HUGH HENRY BRACKENRIDGE
MORE ESSAYS IN THE NATIONAL GAZETTE

Hugh Henry Brackenridge was a classmate and friend of Philip Freneau at Princeton, where they collaborated in writing a hilarious burlesque, "Father Bombo's Pilgrimage," and a prophetic poem, "The Rising Glory of America," which Brackenridge read at the graduation exercises in 1771. Later, as editor of The United States Magazine, he published contributions from Freneau, notably a strikingly imaginative poem, "The House of Night."

After he moved to Pittsburgh, where he established himself as a leading lawyer and politician, he became a contributor to various newspapers, including The Freeman's Journal of Philadelphia, of which Freneau was a sort of assistant editor from 1781 to 1783. Late in 1791, after years of sailing the coast and a year of journalism in New York, Freneau established his anti-Hamilton National Gazette in Philadelphia, then the national capital. It was fitting that his old friend, a political leader of the frontier West, should write occasionally for what became, in 1792–1793, the leading democratic newspaper in the entire country. Claude Newlin, biographer of Brackenridge, lists several of his essays in this publication, on subjects like patriotism, western problems, and the execution of King Louis of France. There are several, however, which he has omitted to mention. These deal with early problems of federal elections and western land sales, as well as the national debt and the excise tax.

"On the disposal of the lands of the Western Territory" deplores the small amount of public money realized from the sale of western lands, the practice of selling large areas to land companies for a small down payment, and their continued possession without full payment, to the exclusion of small buyers. The writer criticizes inefficient federal surveying by amateur engineers, and urges that warrants should be issued, whereupon "let the warrantee find his land, and survey it," as of no expense to the public.

3 An article "by H. H. Brackenridge of Pittsburg" in National Gazette, February 13, 1792, here quoted for the first time.
But Brackenridge uses this criticism of expensive and clumsy methods as an introduction to a more important complaint about the national debt:

The idea of surveys at the public expense is pernicious; and what I have had in view to expose and reprobate. It originated in the theories of visionary men in Congress, who knew nothing of matter of fact and real business. I hope better things for the future.

But the people are discouraged at what they hear of the accumulation of the public debt; the assumption to discharge farther claims. It is true no man who has rendered real and substantial service to the public should have reason to complain that he has not his due. Nevertheless it is a great Serbonian bog on which we ought to tread lightly. When there is too much to pay, an individual loses hope to pay at all. The public mind is of the same character being the aggregate of that of individuals, and should the account swell beyond the hope of redemption, the first thing that strikes the mind is to suffer bankruptcy and begin on a new ground.

In thus opposing the fiscal program of the Washington administration, Brackenridge was following the lead of Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and other critics of the policies of the Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton. The measures of assumption, funding, and taxation were unpopular with the farming, planter, mechanic, and small tradesman classes, and especially so with the frontiersmen and farmers of Western Pennsylvania. Freneau's *National Gazette*, begun in October, 1791, by the following February was prosecuting its attack on these measures with increasing vigor; and Brackenridge's essay was one of many that appeared in the general Republican assault on the Federalist party program.

In another article, "On the appointment of Conferees and Correspondents for the forming of a Ticket for Members of Congress, &c.," published on August 1, 1792, Brackenridge opposed the method of choosing Congressional candidates by conference, because such choices did not represent the people's preference: "To such appointment I am opposed; because at no city, town, district, or village . . . meeting . . . can an appointment take place which will justly represent the people."

Even were all of the citizens present, "a thing not to be expected, and ballots fairly taken," he felt that the men so chosen would still not be the
wisest selections, because of emotional factors present in such gatherings—"a few tumultuously attending, forward and noisy men haranguing, the chairman proposing, or some one bringing forward a ticket, which the bulk do not chuse":

The fact is, that envy or jealousy or equal or superior abilities will unavoidably operate at any such conference to preclude men of merit. Such a conference may be justly styled a juncto or cabal; and I never found truth, honour, or generosity with such yet . . . I judge from my own feelings, and know that were I at a conference at this moment there are those whom I would oppose, just; because I do not like them . . . The people therefore at the town or district meeting, put themselves in the power of the passions of the conferees and do injustice to those persons whom they would otherwise have chosen.

Brackenridge was, then, no less than opposing the selection of all candidates by nomination in convention, a method that has long since become traditional in the American party system, as "an invasion of the right of the citizens at large to think, judge and act for themselves." He therefore urged that every voter be left free to frame his own ticket, to avoid the injustice of a choice not his own—and more important, to avoid injuring the rights of possible candidates who might be better choices:

The appointment of conferees, therefore, becomes, on these principles, an invasion of the right of the citizens at large to think, judge and act for themselves in the first instance. It is a fraud by one neighbour on another, the choice being brought forward by a machinery of chusing, in which one may acquiesce and another not. Leave it to every man to frame his ticket, or be immediately instructed by others how to do it; but let it be his own act, and there is no deception, or injustice.

As a remedy, he proposed a method practiced in Virginia and elsewhere, that of voting for names announced in the local newspapers, a sort of extra-open direct primary election:

Let any man who offers his service to the public, announce his name in these as is done every day in Virginia, Maryland, and other places; or let some one who knows his abilities and inclination, announce it for him; and of those announced let the people take their choice.

The method thus advocated, constituting a sort of direct primary much earlier than the 1842 origin generally accredited to Crawford
County of Pennsylvania, met with public favor at once; and it became a fashion in Philadelphia, at least temporarily, to publish lists of candidates.

