Anticipating the Brethren: The Reverend Charles Nisbet Critiques the French Revolution

CHARLES NISBET, THE SCOTS-PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER who came to America in 1785 to become principal of Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, abhorred the French Revolution from the moment he learned of it in 1789. Nearly fifty when he immigrated, Nisbet had for twenty years been pastor in the Church of Scotland at Montrose on the northeast coast. Although he was a conservative in religious matters, he had while in Scotland been an advocate of political reform and a supporter of the American Revolution. But he did not countenance the French uprising. In private letters and occasional public pronouncements he criticized the French popular movement so thoroughly that, by early 1793, fully two years before his fellow American clergy began to speak out against it, he had anticipated virtually every argument they would make.

Charles Nisbet’s antipathy toward the French Revolution would prove prophetic. After 1795 many other American ministers deplored the anarchy, the destruction, the fiscal, social, and diplomatic damage that the Revolution
run to riot would bring to Europe. Moreover, like Nisbet, they came to fear that its contagion of infidelity and social and political disorder threatened the American Republic, and they also often cast their concerns in the familiar terms of the jeremiad. But in one respect Nisbet’s concerns not only anticipated those of his fellow clerics, they were held in such great depth as to constitute a profound difference of perspective, and it was this difference that accounted for the timing and emotion of Nisbet’s lamentations. Many of the orthodox clergy who became critical of the course of the French Revolution during the 1790s had helped bring about and foster the American Revolution. They had a vested interest in accepting and protecting its results. Thus, when they soured on the French uprising, they saw it as a perversion of its American predecessor, a corrupt copy of her own successful rejection of despotism. They viewed it as a looming threat to a successful republican order. But Charles Nisbet had become convinced by the late 1780s that America's experiment had gone awry. What happened in France, with an even more disorderly lower class, was but a natural extension of the democratic despotism that her revolution had already produced in America. Nisbet deplored revolution in France because he had come to deplore it in America.¹

Nisbet held beliefs about the American people that suggested to him that the people would follow the course of what he called excessive democratization into such behavior as the Whiskey Rebellion, Fries's Rebellion, and support for the Jeffersonians whether the French Revolution took place or not. For Nisbet that revolution presented not an influence but an additional opportunity for already overly democratic Americans to behave in ways

¹ It is here that I disagree with James D. Tagg, “The Limits of Republicanism The Reverend Charles Nisbet, Benjamin Franklin Bache, and the French Revolution,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (hereafter, *PMHB*) 112 (1988), 504-43 While Tagg and I both conclude that Nisbet was a classical republican of such a conservative stripe that it tests the meaning of republicanism as it has been applied to political ideology in revolutionary era America, he argues that Nisbet’s evolving view of American liberty and authority was influenced by American popular reaction to the deeds and beliefs of the French revolutionaries. Thus Nisbet’s conclusions about American political values and behavior were still being shaped during the 1790s. This essay argues that Nisbet reached his convictions on American revolutionary political culture during the late 1780s, in part due to the crisis over the adoption of the Constitution in Pennsylvania. Tagg and I are in agreement on much of what Nisbet abhorred in that culture, but the differences in timing and outlook are, I believe, crucial. Nisbet reached his conclusions so early, despite sharing with the ministerial counterparts of his adopted land a socio-cultural background that was both enlightened and republican, because he was supportive of, yet not directly involved with, the American Revolution. Not nearly so influenced by prerevolutionary bias, Nisbet much more quickly became critical of American democratization. He did not determine the attitudes that other conservative Americans would adopt during the later 1790s, he foreshadowed them.
toward which their culture inclined them. Alarmed at the state of religion, economics, and politics, placing the blame on the principal defect of the American national character, the democratic excess of the majority of the people, Nisbet became an acerbic critic of all that surrounded him. He had come to America a supporter of its revolution and a proponent of republicanism, expecting to mold the minds of students and parishioners alike, educating them to what he believed were the proper conservative values of deference, respect, authority, and the common good. Instead, he found a student body, a congregation, a community filled with restless striving, unwilling to defer to natural leaders and, above all, determined to act autonomously in every facet of their lives. This was perverted republicanism, indeed anarchy, and if it was the product of revolution, then he wanted nothing to do with revolution. When he learned that a popular uprising was overtaking France, engaging a people whom he viewed much less favorably than the American revolutionaries, he was certain that the outcome there would be even worse than it was in his adopted land.

Within a few weeks after news of the first acts of revolution reached America, while almost all of his contemporaries were celebrating the spread of American ideals, Nisbet decried the French actions. In his annual November address to students returning to Dickinson from vacation, Nisbet criticized the philosophical underpinnings of the Revolution as well as its social disruption. His aim, as always, was to get his students to attend to and profit from his lectures. He urged them to shun what he thought of as deviant strands of learning, condemning "that selfish philosophy which teaches men to regard themselves only, to follow their vain inclinations & humors, & to think, believe, & act as they please, without regard to the order of Nature, or the rights & interests of others." It was just such a philosophy that was at that moment "filling the Kingdom of France with slaughter & pillage, & destroying property & the order of Society under pretense of securing the natural rights of mankind." "The French, as well as ourselves," charged Nisbet, "have been guilty of idolizing & encouraging those Writers, who flatter the irregular passions of men, & who persuade them that they have a right to pursue their own happiness in any way that they chuse, without regard to the interests of others; & the same maxims
must have similar effects in all other countries."  

In criticizing the French Revolution, especially in a manner so public, sure to be known to parents of his students and the townspeople of Carlisle within days, Nisbet took what was then an unpopular stance. But what he said about the French uprising drew on convictions that he held dear. His remarks emphasized a belief in the necessity of public virtue, the need for social order, and the corruption inherent in self-interest. What was especially dangerous about the French Revolution, according to Nisbet, was its social anarchy, the product of the conscious professions of an infidel and self-interested philosophy. Nisbet constantly would repeat and amplify these early themes. He believed that French revolutionary anarchy was dangerous because it was contagious. Not surprisingly, considering his heritage, he would demonstrate great concern for the fate of England and Scotland and a pessimistic fascination with the course of the European war, but, as we shall see, he was also fearful that the Revolution's excesses mirrored those already present in less extreme form in America.

