A POLITICAL INTERPRETATION OF
THE WHISKEY INSURRECTION

ALFRED P. JAMES

In a paper read before the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on January 10, 1933, on "Opportunities for Research in Early Western Pennsylvania History," published in the May issue of the society's magazine for that year, part of a paragraph reads as follows:

There is in all probability much opportunity for further research on and better interpretation of the Whiskey Insurrection. We need to know more about the rank and file of the insurrectionists, about their ideas and behavior. We need to compare the Whiskey Insurrection more closely with the American Revolution and to study the influence of the French Revolution on western Pennsylvania. Some study is necessary also of the effect of Hamilton's policy on the Pennsylvania election of 1798 and the presidential election of 1800.1

In another paper later in the same year, read before several historical meetings and published in the November issue of the magazine, on "The Significance of Western Pennsylvania in American History," the earlier statement was expanded as follows:

The famous Whiskey Insurrection in western Pennsylvania in the last decade of the eighteenth century was a matter of varied and weighty importance, not simply a series of dramatic incidents. Historians have considered it mainly in connection with its economic causes and the demonstration of national strength in its suppression. Such treatment seems inadequate. Could it not be given the sort of study and critical analysis that has been given to the American Revolution? It seems safe to say that in many ways the insurrection was an important indication of frontier social, economic, and political sentiment. It was probably a manifestation in part of the survival of pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary theory and behaviorism. The influence, also, of the French Revolution had spread since 1789 even into the remote rural regions of the western world. In some ways the insurrection was but a dramatic feature of the development of anti-Hamiltonianism in the United States as a whole, and its suppression by an overwhelming demonstration of superior power, while it may have strengthened the central government, does not appear to have endeared the Federalist party to the people of the region. Both Brackenridge and Gallatin are soon found in active opposition to the Federalists. The elections of 1798 in Pennsyl-

1 Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine, 16:134.
vania and of 1800 in the United States went against the Federalists. Western Pennsylvania swung to Jeffersonianism in 1798 and from that time until 1858 contributed to the domination of Pennsylvania by the party of Jefferson and Jackson. This a matter of more than local historical importance; for it cannot be disregarded that as Pennsylvania went so went the United States, almost without exception, from 1798 to 1884.  

This article is merely an elaboration of some of the ideas suggested in 1933. The writer is frank to say that in the intervening years he has found little reason to change his earlier interpretation of the Whiskey Insurrection. That, too, is in accordance with psychology. One does not change formulated opinions very easily. Martin Luther was merely one of millions who have stood pat and held fast to conclusions once reached.

Many acknowledgments are necessary in this consideration of a political interpretation of the Whiskey Insurrection. A footnote to the second article mentioned above called attention to an unpublished manuscript of C. Stanton Belfour on the behaviorism of the Whiskey Insurrection. The elaborate and detailed study of the Whiskey Insurrection by Leland D. Baldwin has furnished conveniently located data combined with much interpretation. The equally well known work of Russell J. Ferguson on western Pennsylvania politics has furnished both political data and various political interpretations. Richard T. Wiley, in his Monongahela: The River and Its Region, presented a brief but excellent discussion of the Whiskey Insurrection. But this essay, which has no pretense of being monographic, has been particularly influenced by an unpublished paper of Janet Gass, a paper found on extensive reading and research and characterized by much reflection. Given the necessary time and the opportunity she might have drawn up a far better essay upon this topic.

As the initiated would naturally expect, the Whiskey Insurrection, like most things in life and history, had roots deep buried in the past. This background, this genesis of things, may sometimes, perhaps,
be short in science and technology, but even there the lineage of things of great importance is likely to be more distant in the past than one would suspect. A physicist, for example, in a discussion of polaroids actually began with Greek science and reached in his discussion the twentieth century only after attention to Newton in the seventeenth century, and Maxwell and Hertz in the nineteenth century. It is equally possible, but quite unnecessary and probably inadmissible, to go back many centuries in tracing the genesis of the Whiskey Insurrection. Some background is nevertheless advisable, but emphasis upon a few significant matters seems adequate.

In the background of the Whiskey Insurrection lay the striking feature of human history known by such words as localism, particularism, provincialism and regionalism, varying terminology for a conspicuous aspect of the western world since the period of the downfall of the western Roman Empire, fifteen hundred years ago. Such particularism is a thousand years older than nationalism, which is not much more than five centuries old and even yet nascent in some parts of the world. And it should not be overlooked that in a highly independent world, in many ways an integral world, emphasis on nationalism and national patriotism smacks of retrogression, particularism or provincialism.

