taxed heaviest which were “least necessary” to the community. The problem was in determining what was “necessary.”

Webster defined as “necessary” those items which the United States could export. Therefore, agriculture, fishing, and manufactures would be exempt, as would trade, which would be the “servant” of all. What then should be taxed? Webster recommended those items which injured the prosperity of the community or which weakened “their morals and economy.” This combination of moral vision and economic practices provided a dual benefit. A tax on “harmful” luxuries would raise a revenue while at the same time reducing their use. Among the items Webster thought deserved import tariffs were: “all imported wines; silks of all sorts, cambricks, lawns, and laces, &c. &c. superfine cloths and velvets; jewels of all kinds, &c.” Sugar, tea, and coffee were other items which could be effectively taxed at rates from 10 to 100 percent; to non-luxury items a small duty of 5 percent could be added.

Those who favored “freedom of commerce” resisted import duties; consequently, Webster gave a barrage of reasons why the tariff was superior to other forms of taxation. Import duties were always paid in cash, thus increasing the supply of circulating money, while at the same time they helped to decrease the use of pernicious goods. Because individuals only paid the tax in proportion to their purchases, the tariff operated “in a way of general equality.” A tariff also helped to preserve freedom of choice. Unlike a direct property tax with an arbitrary tax collector who could demand payment at any time, consumers would know before they purchased a bottle of wine or a silk gown that there would be a tariff to pay. In Webster’s train of thought the customer had the choice of whether or not he wanted to pay the extra cost.

Webster, “Essay,” 68.
Ibid.
Ibid., 69.
Ibid., 134-35.
Ibid., 190.
Webster then considered the practical effects of the tariff on the nation. The most important effect was the gradual diminution of "useless" consumption. Webster believed that farmers were especially susceptible to buying one luxury which necessitated the use of another so that the farmer soon "finds the proceeds of the year vanished into trifles." Even more disturbing, merchants and tradesmen who had sold goods to the farmer on credit were unable to collect payment.52

In a cash-deprived economy, a tariff-based tax promised other benefits. Laborers and tradesmen could follow their daily occupations without having to lose work time by having to "go in quest of money to satisfy a collector of taxes." Local manufactures also would increase in response to the tariff, thereby benefiting the whole economy. Webster was not even concerned about the additional price increase, since this would be "but a light inconvenience to the people."53 The alternative to a tariff was to restore poll and estate taxes which, Webster insisted, discouraged industry, oppressed the laborer, and ruined agriculture. The import duty was the least painful to farmers, as compared to parting with a number of animals to satisfy a direct tax, and if implemented fairly and uniformly, the duty would not hurt merchants either.54

Webster's proposal combined moral vision and political economy in a manner that preserved equality (since the tax would be proportional to how much one spent) and liberty (since the consumer presumably had the choice of whether or not to purchase the tariffed item). This form of republicanism relied on economic regulations to improve the moral character of Americans by reducing their consumption of luxuries. At the same time, it provided for the necessary financing of the national government.55

Another national economic concern which the Society for Political Inquiries addressed was the commercial role that would be played

52 Ibid., 191.
53 Ibid., 451.
54 Ibid., 452.
55 Gordon Wood notes that "like Puritanism, of which it was a more relaxed, secularized version, republicanism was essentially anti-capitalistic, a final attempt to come to terms with the emergent individualistic society" that showed itself in America: Wood, Creation of the American Republic, 418. Webster had a strong New England upbringing, and his economic thought reflects many puritanical strains of republicanism. See Forrest McDonald, Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution (Lawrence, 1985), 73-77.
by the national government under the new Constitution. This topic was of particular concern to the many Society members who were merchants. In a series of letters written to his brother in Europe, George Fox, a Philadelphia merchant and secretary of the Society, revealed many of his hopes and concerns for the success of the new Constitution’s commercial regulations. “Our domestic news is not very agreeable,” Fox wrote. Citing the effects of the War for Independence on the local economy, he complained that “The War has in some measure destroyed those habits of industry and honesty which the old settlers” had possessed.56 Fox in a later letter expressed his hope for change: “Much—very much of our future happiness as citizens of the United States depends on the Convention now sitting as well as the wisdom of the several states to adopt these alterations in the Confederation which may promise future advantages.”57

Others expressed the need for commercial regulation in articles for the *American Museum*. William Barton (not a member of the Society) wrote “On the Propriety of Investing Congress with Power to Regulate the Trade of the United States.” The author argued that since sovereignty over trade was given implicitly to the Confederation by the states, it should be granted outright so that Congress may promote “a beneficial system of foreign trade.”58