Charles Nisbet's instant condemnation of the French Revolution was virtually unique. Other Americans thrilled to news of the election of the Estates-General, the triumph of the third estate over the aristocratic orders, and the fall of the Bastille. The generation of Americans which had just lived through its own revolution now thought it was witnessing the spread of its principles to Europe, indeed, to its great ally during the late war. Americans naturally favored the Revolution in its early stages. Yet, as James Tagg has recently pointed out, most Americans knew that the extraordinary changes overtaking France were significant, but they had not the political, social, or cultural acumen to understand why. Their emotional response was to favor the course of the Revolution. Thus most Americans continued to approve of the events of the next few years, applauding the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the Constitution of 1791, the campaign against the Catholic clergy, the end of feudalism and aristocratic privilege, and the declaration of the Republic. They were willing to accept as necessary to the cause such violent actions as the September Massacre, the pursuit of the émigrés, the suppression of the Vendean rebels, the government by terror, and the declarations

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2 Charles Nisbet, "Address to Students," Nov. 2, 1789, Dickinson College Archives (hereafter, DCA). The writers Nisbet referred to in this address were Voltaire and Rousseau, but within a few years his list expanded to include Paine and Priestley as well; see Nisbet to William Young, March 16, 1793, New York Public Library (hereafter, NYPL).
of war first against Austria and, later, the rest of the European monarchies. This American support for the French experiment could be seen in newspaper accounts and private correspondence, in the adoption of French dress and other fashions, in public demonstrations celebrating key developments, in the reception of French representatives such as Citizen Edmond Genêt, and in the formation of Democratic societies, loosely modeled on the Jacobin clubs of the French revolutionaries.  

The Americans who celebrated the French Revolution generally maintained their affection for it throughout the decade, although this support ebbed and flowed depending upon events both in France and in America. It was, for example, difficult for some to transfer the gratitude felt toward Louis XVI's France for its help in the American Revolution to the Republic that executed him. The XYZ affair also dampened the ardor, at least temporarily, of many Francophiles. Still, there was a foundation of enthusiasm for the French Revolution among the American people that remained in place throughout the 1790s.

Charles Nisbet's fellow clergymen, as Gary Nash and others have made clear, overwhelmingly mirrored the pattern demonstrated by the public at large. The ministers of the major American denominations also supported the French Revolution at first. For the most part, their support continued until the mid-1790s. Nash's survey of the sermons published by the orthodox clergy found that only Harvard's Rev. David Tappan attacked the Revolution before 1794, decrying its violence and antireligious taint in a 1793 Fast Day sermon. Through the Terror, through the anticlerical violence,

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America's ministers almost unanimously supported the Revolution. When, finally, America's Calvinist clergy turned against the Revolution, it was because of domestic, not French, developments.\(^5\)

During the American Revolution the orthodox clergy had inseparably linked the fate of civil government and religion as parts of God's plan for mankind. In the early stages of the French Revolution they saw the attack on the Roman Catholic Church and its clergy as a fulfillment of millennial history. American Calvinists, whether pre- or postmillennial, rejoiced at the battle the French were carrying on against the Antichrist. They interpreted French events as a happy conjoining of liberty, republicanism, and Protestantism (for a blow struck against Catholicism was one struck for Protestantism).\(^6\)

The increasing radicalism of the French Revolution and the threat of the spread of its ideas to America began to undermine the clergy's support for it around mid-decade. Gradually, American ministers realized that Catholicism was not the only possible manifestation of the Antichrist. Infidelity frightened them even more, as it became the intellectual fashion in France, seeming to subvert all religion, to secularize all clergy, to corrupt the people's morals, and to endanger governmental reform. Worse, this infidelity increasingly penetrated America. Irreligion seemed to capture the minds of many in America's upper classes; it came to dominate college campuses, and ministers feared greatly that it was trickling down to the lower orders. This religious equivalent of liberty and equality fiercely condemned revealed religion, making it appear the enemy of democracy.\(^7\)

While irreligion attacked from above, the postrevolutionary upsurge in popular, evangelical religion attacked from below. Nathan Hatch has recently made clear that the rise of popular religion denigrated the status of the established clergy, empowered people to reach their own conclusions about religion free from the scrutiny of the orthodox ministry, and fostered religious disorder by promoting a wide variety of sectarian forms, each


\(^7\) Hatch, *Sacred Cause of Liberty*, 141-60; Davidson, "Searching for the Millennium," 241-61.
convinced that its way was the path to true belief. Developments such as these made it easy to believe that the French Revolution had become riddled with corruption, that its social excesses, its unlimited faith in democracy, and its atheism threatened American values through importation by its devotees. The orthodox American clergy, threatened by infidel religious beliefs and loss of control over the practice of religion, and generally alarmed at domestic political developments that threatened the Federalists, the party of religious orthodoxy, gradually shifted from being supporters to opponents of the French experiment, a shift that Federalists both abetted and were happy to exploit.8

Charles Nisbet, of course, agreed with all of these clerical prescriptions, but he had been advocating them for half a decade by the time Tappan spoke out, and was even further in advance of other clergy.9 Nisbet's views of the French Revolution, and, as we shall see, of the American Revolution, were deeply colored by his Scottish experience. He was ambivalent about leaving his native country, and he did so reluctantly. He had led a good life there. Born to a village schoolmaster and his wife, Nisbet had followed the path taken by many landless younger sons and had sought his fortune in the church. A high degree of intelligence, lively wit, and sincere religious conviction had taken him through Edinburgh University, Divinity Hall, and a short appointment to a parish outside Glasgow before he settled into the parish at Montrose in 1764. There he advanced from second to highly respected first minister of the parish, and became an influential figure in the Church of Scotland, representing his presbytery in several general assemblies between 1766 and 1784.10

Nisbet's Scotland was immersed in the Enlightenment, a period of great intellectual and cultural creativity and ferment. But socially and politically

9 Nisbet wrote to Jedediah Morse in January 1800 to cement the point: "I was never a Moment deceived with Regard to the Designs of the French in the Aid that they gave to this Country, & with Respect to their Revolution, I never saw anything in it from the Beginning, except a Conspiracy by a Knot of Villains, against all Religion & Government, & no subsequent Event has given me any Cause to alter my original Opinion," Nisbet to Jedediah Morse, Jan. 4, 1800, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter, HSP).
the country was both deferential and orderly. Nisbet reflected these characteristics. He was fascinated by the intellectual activity of the time, tried to master as much of it as he could, and earned a reputation as a “walking encyclopedia” for his efforts. As he viewed the social distress caused by agricultural hard times and what he viewed as English commercial discrimination against Scotland, he adopted some of the ideas of political and social reform emanating from his countrymen. Caroline Robbins has categorized him as a minor figure among Scottish Commonwealthmen. But even more than reform, Nisbet valued deference and order. He was no democrat. His brand of governmental improvement called for only minor departures from the aristocratic, hierarchical, patronage-based, politically authoritarian world he knew. He still favored the English system of mixed government but desired that it be staffed by virtuous men who would place the welfare of the people above their own enrichment.