Our colonial ancestors, for many reasons, were unusually particularistic. To a remarkable degree the continental American colonies of England enjoyed political and economic self-government and resultant local autonomy. The American Revolution in its broadest aspects was a matter of particularism or regionalism within the British Empire. Such particularism was also old and strong among and within the thirteen colonies which revolted from England.

Back of the Whiskey Insurrection lay also the once much respected matter of individualism. To the historical student it is amusing that in the twentieth century the political descendants of Jefferson, the apostle of individualism, should have been those to see the necessity of surrendering some of the old American individualism and that the political descendants of Hamilton should be the avowed latter day champions of individualism. The inconsistency of an upholder of recent administrations in Washington, D. C., manifesting any interest in the individualism of the last decade of the eighteenth century is obvious,

7 Club discussion by Dr. Oswald H. Blackwood of the University of Pittsburgh, on “Polarised Light.”
but it should not be forgotten that much Jeffersonian individualism still survives in the South to the delight, astonishingly enough, of the political descendants of Hamilton.

This matter of individualism was accentuated in the Whiskey Insurrection by the fact of pioneer and frontier conditions. It is sufficient to note that in the opinion of all historians of the American frontier, individualism was one of its dominant features. Western Pennsylvania, in the last decade of the eighteenth century, was ninety-five per cent agricultural. The individualism of farmers is notorious. Only in Russia has this individualism of the farmer been "liquidated," if the modern terminology of militarism and politics may be used. However, the matter of importance is not the respectability or reprehensibility of individualism but the fact of its existence in early western Pennsylvania. On this point there is practically no doubt at all. The western Pennsylvania farmer inherited the old British concept of individual rights. The occupation of farming fortified the concept and the wilderness frontier hardened both the individual and his concept of his rights.

In the third place, in the political background of the Whiskey Insurrection is yet another important matter, the social and economic democracy of frontier society in rural western Pennsylvania. Great emphasis upon this aspect of the frontier was repeatedly made by Frederick Jackson Turner, the apostle of frontier history. In part, at least, the frontier was the source of our boasted American democracy. It is upon such democracy, along with other qualities, that the United States may in the twentieth century have to rely for opposition to the totalitarian state in whatever form it may appear, whether as Fascism, Nazism, or Communism. To autocracy and aristocracy the democratic society of western Pennsylvania was strongly hostile.

An additional item, in the ideology of the early inhabitants of western Pennsylvania, was that of hostility to direct taxation for other than purely local purposes. Students of American colonial history are familiar with this hostility as a significant cause of the American Revolution. For a century and a quarter this hostility survived even under our national government. The acceptance of federal income taxation

9 Paraphrase of statements in Ferguson, Early Western Pennsylvania Politics.
has done much to destroy it, but the old hostility is not yet completely dead. Early western Pennsylvanians, with their acute lack of ready cash, had an intense and easily understood hostility to direct taxation for other than local or regional purposes. And to one particular type of direct taxation there was in early western Pennsylvania a traditional dislike. And that was to excises in general and an excise on liquors above all others. It was this dislike of Walpole's excise on beer in the first half of the eighteenth century which led the Scotch and Scotch-Irish in the old world to turn to whiskey as a beverage, an acquired taste which some of their descendants in both the old world and the new have retained in large degree. Traditionally and historically, the early western Pennsylvanians, Scotch, Scotch-Irish, and others, hated excises on liquors. Sanction of the enormous revenues now derived from this source has been a gradual development in the United States. A good illustration and verification of this traditional hostility in early western Pennsylvania to an excise on liquor is seen in continued opposition to the Pennsylvania excise on liquor in the decade before the Whiskey Insurrection.10

From the beginning, therefore, by heritage and environment the settlers of agricultural western Pennsylvania were particularistic, individualistic, democratic, and opposed to direct taxation, particularly to excises on liquors. A brief resume of the political history of western Pennsylvania from 1773 to 1793 will illustrate these characteristics of the later participants in the Whiskey Insurrection.