Brackenridge also disapproved of choosing candidates through correspondents in distant districts, though for a different reason, the great difficulty of judging their fitness:

As to correspondents, I have the same objection to such committees as to those of conferees. It is not always that they judge well with whom to correspond; especially when the distance is considerable. I have seen papers in the western country addressed to persons, and myself among the rest, some of which associates I disdained, knowing them to have just about as much interest in our politics as a brindled cow, and no more.

It was indeed the intent of Brackenridge to place the selection and election of political candidates above all party and prejudicial factors, so that the best men might be considered and chosen fairly, in the impartial "light of knowledge":

In the business of elections it is my wish, that the light of knowledge with respect to men and characters may shine naturally and equally, and though like the sun, it may be clouded or obscured in places by shade of trees or accident of wind or weather: yet the chance is much more in favour of real merit than from any adventitious help of lenses by which mathematicians might attempt to increase the sun's rays, or direct them where they are not. Were it, in nature, to be left to them, we should not have an equal sun, and taking their passions into view, some would have all day, and others all night.

He frankly confessed that he was speaking partly for himself, with an eye to the day when he might be a candidate for office, and precluded from fair treatment by the existing practice:

I feel myself interested in this question; not that I have any object at present of being a member of Congress, or elector of presidents; but the day may come when I may; and I would not wish myself precluded by any system that

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4 V. O. Key, Jr., Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups, 371 (New York, 1942); James H. Booser, "Origin of the Direct Primary," in National Municipal Review, 24:222 (April, 1935). According to the latter, "Recent researches into the files of old newspapers, chiefly of the Crawford Democrat . . . prove beyond question that the first use of the device was made by the Democrats of Crawford County, Pennsylvania, on September 9, 1842."
may be now adopted, and become the custom, which I do not think will be favourable to me or any one who thinks more of the public opinion than of that of particular persons.

The date of this letter, July 30, a mere two days before its publication, indicates that Brackenridge was in Philadelphia, probably visiting his old friend and classmate, who was now embroiled in a furious newspaper war. It was a moment of electric and passionate dispute over the recent reelection of Governor Clinton in New York, the coming contests in Pennsylvania, and the bitter opposition of the followers of Jefferson and Hamilton. Philadelphia was seething with political rivalries. One of them was the angry editorial battle between Freneau and John Fenno, editor of the pro-Hamilton Gazette of the United States. The time was ripe for an eruption. Already, Hamilton, angry at the persistent attacks upon his measures in the National Gazette, was planning an exposé of Freneau as the “pensioned tool” of the Secretary of State, now absent in Virginia. Three days later, August 4, he precipitated a furor with his attack on Freneau and Jefferson, signed “An American.”

Part of Hamilton’s purpose was to turn public sentiment away from the growing interest in Republican candidates in the forthcoming state elections. If Pennsylvania were to turn Republican, a heavy blow would be struck at the Federalist balance of power in Congress.

The situation was a temptation to a visiting Republican leader from Pittsburgh to speak his mind on throwing all nominations wide open, so that voters in the farming and country districts might have a free choice in the selection of men who would serve their interests. And in the warm exchanges that followed, he may well have had a hand, as “Mercator,” “A.B.,” “Honestus,” or one of the many other pseudonymous writers who rushed into print during the late summer and fall in answer to Hamilton’s attacks.

Particularly were the westerners against the excise, since it struck directly at one of their most profitable means of converting corn into ready cash, the manufacture of whiskey. Two years later their protests, mildly encouraged by Brackenridge, were to give rise to the short-lived
"Whiskey Rebellion." Quite possibly, while he was in Philadelphia in 1792, his hatred of the whiskey tax prompted the writing of an anecdote signed "H.B.":

EXCISE.

OBSERVING the notifications of the Excise Officers stuck up in every quarter of the United States, puts me in mind of the conduct of a negro in one of the West-India islands. His master, a mere tyrant, could not get a white man sufficiently severe for an overseer; and knowing that too frequently a man is morose and cruel to his fellow-creatures, in proportion to the lowness of his origin, determined him to make a negro Cuffee his overseer; the poor fellow not being able to change his colour, by which he might be distinguished from the herd of slaves, and having no coat to the button-hole of which he could suspend an eagle, a cross, or some other token of his exalted station and superior blood, he bethought himself and placed over the door of his cabbin the following notification. *Dis be de house of Oberseer Cuffee; no vile negro eat any ting on de plantation, widout Oberseer give leave!*

The yeomanry of the United States are reduced to the situation of slaves on West-India estates, constituting nine tenths of the inhabitants, as they dare not make use of their own industry without being subject to heavy penalties upon the information of a pimping exciseman, placed in every quarter of the country to watch the private actions of the citizens—O tempora, O mores!

H. B.

In style and content, it must be admitted, this sounds more like Freneau than Brackenridge. Captain of coastwise vessels in the 1780's, as well as supercargo and mate of Caribbean privateers in the Revolutionary War, Freneau knew the West Indies almost as well as his home state, New Jersey. Was "H. B." signed in jest? Or had the two old friends, as formerly in Princeton, been about their collaborating antics again? Jest or no, the article undoubtedly represented the sentiments of Brackenridge and the citizens of Western Pennsylvania about taxes in general, and the whiskey tax in particular.

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5 *National Gazette*, August 18, 1792. Quoted for the first time.