As in the social and political realms, so too in religion, Nisbet advocated order. One way to understand Nisbet’s brand of reform and his hopes for its fulfillment in America, as well as his repudiation of the French Revolution, is to examine his stance on the issue of patronage in the Scottish church. Nisbet belonged to the Orthodox wing of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, which differed from its numerically superior rival wing, the Moderates, in that it favored a more evangelical approach to preaching and opposed the practice of allowing influential patrons to name the ministers in the congregations they supported. Yet for Nisbet the problem was not patronage per se; indeed, his own living was in the gift of the king, who had prescribed that


13 Nisbet made clear his views on the desirability of mixed government and the dangers of republicanism in his moral philosophy lectures, delivered annually at Dickinson College. For a typical rendering, see Nisbet, “Questions and Answers on Moral Philosophy,” MS, Grace Doherty Library, Centre College, Danville, Ky., 317-29. These lectures appear to be in the handwriting of John Young. If so, they were transcribed by Young during his senior year, 1789.

the congregation be free to name its own minister. What angered Nisbet about patronage was the potential for corruption that existed within the practice. Two of his surviving speeches to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland protest varieties of that corruption. In one case he spoke out against allowing a large parish to annex a smaller, arguing that it was simply a means by which the large parish minister's salary could be increased without additional expense to the patron. If this practice were to continue, he felt it would drastically alter the ecclesiastical landscape of Scotland, but more importantly, it would undermine the morals and structure of the national church. In the other case Nisbet's concern was simony. He accused a wealthy Scottish businessman of having bought the gift of a living simply so that he could bestow it upon his son. Worse, the lower church courts had sanctioned the practice, suggesting to Nisbet how thoroughly corruption could infiltrate parish and ministry alike. Thus patronage, improperly conducted, robbed the church, its ministers, and its parishioners of their virtue, so Nisbet was a leader in the fight against it, but he acted always within the confines of the orderly debates of the General Assembly, and never sanctioned resistance against a minister once legally appointed.

Moreover, not all patronage relationships were corrupt. Nisbet was pleased to cultivate the support of David Erskine, earl of Buchan, when he sought to send his oldest son, Thomas, off to Edinburgh University in 1782. He hoped that Thomas would observe "what lustre the study of letters adds to persons of rank," so that it would excite in him "an ambition to deserve the approbation of the declared patron of letters and liberty." Nisbet's critique of patrons, including the Scottish peerage, was, like his critique of patronage, broad, but not without exception. Nisbet recognized that "it is natural for great men to desire to rule, and to have extensive influence among their inferiors in rank," but he would tell them that "they mistook the road to influence and esteem, if they thought of forcing it by authority, or attracting it by outward show, and the trappings of false dignity. To convince

15 Miller, Nisbet Memoir, 19; "Memorial from David Doug Esq Provost and the other Magistrates and Town Council of Montrose to the Right Honourable James Stewart McKenzie of Rosehaugh Esq. Lord Prv y Seal of Scotland," National Library of Scotland, MS 17601, folder 140
16 Nisbet was frequently on record in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland against patronage. See Registers of the Acts of the General Assembly [of the Church of Scotland], 1766-84, Scottish Record Office, General Register House, Edinburgh; his petitions to the General Assemblies of 1771 and 1773 are reprinted from the London Magazine of 1773 in Miller, Nisbet Memoir, 31-47, 48-68.
17 Nisbet to earl of Buchan, Oct. 22, 1782, in Miller, Nisbet Memoir, 91-93.
the public that one wishes their welfare will establish a greater and more permanent interest than legions of superiority votes, or the temporary power of distributing places and pensions." Virtuous, benevolent aristocrats, not an end to aristocracy, was Scotland's great need: "Scotchmen, above all others, love to be led by authority, and to imitate the example of their superiors." What Nisbet sought in order to republicanize Scotland was not to eliminate hierarchy, patronage, and political authoritarianism, but rather to infuse them with virtue in the sense of a disinterested preoccupation with the commonweal.

Another part of Nisbet's Scottish background that would influence his attitudes once in America was his distaste for the French. Unlike most Americans, Nisbet felt no kinship with the French. To him, the French were protectors of the Jacobite pretenders to the British throne, abettors of the Rebellion of '45, constant enemies of the British empire. Nisbet was reminded of this not only by having lived through the rebellion as a boy, but also because Bonnie Prince Charlie had made his final escape from Scotland by taking ship from Montrose.19

Charles Nisbet brought with him to America this intellectual and emotional baggage formed during his half century in Scotland. When he arrived in June 1785, he was prepared to like his new country. Invited by its

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18 Nisbet to earl of Buchan, Nov. 12, 1782, in Miller, Nisbet Memoir, 94-98. Nisbet, as shall be seen, frequently confided his thoughts on politics to Lord Buchan. Although a nobleman, David Stewart Erskine, eleventh earl of Buchan, was never a member of the House of Lords. The union of 1707 had allotted Scotland sixteen seats in the upper house of Parliament, considerably fewer than the number of Scottish nobles. Those gentlemen were ostensibly to make free choice of their representatives, but in practice no Scottish lord went to London without the support of the Crown and its Scottish "managers." Those managers denied Buchan their support because he was a reformer. A few years younger than Nisbet, and possibly influenced by him, he shared with the minister his belief in the need for greater representation of the middle class, less self-serving activity by the peers, and, above all, removal of English influence from the conduct of Scottish affairs. Thus, Nisbet found Buchan a generally like-minded observer of politics, although at times Buchan demonstrated more faith in American republicanism than did Nisbet. See Bruce Lenman, Integration, Enlightenment, and Industrialization, 14-17; Pryde, Scotland from 1603 to the Present Day, 116-17; Smout, A History of the Scottish People, 218-20; R. H. Campbell, "The Landed Classes," T. M. Devine and Rosalind Mitchison, eds., People and Society in Scotland: I, 1760-1830 (Edinburgh, 1988), 94-96; Alexander Murdoch, "The People Above," 25-27; William Anderson, The Scottish Nation; or the Surnames, Families, Literature, Honours, and Biographical History of the People of Scotland (9 vols., Edinburgh, 1882), 2455, 4:164-65; Joseph Irving, The Book of Scotsmen Eminent for Achievements in Arms and Arts, Church and State, Law, Legislation, and Literature, Commerce, Science, Travel, and Philanthropy (Paisley, 1881), 131; William L. Mathieson, The Awakening of Scotland: A History from 1747 to 1797 (Glasgow, 1910), 70, 72-73.