In their hostility to the Tea Act of 1773, their approval of the Boston Tea Party, and a little tea party of their own in Pittsburgh, are found evidences illustrating on the part of western Pennsylvania some of the attitudes mentioned above. The majority of the western Pennsylvanians opposed the Coercive Acts of 1774 and sanctioned armed resistance in 1775. The particularism and democracy at the basis of American opposition to England were apparent in western Pennsylvania, where settlers, whether of Virginia and Maryland origin or of old Pennsylvania stock, alike joined in active resistance to imperial suppression. The four regiments raised in western Pennsylvania were adequate testimony to their spirit. In comparison with the conservative Quakers of eastern Pennsylvania, the inhabitants of western Pennsylvania were both revolutionary and radical in 1776. They approved

10 This is clearly shown in Baldwin, Whiskey Rebels.
of the Declaration of Independence, helped in overthrowing Quaker domination of the legislature, shared in the formation of the ultrademocratic Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776, and resisted, to the last, conservative attempts to revise it before 1790. During the long drawn out American Revolutionary War, western Pennsylvania endured much and suffered much in an isolation which further developed independence, as well as particularism and sectionalism. It is the opinion of Ferguson that during the war the inhabitants of western Pennsylvania became more radical democrats than their fellow citizens east of the mountains. He sets forth as indisputable fact that "Revolutionary writers and philosophers had created a fervor for liberty, independence, and self-government and had utilized the rights-of-man theory to justify the Revolution." His careful study of local politics permitted him to add that such "doctrine was wholly acceptable to the western farmer and seemed to be an interpretation of his natural condition." It might be suggested that the American Revolution poured oil on fires already burning on the upper Ohio frontier.\(^{11}\)

At the end of the American Revolutionary War, the back-country agricultural democracy of western Pennsylvania had very definite wishes and ideas. Failure to secure these for themselves and opposition to these desires and ideas were bound to be considered grievances. Quoting Ferguson again: "They wanted cheap paper money because they were in debt; they opposed the Bank of North America because their economically disadvantageous position caused them to fear the domination of a financial power; they desired protection against the Indians; and they opposed taxation ostensibly because they received little benefit from the government but really because they had an innate objection to taxation; and they wanted cheap land."\(^{12}\) Too much emphasis cannot be put upon this, for the existence of this psychology in 1783 throws great light on the events of the next decade. For three years, 1783-1786, such ideas met with political success. But circumstances changed. Both in Pennsylvania and in the United States as a whole, the political pendulum swung away from particularism and individualism and from backcountry democracy with its spirit of freedom and equality. The western Pennsylvania democrats became, for more than

\(^{11}\) This paragraph is based on the findings and conclusions of Dr. Ferguson in chap. 2, on "Revolutionary Politics," of his Early Western Pennsylvania Politics.

\(^{12}\) Early Western Pennsylvania Politics, 37.
a decade, an embittered minority in a country temporarily moving in the direction of conservatism and consolidated nationalism. More than one petition from western Pennsylvania to the state legislature set forth the grievances under which the people of the western counties considered themselves to be suffering. In the face of these grievances, the conservative element in the state worked for the revision of the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776, and supported the movement for a new and stronger federal constitution. As usual with political rivalries there was that irrational linking of hostility to political opponents with hostility to measures sanctioned or advanced by a rival party. And as usual, political trickery and political wisdom became sadly confused. The tricks by which the Federalists in 1787 forced through the call for a ratification convention in November are well known and generally criticized by historians as sharp practice.

Like the majority of the people of the United States in 1787, the farmer majority of western Pennsylvania opposed ratification of the United States Constitution. The latter majority was also opposed to the revision of the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776, which was carried out in 1790 by the conservatives, who wished to eliminate some of its uniquely democratic features. Four to two was the proportion of democratic representatives versus conservative representatives elected in western Pennsylvania to the constitutional convention of 1789-1790. Five to two was the proportion of representatives elected to the Pennsylvania house of representatives in 1790, while the democrats captured all three seats in the state senate. In the session of the legislature which followed, these democratic members sought ardently the repeal of the old Pennsylvania excise legislation. Is it not obvious from all this that western Pennsylvania was already set for the role which it was to play in the next half decade? It was destined to be challenged in its traditions, its ideology, its interests, and its politics. Resistance was natural.

In the language of Janet Gass: "This western revolt, which has since become known as the 'Whiskey Insurrection,' was not just a series of violent acts, but a political movement; it had political motives, and effects, and it was definitely allied with the greater political struggle between the Federalists and their opponents."

18 Many of the ideas and statements of the paragraph are based upon Ferguson, Early Western Pennsylvania Politics, chaps. 8 and 4.
The western Pennsylvania farmers did not like Hamilton nor Hamiltonianism. They did not like his funding and assumption policies. They did not like the First United States Bank. They did not like the United States Constitution, especially when loosely constructed in its interpretation. They did not like the centralization and consolidation of federal power. Above all, they did not like the federal excise law of 1791. According to Townsend Ward, writing on "The Insurrection of the Year 1794 in the Western Counties of Pennsylvania," a majority of the southern and western members of Congress, even before the bill was passed, "proclaimed an organized agitation for its repeal; and hardly had the President's signature been obtained, before the measure was assailed violently from the country at large."¹⁴ This fact is important, for though in his writings Hamilton claims his main purpose was to secure revenue from New England rum distillers,¹⁵ his natural political aggressiveness probably led him to welcome an opportunity to fight out the issue with Jeffersonian opponents and distract attention from the financial burden upon his New England Federalist supporters.