Tench Coxe, a merchant who would later help Alexander Hamilton to draft a report on the manufactures of the United States, read an essay before the Society at this time on “The Principles on Which a Commercial System for the United States of America Should be Founded.”59 Coxe began by noting that “now is a moment of crisis” and listed the economic and political problems of the Confederation. Precious metals and hard currency were absorbed “by a wanton

56 George Fox to Samuel M. Fox, Sept. 1786 and May 1, 1787, George Fox Letter Book (American Philosophical Society).
57 George Fox to Samuel M. Fox, June 9, 1787, ibid.
59 Tench Coxe, *An Enquiry into the Principles on which a Commercial System for the United States of America should be Founded; to which are added Some Political Observations connected with the subject. . . .* (Philadelphia, 1787). Jacob Cooke treats this essay admirably in *Tench Coxe and the Early Republic*, 99-102. See also Minutes of the Society for Political Inquiries, May 11, 1787.
consumption of imported luxuries,” and as a result, paper money was used. An ineffectual federal government under the Articles of Confederation had left foreign commerce and trade extremely weak. Even shipping between American ports faced foreign competition.\(^{60}\)

To combat these problems, Coxe reviewed the state of agriculture and then suggested improvements for commerce and manufactures. Coxe’s essay pointed out many benefits in agriculture. It was productive because of the abundant fertile soil in the United States, but also because few or no duties were required to strengthen it and it provided employment for a large labor force (nine out of ten people were employed in agriculture). Agriculture was “the spring of our commerce and the parent of manufactures,” he argued. While Coxe may have been a little too laudatory in his exuberant praise of agriculture, he was aware of the role that farm exports played in eighteenth-century America’s balance of trade.\(^{61}\)

After safely remarking that nothing should be done to agriculture which would “interrupt this happy progress of our affairs,” Coxe argued that positive action was necessary to encourage manufactures and commerce. First, Coxe advocated a domestic policy of reciprocity. Americans should return in kind the trade regulations that they had been forced to work under for the previous decade. For example, Coxe believed that navigation between American ports should be restricted to domestic ships, allowing foreign ships only to finish their sales, not carry cargo, between ports. This, after all, was what Europeans did.\(^{62}\) Coxe next pointed out the need for trade restrictions against certain imports. The fisheries of Nova Scotia, for example, interfered with New England’s trade in sea products. Regional specialization also would promote economic growth in the new nation. He wrote: “the produce of the Southern states should be exchanged for such manufactures as can be made by the Northern.”\(^{63}\) The benefits of domestic manufacture were not forgotten. It seemed to Coxe that domestic manufactures had a natural advantage in America over imports. After the costs of insurance, commissions, duties, han-

\(^{60}\) Coxe, *An Enquiry*, 5-6.
\(^{61}\) Ibid., 7-9.
\(^{62}\) Ibid., 12.
\(^{63}\) Ibid., 20.
dling, storage, and shipping were taken into account, Coxe figured that American-made products had a 25 percent bonus right from the start. Finally, in the area of foreign policy Coxe advocated a strict neutrality policy toward Europe. European wars would benefit “farmers, merchants and manufacturers. . . . Our ships would carry for them . . . and our lands and manufactories would furnish the supplies of their fleets.”

Coxe’s essay on a commercial system was immediately popular. One week after presenting the essay to the Society (on May 11), Coxe wrote to Franklin that he had received encouragement from his friends to publish the essay. Published just as the Constitutional Convention began to meet, the essay was designed to influence the Convention. Coxe’s intentions were all too clear. Six of Pennsylvania’s delegates to the Convention had heard him read his essay, and the pamphlet was dedicated to “The Honorable Members of the Convention, assembled at Philadelphia for Federal Purposes.” The popularity of Coxe’s essay did not subside. One month later the American Museum reprinted the entire essay and dedicated it and the rest of the issue to the Convention delegates.