19 David Mitchell, The History of Montrose (Montrose, 1866), 77.
trustees and persuaded by Benjamin Rush to take the reins of Dickinson College, Nisbet was pleased with his initial reception and optimistic about the future. He had resolved his ambivalence in favor of America for several reasons. As an influential Presbyterian minister in Scotland, he had responded to the obligations of his faith and profession in order to spread the gospel in a new land. As an intellectual, he welcomed the opportunity to train up succeeding generations of youth in the kinds of knowledge that would ensure their and their country's future. As someone of low birth who had worked his way up the social ladder, he had no small sense of his own importance, and was no doubt flattered by the attention he had received from his American suitors. Having had trouble convincing his parish in Scotland to provide adequately for himself and his family, Nisbet negotiated what he trusted would be a remunerative future in his adopted land. But another reason for Nisbet's optimism was that he was pleased at America's escape from Great Britain and was hopeful about her ability to implement truly virtuous government. He had been an outspoken supporter of America during the Revolution, viewing her rebellion as defiance against Britain's despotic efforts to control the internal affairs of another country. It was an extension of his resentment against British interference in Scotland's domestic affairs. Impressed with the wartime leadership of men like Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams, men who seemed to embrace enlightened reform, he told friends in Scotland that he was delighted to be

20 Nisbet to earl of Buchan, June 13, 1785, in Miller, Nisbet Memoir, 133-34
21 The wooing of Charles Nisbet is discussed in Miller, Nisbet Memoir, 100-132, James Henry Morgan, History of Dickinson College (Carlisle, 1933), 21-34, and Charles Coleman Sellers, Dickinson College A History (Middletown, Conn, 1973), 63-71. Especially effective in appealing to Nisbet's character and pride were Benjamin Rush's letters of Dec 5, 1783, April 19, May 15, Aug 27, 1784, found in Lyman Butterfield, ed., The Letters of Benjamin Rush (Princeton, 1951), 315-16, 321-25, 334-35, 335-39, letter of June 1, 1784, in Miller, Nisbet Memoir, 114-16, and letter of Aug 30, 1784, Founders' Papers, DCA. Nisbet's initial salary as second minister of Montrose was £50 per year, an amount he sought unsuccessfully to have increased. He also failed to gain the manse and glebe associated with the parish at Montrose, for his predecessor, to whom the parish had granted rights, lived long after leaving the pulpit, see July 4, 1764, Jan 18, 1769, Oct 8, 30, Dec 3, 1777, Presbytery of Brechin, Minutes, vols 10-11 [1749-1803], Scottish Record Office, General Register House, Edinburgh
22 On Nisbet's place among the Scottish protesters against British policy regarding the country, see Robbins, Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman, 177-220, some of Nisbet's pro-American statements are described in Mitchell, History of Montrose, 36, and Robert Kerr, Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Correspondence of William Smellie (Edinburgh, 1811), 495
heading to a land of "Liberty & Plenty," a place where men's minds were "free from the Shackles of Authority."²³

But life in America did not measure up to Nisbet's hopes. Soon things began to go wrong. The family suffered debilitating illness and personal tragedy. Dickinson College proved to be more difficult to manage than Nisbet had thought, and he came to feel undermined by the trustees. But most upsetting was the unexpected behavior of the American people. The social interactions of Americans, especially the ones he saw daily in Carlisle, dismayed him, their religious attitudes appalled him, and their political activities disgusted and angered him.²⁴

Of all Charles Nisbet's motives for attacking the French Revolution, the most deeply felt was a hostility toward the effects of what he saw as uncontrolled democracy. He came to that feeling through disappointment with his newly adopted homeland. Enthralled by the American resistance movement, impressed by the enlightened thought of its political leaders, Nisbet clearly expected to find a society guided by that thought in postrevolutionary America,²⁵ and he felt shocked and betrayed when he did not. Consequently, he rapidly turned from optimistic celebrant of America to acerbic critic of its excesses of democracy.

Within six months of settling in Carlisle he bemoaned the state of the American character, which in his view suffered from many shortcomings. On occasion he argued that "the general Want of Religion is at the bottom of all other public Grievances." America had too few ministers, they were too scattered to be effective, and they were so ill-supported by the people as to

²³ Miller, Nisbet Memoir, 74-78, Lady Wilhelmina Leven to Nisbet, Nov 20, 1784, in ibid., 108-12, Nisbet to John Witherspoon, April 3, 1784, HSP


²⁵ The Rush correspondence cited in note 21 presented Nisbet with an exaggerated impression of the order and stability of American society and politics. Nisbet also engaged in correspondence with Samuel Stanhope Smith, at the time a professor at the College of New Jersey and heir apparent to John Witherspoon. Smith, more honest about the effects of liberty on the American people, nonetheless presented Nisbet with a largely favorable view of their orderliness and public spirit. See Samuel Stanhope Smith to Nisbet, Nov 26, 1784, Feb 4, 1785, in Michael Kraus, "Charles Nisbet and Samuel Stanhope Smith—Two Eighteenth Century Educators," Princeton University Library Chronicle 6 (1944), 19-34
be unable to lead and inspire them. "It is a Pity that the Blessings of Liberty & Independency," he wrote friend and fellow immigrant Alexander Addison, "so largely enjoyed by other Inhabitants of the Country, were not extended to the Clergy. But the People are proud of this Distinction above them, & totally unwilling that it should be removed. They do not consider that a knavish and dependent Clergy can neither be faithful nor respectable." He later complained to Lord Buchan that "... every Body lives in Luxury, & there is no want of Money for Lawsuits, Drunkenness, & the Purchase of foreign Goods. Only Debts & Taxes remain unpaid. The Clergy, to be sure, have the worst of it in such a situation of things, as no Laws protect their Rights, it having pleased the Majesty of the People that Clergymen & Negroes would be entirely at discretion." \(^{26}\) Peculiarly sensitive because he himself shared the pulpit of Carlisle's Presbyterian Church, Nisbet could not abide the absence of status and authority in America that the clergy had enjoyed in his native land. He could neither understand nor appreciate the egalitarian ethos amongst people who refused to distinguish the clergy because of their learning and insisted that ministers earn their keep, not by dint of effort of mind, but by the same kind of hard physical work as did everyone else.\(^ {27}\)

American democracy meant not only the absence of deference and disregard for religion. Its manifestations also included a popular striving for economic equality, apparent in the rampant pursuit of self-interest. "Indeed," wrote Nisbet, "private industry seems every where to be pursued in preference to the public good. ... Their public debts, though easily payable by good management, bear hard upon them. Industry and manufactures, even with the thin population we have, might extricate us from our difficulties; but most people here think that what has not been done can never be done." Americans thought of their own rather than the country's economic well-being, yet refused to work hard or emulate the few who engaged in reform activities. Nisbet complained, "On account of the scarcity of working people, agriculture is in a low state, and the want of proper exports is continually