To the opposition to excises and sharp criticism in the Pennsylvania legislature made by Albert Gallatin and other representatives of frontier democracy, were now added attacks in Congress and at home by the two western Pennsylvania Congressmen, John Smilie of Fayette County and William Findley of Westmoreland County, dominant figures in the backcountry democratic politics of the period, who loudly and widely criticized the excise act, knowing that this accorded with the ideas of their constituents.¹⁶ Seemingly, Hamilton's harsh attitude toward these men in the winter of 1794 was based, in part, upon the political opposition of 1791. Henry Adams has pointed out that in the beginning the national government was looked upon by many as a "necessary evil."¹⁷ Prominent politicians like Jefferson thought so then. Prominent opponents of Jefferson's party of today have much the same attitude. It is not surprising that the idea was in vogue in western Pennsylvania in early frontier days.

This attitude can be more easily comprehended when attention is

---

paid to the fact that the central government had neglected western Pennsylvania, at least in result if not in intention. Its use of the Mississippi River had not been championed, the ravages of the Indians had not been suppressed, relatives had been lost in the campaigns of Harman and St. Clair, and the British had been left in possession of the western posts. The excise on whiskey, seemingly a discrimination against the transmontane frontier, added but an additional indignity and eventually precipitated revolt and insurrection.

Political opposition leading to repeal was the plan of prominent politicians in 1791. Their technique was not unlike that of Samuel Adams and Patrick Henry in 1765 and that of the American Association of the First Continental Congress in 1774. They aimed to make the law odious and to intimidate those who might enforce or support it. It is reasonable to suppose they had not forgotten such techniques as those of the Stamp Act riots and the Boston Tea Party, which they themselves had warmly approved in earlier decades.

The first mass meeting, at Redstone Old Fort, on July 27, 1791, was called in good American Revolution phraseology, "to consider the means of redressing their grievances." Like the First Continental Congress, they called for another meeting to be held in Pittsburgh in September, 1791. After the famous manner of Samuel Adams, a circular letter was to be sent to the surrounding counties. Almost in the language of the American Association Act of 1774, the Washington County committee declared that "any person who had accepted or might accept any office under Congress, in order to carry the bill into effect, should be considered as enemies of the interest of the country; and recommended that the citizens of Washington County treat every person who had accepted or might thereafter accept such office, with contempt, and absolutely refuse all kind of communication and withhold from them all aid, support, or comfort." In good American Revolution technique, reminding one of the grievances listed by Thomas Jefferson in his Summary View and in the Declaration of Independence itself, and also as evidence of Western Pennsylvania anti-Hamiltonianism, the Pittsburgh meeting of Sep-

18 For this point of view, ably presented, see William Findley, History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties of Pennsylvania, 41 (Philadelphia, 1796).
19 This is the well-founded conclusion of Janet Gass.
20 Findley, History of the Insurrection, 41.
tember, 1791, criticized "the exorbitant salaries of the officers, the unreasonable interest of the public debt, and the making of no discrimination between the original holders of public securities and the transferees, contrary to the idea of natural justice, in sanctioning an advantage which was not in the contemplation of the party himself to receive and, contrary to the principles of municipal law of most nations and ours particularly, the carrying into effect an unconscionable bargain where an undue advantage has been taken of the ignorance of another." If the historical reader did not know otherwise, he might suspect that Thomas Jefferson himself was present on this occasion. Repeal of the excise law was, of course, demanded, just as earlier repeal of the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts, the Tea Act and the Coercive Acts, and later the repeal of the Alien and Sedition Laws, were demanded.