While Coxe’s essay apparently had little impact on the Convention, the popularity of his ideas extended beyond his government proposals. Two months after the American Museum reprint appeared, Coxe addressed the opening meeting of the Pennsylvania Society for the Encouragement of Manufactures and the Useful Arts, which was organized to raise funds for manufacturing investment. The Society for the Encouragement of Manufactures was first proposed July 26, 1787, at a meeting held for those interested in the scheme. Coxe,

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64 Ibid., 16-20.
65 Ibid., 33.
66 Tench Coxe to Benjamin Franklin, May 18, 1787, Benjamin Franklin Papers; Coxe, An Enquiry, 2. Thomas Jefferson received a copy of Coxe’s pamphlet from John B. Cutting (then in London), who wrote to Jefferson (who was in Paris): “if a good opportunity occurs soon I will transmit to you a pamphlet or two lately written in various parts of the Union.” See E. Millicent Sowerby, ed., Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson (5 vols., Washington, 1953), 3:470-71.
67 Tench Coxe, “An Enquiry into the principles on which a commercial system for the United States of America should be founded,” AM 1 (June 1787), 496-514.
with several others, was assigned to draw up a constitution for the new organization. Preliminary officers were appointed on August 12, and by September 12, a regular election of officers and managers was held. Not surprisingly, much of the leadership came from members of the Society for Political Inquiries: the president (Thomas Mifflin), two of the vice-presidents (David Rittenhouse and Samuel Powel), one of the secretaries (George Fox), the treasurer (John Nixon), and five of the managers (William Bingham, Tench Coxe, Robert Hare, William Rawle, and Benjamin Rush).

The Society for Political Inquiries drew members from both political parties in Philadelphia to discuss issues of importance to the republican experiment. If those involved were not the "men of all classes, sects, and political beliefs who showed a signal willingness to forget private animosities" (in the words of Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, who were writing on associations and their members prior to 1776), neither were they partisans who identified so strongly with a sense of party that a clear division prevented them from coming together. The Society for Political Inquiries illustrates these aspirations and limitations in the desire to cross party lines and the inability to discuss the basic theory and structure of government. Republicans and Constitutionalists may have joined the Society to show that they could gather as reasonable, educated gentlemen dedicated to a republican pursuit to improve the nation. But the closest that the Society could come to talking about principles of government was in areas that were not yet partisanly divisive, such as political economy (when Paine talked about the economic influence of charters on towns, or in the discussions on commerce or direct taxes). The Society eschewed debate or discussion over such politically volatile topics as whether a unicameral or a bicameral legislature was better suited for the new nation. Thus Paine, who favored a unicameral legislature, "never opened his

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69 For the activities of the Pennsylvania Society for the Encouragement of Manufactures and the Useful Arts, see Cooke, *Tench Coxe and the Early Republic*, 102-8; and Neil Longley York, *Mechanical Metamorphosis: Technological Change in Revolutionary America* (Westport, 1985), 164. For an excellent discussion of how capitalistic and communitarian motives were combined in early American republicanism, see Ralph Lerner, "Commerce and Character: The Anglo-American as a New Model Man," *WMQ* 36 (1979), 3-26.

mouth” when he attended the meetings, no doubt in deference to the other members’ feelings on bicameralism and the Society’s tacit understanding to confine discussion to issues that would not divide the membership.\(^{71}\) That understanding was lost when the Pennsylvania debate over ratification strained the attendance of the Constitutionalists. After the U.S. Constitution was ratified, even Republicans lost interest in Society affairs. Only a few members continued to attend, including Charles Biddle, the one remaining Constitutionalist.

The Society for Political Inquiries was most successful when it dealt with issues that had little immediate partisan significance, such as prison reform and encouragement of manufactures. That it failed to deal with the “science of government” is not really surprising, given the contradictory demands the members of the Society put on themselves. Originally they had organized a society to search for new principles of government that could be applied to the new nation. Thus, they overlooked partisan boundaries in their memberships. But political principles were partisan, not universal, and any attempt to discuss them was potentially dividing. Political necessity restrained topics of discourse among the republican-minded members of the Society for Political Inquiries. This suggests the need for examining levels of discourse, whether republican, political, civic, or economic, and their interrelationship in the early republic.\(^{72}\)

The abandonment of the search for theories of government was unavoidable if the Society were to survive beyond the first meeting. The decision might not have been explicitly made, but in effect the members avoided arguments over principles of government in favor of maintaining the appearance of a community of republican citizens—an appearance which they gave up after the struggle over ratification.\(^{73}\)


\(^{72}\) For an examination of levels of discourse, especially with regard to federalism and republicanism, see the suggestive article by Peter S. Onuf, “Reflections on the Founding: Constitutional Historiography in Bicentennial Perspective” (forthcoming in the April 1989 *William and Mary Quarterly*).

\(^{73}\) Interestingly, in April 1985, a group of civic-minded citizens joined with Roland Baumann, then of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, in reviving the Society for Political Inquiries.

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