\(^{26}\) Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Jan. 26, 1786, University of Pittsburgh Library (hereafter, UPitt); Nisbet to earl of Buchan, Dec. 25, 1787, DCA.

taking money out of this country, and running our merchants in debt to England more than they can pay. . . . A deference to absurd customs, and an aversion to labour prove a dead weight on all schemes of improvement.” The results were devastating: “the lands produce little; most of the ground is in wood or waste; the highways in a state of nature; and the inhabitants, by living so distant from each other, are deprived of the benefit of society, and especially of that emulation which is excited by neighbourhood.” Here, as with religion, the populace’s espousal of democracy deprived natural leaders of the opportunity to effect improvement. Nisbet knew “of no such thing as a man of fortune residing on his estate in the country, and setting an example of rational agriculture to his neighbors.”

Nisbet’s conviction that an excess of democracy was the great enemy of religious and economic well-being in his adopted homeland bore even more strongly on politics. In Pennsylvania, politics was the obsession of all, rather than the province of the learned elite to whom it properly belonged. To Nisbet, the result was inevitable. “Without wise and Virtuous Men in the Offices of Administration,” he preached, “no State can preserve its Reputation abroad, nor its Order, Prosperity and Existence at home. Men of weak Understandings and confined Ideas can neither uniformly discover, nor steadily attend to the Public Interest.” Such men were self-interested, inexperienced, and clung to their “little brief Authority.” They had no “proper Notions of Honour and Justice, or of the sanctity of public and private Faith; and may sometimes by a stretch of Power, enact Laws to stop the Course of Justice, to encroach on the Rights of Property, and to render the Public Faith uncertain and insignificant, while their Numbers render them incapable of blushing for the Iniquity they have established by Law.”

These were precisely the kinds of men who held office in Pennsylvania—the wrong kinds of men. They were common, they were ignorant, they were self-interested; they threatened property, honor, and order.

Despairing of an immediate repair or replacement of his state’s overly democratic constitution, Nisbet looked to the new federal order to check the people’s slide toward anarchy. But he was not very sanguine about its prospects. He wrote to Addison soon after Pennsylvania’s contentious

28 Nisbet to the earl of Buchan, April 20, 1786, in Miller, Nisbet Memoir, 142-45.
29 Nisbet, extract of a sermon preached at Carlisle, May 11, 1786, before the trustees of Dickinson College, DCA. For the implications of postrevolutionary democracy on politics, see Wood, Radicalism of the Revolution, 287-305.
ratification of the Constitution, "If one considers that it originated from a Convention, the far greatest Part of whom neither fear God, nor regard Man, who have no political Knowledge but a few scraps they have picked up from the Collections of superficial Writers, it may be reckoned a Miracle of divine Goodness that it is not ten times worse than it is." The reason it should be approved by the rest of the nation was "that there is no Sort of Probability that either a better Convention could be assembled, such is our Scarcity of Men, nor that a better Constitution could be agreed to by the People of the States, till they get a great deal more Sense and Virtue." 

More sense, more virtue. Despite Nisbet's sometime contention that irreligion lay at the bottom of the early Republic's troubles, what he consistently complained about were defects in the American character. By the end of 1787, even as he supported the new Constitution as the best form of government Americans were likely to get, he despaired of their character in the wake of the Revolution. "The People of this Country," he wrote to his former Scottish patron, "seem to have gained nothing by their Independence, except Impunity of Crimes, & the prevalence of every human Vice except Hypocrisy & Superstition. Public Spirit appears to be extinct, & public & private Credit entirely at an End. No Man is ashamed even of the most Shameful Conduct & the Authority of Laws and Magistrates is entirely disregarded." Nisbet directed his outrage partly at the elite, who were cowardly and weak, but mostly at the common people, who had taken the democratic freedom made possible by their revolution to such extremes that authority, property, and order were destroyed. "The Magistrates being chosen by the People," he fumed, "dare not act, for fear of taking their offices, and a Competition & Reciprocation of Cheating & Knavery—seems to pervade this Country from one End to the other. . . . A few good Characters exist, but like Stars in a dark Night, they are scarcely discerned, & have no sensible Effect on the Public Morals." It especially galled Nisbet that men like himself, educated, experienced, trained to lead, imbued with the public good, were helpless before the democratic tide: "No Man of Sense has any Influence, Authority, or Respect. The meanest & most wicked of the People bear Rule & every Man does that which is right in his own Eyes, without Fear or Shame." He closed his angry lament with an epitaph for the American Revolution: "Those Poets & Romantic Politicians who have sung

30 Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Dec. 7, 1787, UPitt.
the Charms of Liberty, ought to travel to this Country for Information, & they would soon find that the Person of her Ladyship is extremely deformed & disagreeable when She is seen naked & not dressed in the Robes of Justice, Law & good Order."  

The day after penning these lines Nisbet witnessed a quintessential illustration of his critique, the infamous Carlisle Riot. Federalists, meeting on Carlisle’s town square to celebrate the state convention’s ratification of the Constitution, were challenged and then set upon by a gathering of anti-Federalists. There followed on succeeding days a renewal of celebratory rituals by armed Federalists and counterdemonstrations by armed anti-Federalists, the arrest of leading anti-Federalist demonstrators, and scattered violence on both sides until a compromise freed the detainees and lessened tension in the town. Nisbet and other staunch supporters of the Constitution, greatly outnumbered by its opponents, feared physical attacks as late as March 1788.  

Charles Nisbet’s perceptions of what had happened to the social and political character of the United States due to the excess of democracy accompanying its revolution, along with his concerns for his former homeland and his basic religious beliefs, all combined to influence his understanding of the French Revolution. Mirroring his judgments of American conduct, he saw in the French upheaval from the very beginning a breakdown in the social organization of the country, the absence of public virtue among its governors, and the excessively democratic, irrational, even violent conduct of the common people. He quickly came to fear that these ills would spread to Great Britain, especially to Scotland. And soon, much more quickly than his American brethren, he concluded that these developments were divinely inspired, part of God’s retribution on a sinful people.  