The Congress of 1791-1792 reduced the rate of the excise tax, but did not repeal it, and it passed an act which provided for the calling forth of the militia, if necessary, to enforce the execution of the laws of the Union, "suppress insurrection, and repel invasion." Hamilton and his Federalist followers had decided to make an issue of the matter in order that as a precedent the power of the national government "might be visible in some branch of internal revenue." This legislation of 1792 further aroused the backcountry democracy, and on August 21, 1792, a meeting was held at Pittsburgh, of which John Canon was chairman and Albert Gallatin secretary. After the manner of Samuel Adams and Massachusetts in 1772, this meeting appointed a committee of correspondence. And, as in the case of Samuel Adams and the Townshend Acts, the frontiersmen objected to the creation by law of "a numerous host of petty officers, scattered over the country," and, as is well known, the frontiersman objected to appearance before courts in Philadelphia in answer to summons for violation of the excise law. Trial in England of colonial defendants would have been hardly more disadvantageous in time and money and only a little less disliked. To remedy this grievance, but only at a very late date, in June, 1794, a law was passed by Congress, making it possible to secure trial in state

23 Brackenridge, History of the Western Insurrection, 18.
27 Brackenridge, History of the Western Insurrection, 18.
courts when the defendant lived more than fifty miles from the nearest federal district court.\textsuperscript{28}

But in the meantime, the influence of the French Revolution had permeated western Pennsylvania. John Scull gave it much publicity in the pages of the \textit{Pittsburgh Gazette}. After the manner of the French, Jacobin Clubs were organized at Mingo Creek and Washington, Pennsylvania. The famous party quarrels of Hamilton and Jefferson were extended to the upper Ohio Valley. Alexander J. Dallas, a Jeffersonian partisan, cultivated Gallatin and the frontier democrats.\textsuperscript{29} Federalists of the type of John Neville naturally championed Hamiltonian policies, and in the language of Janet Cass, “John McMillan preached religion and Federalism.” In the elections of 1792, the Federalists were defeated. Political hostilities were rife, as the year 1794 approached.

It seems reasonable that Hamilton made a bad blunder in July, 1794, in not extending the above-mentioned law of June, 1794, to 75 writs of summons which had been issued on May 31, 1794. Whether intentional or unintentional, the serving of these old writs led directly to violence.\textsuperscript{30} The incidents of July 15 and 16, resulting in the burning of Bower Hill, were the somewhat natural result. Into these incidents and into the meetings at the Mingo Creek Church, at Braddock’s Field, and at Parkinson’s Ferry it is unnecessary to go at length. Unfavorable comment upon the foolish act of Bradford, in seizing the United States mail in order to detect unfavorable correspondence, is justified, but it cannot be forgotten that almost equally uncomplimentary comment has been made upon the actions, two decades earlier, of Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Adams in getting surreptitiously and making public use of the private correspondence of Governor Thomas Hutchinson of Massachusetts.

Thus in midsummer of 1794, matters had gotten out of bounds. Hamilton, Washington, and the Federalist were clearly determined upon suppression of opposition and enforcement of the law by military power. Conservative democrats like Gallatin and Brackenridge became worried and sought peaceful settlement of the dispute. They claimed to have participated in the meetings at Braddock’s Field on August 1, at Parkinson’s Ferry on August 14, and at Redstone Old Fort on August

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Annals of Congress}, 4 :1459.

\textsuperscript{29} Ferguson, \textit{Early Western Pennsylvania Politics}, 123, 125.

\textsuperscript{30} Findley, \textit{History of the Insurrection}, 87-90.
28, in order to moderate the demands and behavior of the more radical element in the widespread revolt.\textsuperscript{31} The backcountry democracy thus was divided in sentiment in the midst of difficulty. This fortunate combination of local moderating influences with overwhelming external pressure brought about a speedy collapse of violent opposition. Temporarily, backwoods democracy was under a shadow, but not for very long.

Jefferson and Madison viewed the western struggle with interest, understanding, and probably with political sympathy. The former wrote William Branch Giles, his lieutenant in Congress, to “make friends with the trans-Alleganians.” In a letter to Madison, Jefferson wrote that western “detestation of the excise law is universal, and has now associated to it a detestation of the government,”\textsuperscript{32} meaning by this, of course, detestation of the Federalists in power. The suppression of the Whiskey Insurrection did not break up permanently back-country political democracy. Its factions soon got together.\textsuperscript{33} What strength the Federalists derived from the opening of the Mississippi river trade by Pinckney’s Treaty of 1795 was soon destroyed by the un-popularity of the Alien and Sedition Acts. The elections of 1798, 1799, and 1800 went against the Federalists.\textsuperscript{34} The old ideas of western Pennsylvania triumphed in the elevation of Thomas Jefferson to the Presidency in 1801. Even in defeat, the whiskey insurrectionists actually stood not only for many traditional American ideas and practices, but for the very policies which were to dominate the national government during the next generation.

\textsuperscript{31} Disagreement about the validity of this claim has never ceased and may never be settled.
\textsuperscript{33} Cf. Ferguson, Early Western Pennsylvania Politics, 129 ff.
\textsuperscript{34} Pennsylvania Manual, 1931, pp. 490, 492.