Repeatedly, Nisbet expressed concerns about the breakdown in social order inherent in France’s revolution, often connecting it to the excesses of American democracy. He observed to Lord Buchan in March 1790 that “The Rage for Liberty seems to be spreading in Europe, but if they knew

31 Nisbet to the earl of Buchan, Dec 25, 1787, DCA
how little good it has done here, they would not be so sanguine in Pursuit. Mankind in the wild State are at best disagreeable, & sometime terrible Animals, as many in France have lately felt to their Cost.” Early in 1792 Nisbet maintained to Ashbel Green, “My Theory is that Mankind are commonly Hypocrites, even when they profess to be Admirers of Liberty & Equality. . . . Your Indian Politicians of New York & Philadelphia may bawl as loud as they please, & profess that they wish that such Monsters as Kings, were exterminated from the face of the Earth, but . . . they only wish the Extinction of Kings, in order that they might take their Place, & obtain the like Homage from the Multitude.” He was convinced that as it operated in America, republican liberty was a failure, and yet the French revolutionaries wished to emulate it. To him it was a mystery: “. . . it does not appear that our Republican Government renders the People happy, either in Reality, or in their own Imagination, as they are perpetually dreaming of Slavery & Chains, in the very Bosom of Liberty, & complaining as much of the Doings of their own Representatives, as if they had no Vote in the Choice of them. What signifies this Phantom of Liberty, that can neither make a People happy in Reality nor Imagination? Yet it is coveted by others who know nothing of it, as much as it is despised by those who know it.”33

Generally, Nisbet’s worries about social order took two forms: anxiety over attacks on property and fear of what was happening to the concept of hierarchy. In a late 1790 letter to Addison, Nisbet noted that the Revolution had already included an attack on church revenues and nobles’ titles; he was sure their property would soon be seized. By mid-1791, he learned that his prediction had proven correct and charged the National Assembly with being the pilferer of the nation’s property. A month after this letter to Lord Buchan, Nisbet observed to Addison that “to be Rulers, Legislators, & coiners of waste Paper, & to plunder the Rich Part of the Community, are always great Objects of Ambition to the Mob, & as they have the muscular Strength of the Society on their Side, they need not be in pain for Arguments in Support of their Conduct.”34

The destruction of the concept of hierarchy was of even greater concern to Nisbet. His early distress at the attack on nobles’ titles became a subtext

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33 Nisbet to earl of Buchan, March 20, 1790, DCA; Nisbet to Ashbel Green, Jan. 18, Aug. 24, 1792, HSP.
34 Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Nov. 5, 1790, July 22, 1791, UPitt; Nisbet to earl of Buchan, June 22, 1791, DCA.
when he learned during the summer of 1791 that the king had been imprisoned in the Tuilleries. Once again, the behavior of the French mob was only an extension of its American counterpart: “The People of France had no political Existence when the King took America under his Protection, but as they [Americans] pay their domestic Debts to the People who starved or cheated their Creditors, so they seem to pay their foreign Debts to those who have mined & imprisoned their Benefactor.” That September he predicted that the family would be poisoned, each member at a different time, with the National Assembly proclaiming a tragic series of accidents. Two months later, he lamented that the king was still held captive, more subtly at Fountainbleau, in an attempt by the National Assembly to use him to sanction its constitution. Early in 1792 he was hoping that Prussia and Austria would use the threat of military intervention to save the royal family. If the king could survive, the fortunes of the Revolution might shift and allow him to prevail—remember the English interregnum, he said. By September of 1792, Nisbet was more pessimistic, certain that the fate of the king was tied to the fortunes of France’s war with the combined powers; monarchical military success would mean death.\(^{35}\)

At about this same time, Nisbet amplified his fears for the French king and for hierarchy. He thought it “probable that poor Lewis the 16th will have a mock Trial & real execution in a short time.” Such an event was hard to envision when only a few years before almost all Parisians sat up the night, concerned over the queen’s health at the birth of the dauphin. At that time “the Addresses of all Ranks & Orders of Men . . . vied with each other in expressing the warmest affection to his Person, & the utmost Satisfaction with his Government.” Now that the jails of Paris had been emptied and “their former Inhabitants fill the Seats of the Legislature, nothing less than his Blood can satisfy them, tho’ his only Crime is that of being a King, which is now considered the greatest of all.” A month later Nisbet feared the worst. Admitting to his daughter that he was hanging on rumor, he reported the news that the queen had been murdered, but the king had escaped, and whether now alive or dead he knew not. He was shortly aware that these reports were false. But the news of the king’s execution that he conveyed to Philadelphia bookseller and publisher William Young in March 1793 was

\(^{35}\) Nisbet to earl of Buchan, June 22, 1791, DCA; Nisbet to Ashbel Green, Nov. 12, 1791, Sept. 24, 1792, HSP.
the truth. The royal death was a "new triumph of Liberty & Equality, supported by Philosophy."36

Regicide was the most serious but not the only crime that Nisbet attributed to the application of "Liberty & Equality." As we have seen, he was early suspicious of the motives and actions of the National Assembly, as it plundered the church and nobility, while raising taxes for the common people. He observed that the National Assembly was using the assignats (bonds based on the nation's landholdings) to delude the people. The Comte de Mirabeau, the renegade aristocrat who had proposed the use of the assignats, and the English sympathizer Richard Price had left the Assembly too soon to profit personally, but it and the army would "live in Clover."37 Nisbet's suspicion extended to other prominent revolutionary leaders. He simply had no faith in their capacity to maintain dedication to civic virtue: "My Theory is that Mankind are commonly Hypocrites, even when they profess to be Admirers of Liberty & Equality." Thus he thought Petion, the Jacobin mayor of Paris, wanted the execution of Louis XVI so that he could succeed to his throne. Even that friend to America, Lafayette, aroused Nisbet's ire. When he learned that the general had returned to Paris from the front in late summer of 1792, Nisbet was certain that he had come to see if the throne would soon be vacant and if he had enough support in the National Assembly to claim it before anyone else. Corruption and self-interest were the bywords of the revolutionaries, a natural product of their philosophy. "There are two things in view in every Revolution: to set up a new Government, & to get Fortunes for the Leaders. And the last of these is generally more attended to than the first, & the first is no further pursued than it is subservient to the last." The French revolutionaries may have refined corruption to the highest degree, but they were not the inventors of such actions in the name of the people: "Our Congress here were not so Despotic," Nisbet wrote in mid-1791. "They made use of the plain Arts of Cheating & Lying only, for putting off their waste Paper, and completely gull'd the


People, by giving them a Chance for coming in for a Share of the general Plunder."^38

Not all the French were corrupt, of course, just as neither all Scots nor all Americans were. Nisbet was even sure that the better part of French society included the vast majority of the populace. Occasionally, the Dickinson principal derived comfort from the French Revolution's excesses, certain that those who still retained their virtue and sense of order would regain control. Even though the armed part of the nation "are mad for Liberty & Equality," and had forced the general populace "tho' the unarmed Part, which is more than nine-tenths of the whole . . . to join in the Cry of Liberty at present, lest their politic Neighbors the Mob, should exercise the Rights of Mankind, by cutting their Throats, & plundering their Property," yet the balance would swing again. The mob would divide against itself over the distribution of plunder and the claims to office, and then "the unarmed Part may regain the Ascendant." But these optimistic moments were rare and brief. In this case, Nisbet changed his mind in the same letter, observing to Philadelphia's Rev. Ashbel Green that the Revolution was muddier and more intricate than ever. The one sure thing was that it would not soon end.^39

The Revolution would not end soon because it was not just a revolt by the elite; the lower classes of France had perverted democracy and acquired power. The mob ruled and would not yield its rule. From the Revolution's inception Nisbet recognized that, noting to Lord Buchan in early 1790, the spread of the rage for liberty throughout Europe was detrimental, for the mob was composed of disagreeable, even animalistic, wild men, as the French were learning to their peril. Yet this was but an extension of the conclusion he had already reached about the American lower classes. He had complained to Buchan shortly after the Constitutional Convention, "God Almighty has raised up all nations from Tribes of barbarous & wandering Banditti, but the Mob of a conquering Army, the usual Seminary of nations, is much easier reduced into Order by the Sense of Subordination & the Sense of Honour arising from their Condition, than a Mob of Bankrupts, Fugitives from Justice, transported Convicts, & indentured Servants, which

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^38 Nisbet to Ashbel Green, Jan. 18, Sept. 24, 1792, HSP; Nisbet to the earl of Buchan, June 22, 1791, DCA. On Petion, who eventually fell out of favor with the Jacobins and committed suicide while trying to flee France, see Doyle, *Oxford Hist. of Fr. Rev.*, 170, 176, 180, 186-89; Scott and Rothaus, eds., *Dict. of Fr. Rev.*, s.v. "Petion de Villeneuve, Jerome," by D. Stone.

^39 Nisbet to Ashbel Green, Jan. 18, 1792, HSP.
are the four Elements of which our Body Politic is here composed, for the far greatest part. A Love of Order & Obedience to Laws may be grafted on a Sense of Honour & a Love of Distinction, but almost no such Principles exist here[,] in all Orders of Men, Lying, Cheating & low Cunning are the highest political Virtues."

As the contagion of revolution had spread from America to France, so Nisbet feared that it would spread from France throughout Europe. To Alexander Addison, Nisbet sympathized with the pope's anxiety that the French example would agitate the Italian city-states and the king of Prussia's fears that his troops supporting Flemish rebels would catch the "French disease." The great danger in Thomas Paine's 1791 pamphlet, *The Rights of Man*, was that it used French Enlightenment philosophy to grant people "the Divine Right of Ruling Wrong." This was, in Nisbet's view, offensive when claimed by kings and no less so when claimed by the common people, who had no respect for the rights of property or life. Neither their rage nor their desires knew any bounds. Commenting on the widespread mob hangings of French opponents of revolution, Nisbet sarcastically complimented the French crowd for developing the "Argumentum Lanterninum," which would form the basis of all future systems of logic, and become the "most eligible, as well as it is the most cogent Method of Argumentation."

Sarcasm born of disgust continued to mark Nisbet's observations on the conduct and influence of the French lower classes over the next several months. He thought the mob, spurred on by the second part of Paine's *Rights of Man*, had somehow contrived an attempted assassination of the king of Sweden. The people were justified by Paine, who included the rights of poisoning and stabbing among those belonging to all mankind. Mob influence penetrated the French army where it was responsible for the murder of General Dillon, who was felt to have betrayed the Revolution by his unwillingness to face the Austrian enemy with inexperienced troops. Learning of this, Nisbet acerbically observed that Dillon's case demonstrated that trial by jury now characterized even the French armed forces, again surely a legacy of Paine's instruction. By early 1793, the angry minister was so outraged over the spread of revolutionary fervor and popular violence that he called the French mob "the Goths and Vandals of our times. . . . When the

40 Nisbet to earl of Buchan, March 22, 1790, Dec. 25, 1787, DCA.
41 Nisbet to earl of Buchan, June 22, 1791, DCA; Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Nov. 5, 1790, July 22, 1791, UPitt.
Sweepings of the French Gaols pretend to be Legislators of the World, &c endeavor to make all Men free, whether they will or not, strange things may be expected. I see that the French take care of one thing, which is to free Men of their Property, wherever they can lay their Hands on it." By March, when he learned of the king’s execution, he had become an implacable foe of the unruly strivings of the lower orders. He was certain that the French mob was bent on overturning all the governments of Europe and was joining with the mobs of other countries to accomplish its end. All Europe was threatened and must ally against this.42

Nisbet feared most that French lower-class disorder might spread to Great Britain and bring about the downfall of the constitutional order he so admired. Thus he examined closely the course of the European war. He was sure that only the defeat of France and the suppression of its Revolution could prevent the spread of its doctrines. Consequently, the enemies of France earned the Scot’s blessing from the moment they began their attack. He was eager for information about the war, but often he did not understand what he learned. European alliances seemed evanescent and unpredictable, and the conflict did not progress as he would have liked. He became especially concerned once the king of France became a captive, speculating that Europe’s princes wanted to liberate Louis but could not figure out how to attempt it without condemning him to death. The conduct of the Austrians and Prussians puzzled him. In early 1792 the war seemed to have reached a sort of stalemate, perhaps because France’s enemies operated on divided motives. They wanted to restore an effective monarchy in France but did not want to run any great risks in a cause not really their own. Moreover, there were some advantages for them, he thought, in maintaining a divided France. Still, he wished that they would use their strength to bring about a treaty that would save the king and queen. Instead, he saw the Germans retreating, allegedly for want of provisions, even though their supply lines were still predominantly in their own country. In late 1792 his disappointment turned to optimism on the rumor that the Prussian and Austrian

armies were within thirty miles of Paris, but soon the news of the king’s execution returned him to gloom, which deepened when he learned that France had declared war on Great Britain. Now his homeland was in more danger than ever.\(^{43}\)

Nisbet had been anxious about the spread of revolution into Great Britain from the moment he heard about the French outbreak. He followed the British reaction to the Revolution closely, noting with approval Edmund Burke’s criticisms of French developments. *Reflections on the Revolution in France* defended traditional English governmental, social, and property-holding patterns, while criticizing the French for descending into anarchy, fostering unending social upheaval, and launching an unprecedented attack on property. It blamed the Revolution on a conspiracy among the French moneyed interest and the philosophers of the Enlightenment, not unlike the one perpetrated by the Bavarian Illuminati. It predicted a bleak future for France, with governmental chaos, economic collapse, possible disintegration of the nation, and ultimately the rise of a military dictator to piece things back together. Nisbet agreed wholeheartedly with all of this. Burke’s critique of the French debacle precisely mirrored his own assessment, and he hoped Burke spoke for the united people of the realm.\(^{44}\)

Actual concern for Great Britain arose in the wake of the publication of Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man*, which Nisbet thought was better designed to set off revolution there than to defend the one in France, especially when its doctrines were strongly supported by political radicals such as Richard Price and Joseph Priestley. Popular revolution was contagious, as Nisbet could see, and the great national debt and high taxes which had led France to the precipice were present in England also. He thought his fears at least partially realized by early fall 1791, as he mused to his friend Addison about the causes of an antigovernment riot in Birmingham and the role that Priestley had played: “What do the Inhabitants of a free Nation mean to represent their Country as if it were under arbitrary Government, except to

\(^{43}\) Nisbet to Alexander Addison, Nov. 12, 1791, UPitt; Nisbet to Ashbel Green, Jan. 18, 1792, HSP; Nisbet to Mary Nisbet Turnbull, Oct. 20, 1792, DCA; Nisbet to William Young, March 16, 1793, NYPL.

excite the Mob to riot & Massacres? I think all the World are gone Liberty-mad.”

The influence of Paine, whose pamphlet sold perhaps 200,000 copies in Britain from 1791 to 1793, and the continued oppressive tax burden served to agitate the populace. Nisbet protested in late summer 1792 at the contradiction evident in the behavior of the lower classes in Ireland and Britain (his distinction) who cried out against high taxes and simultaneously sent great sums to France to support the National Assembly. That fall he noted the continued complaints against government coming out of England and Scotland and the riots that had taken place in two Scottish shires over the turnpike acts. The unhappy news continued to pile up. Scottish correspondents wrote him that his countrymen remained in a state of unrest and that even ploughmen were reading Paine. The newspapers reported that Roman Catholics were up in arms in Ireland (Nisbet suggested that George III should send them to Rome to defend the pope against the French mob). It was because of all this unrest that the Scot was so distressed by the start of the Anglo-French war. He approved of the Crown’s action of calling out the militia to put down disturbances in Scotland and Ireland, hoping that it would quell the growing rebellious spirit. But he also feared the tentacles of the Revolution, warning the British to beware of French refugees and emissaries and of their own people who corresponded with the Parisian Jacobin Club. With the declaration of war, the British (including his beloved Scots) faced greater dangers than ever before.

The sense of crisis that Nisbet felt at the worsening situation in Great Britain, at the prospect of war between Britain and France, and at the news of the execution of Louis XVI prompted the minister for the first time to view the French Revolution in religious terms, as the product of the wrath of an angry God. Unlike colleagues who had excused the excesses of the early years of the Revolution, in part because of the attack on what they regarded as the Whore of Rome, Nisbet had deplored the confiscation of church property and the requirement of the civil oath. He had done so, however, on

45 Nisbet to Alexander Addison, July 22, Sept. 29, 1791, UPitt. Nisbet received reinforcement for his inclination to blame Priestley for the Birmingham riot from the Scottish Presbyterian minister John Erskine, who thought many English clergy, within and without the established church, were too sympathetic with the rioters; John Erskine to Nisbet, Oct. 29, 1791, in Miller, Nisbet Memoir, 199-201.
46 Nisbet to Ashbel Green, Aug. 24, 1792, HSP; Nisbet to Mary Nisbet Turnbull, Oct. 20, 1792, DCA; Nisbet to William Young, Feb. 16, 1793, HSP; Nisbet to William Young, March 16, 1793, NYPL.
the grounds that these were illustrations of the larger revolutionary attack on property and social order. He had attached no special religious significance to the actions. But events from mid-1792 into 1793 affected him differently, evoking a providential analysis for the first time. In late summer 1792, he mused that "there appears to be something singular in many of the Occurrences of our Times, but as human nature is always the same from the beginning of the World, the History of the Times may furnish us with the Causes of these Singularities." Depressed at the spread of revolutionary fervor into England, Scotland, and Ireland, he lamented, "We are a sinful Generation, & God seems to be preparing His Rods for us. Happy are those who shall be hid in the Evil Day that is approaching." The French declaration of war against England he thought would bring about a divine response. The French ought to expect that an omnipotent God who ruled the world in spite of the rights of man would avenge the quarrel the French had begun with his covenant and would force them to see that there was a God who judges on earth. He might "send a Spirit of Discord among the worshipers of Voltaire & Rousseau, & turn the Sword of every one of them against his Fellow." These philosophers, and now their revolutionary followers, had for some time been saying that religion was useless, that rulers should not concern themselves with it, and that men should be free from religious prejudice, able to assert their rights as they pleased. God was about to show the world what kind of government that philosophy produced, and just how good it would be for mankind to live under it.\(^7\)

Most Americans knew by the spring of 1793 of the European wars and the execution of Louis XVI. French anarchy, European war, and the accompanying threat of infidelity, all threatening to engulf America, by 1795 turned most orthodox ministers into conservative critics of the Revolution. But by then Charles Nisbet had been attacking its excesses for a long time, with a fully developed rationale to justify his scathing denunciations of all things French. He had come to America possessed of a conservative ideology, a Commonwealth political outlook closer to Bolingbrokean conservatism than to republicanism, based on the belief that socially prominent men committed to civic virtue could lead a newly forming nation to greatness. He expected to be one of those men. But what he saw, he regarded as rampant democracy, disorderly, corrupt, self-interested. By 1789 he had become so

\(^7\) Nisbet to William Young, Feb. 16, 1793, HSP; Nisbet to William Young, March 22, 1793, DCA.
disillusioned by and alienated from what he regarded as the excesses of American society that he saw no reason for optimistic assessment of an upheaval fomented by an even more disorderly French lower class. He had come to deplore revolution and democracy—anywhere. They brought unacceptable changes that could not be stopped. Nisbet's stances between 1789 and 1793 foreshadowed the positions that America's less alienated conservative republicans, both ministerial and lay, would later take up, but they, flushed with hope and expectation in the aftermath of their own successful rebellion, were not yet so disenchanted as was he nor so critical of the workings of democracy. Yet after the fear of infidelity had spread, and after the Federalist Party had come severely under attack, Charles Nisbet was no longer so alone in his condemnation of developments in France, nor in his willingness to connect those actions with the democratic trends evident among his fellow Americans.

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