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The Vermont Democratic-Republican Societies and the French Revolution

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IT HAS long been recognized that the convulsion which shattered the peace of Europe during the French Revolution was not without its effect on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. The difficulty in studying and analyzing the impact of the revolution abroad, however, lies not in the paucity of the data but in the fact that so little of it relates directly to the activities and attitudes of the masses of the people which were commonplace and therefore not recorded. The writing of good social history and the history of ideas necessitates that we penetrate through the various strata of society to determine whether or not the concepts and ideas involved were effective at all social levels. Fortunately, in Vermont this opportunity is presented to us by a study of the activities and pronouncements of a series of popular associations. While the actual records of these bodies, the Democratic-Republican Societies, are themselves no longer extant, the press reports of their activities were particularly detailed and numerous and can be the subject of such a penetrating study. The nature of this investigation, however, requires that it be centered not on the newspaper editorial attitudes but rather on the substantive information contained within those reports.

The Vermont newspapers of the period 1794-1798 recorded faithfully the turn of the tide of battle in favor of the French Republic: Pichegru's capture of Amsterdam, the treaty of peace with Tuscany, the suppression of the Vendean revolts, and the treaties of peace with Prussia and Spain. Reports of these events in the Vermont press differed but little in presentation from the accounts of earlier military and diplomatic encounters. Nevertheless, within France itself all was in a state of flux, the Thermidorean Reaction had begun. The third stage of the French Revolution, which opened with the fall of Robespierre, was clearly a period of corruption, and perhaps of stagnation and cynicism as well.¹ With

1. It is interesting to note that some textbooks, such as those by J. M. Thompson and A. Goodwin, terminate the history of the French Revolution with the Thermidorean Reaction.

Robespierre removed from the scene all France heaved a sigh of relief. The terrorists were eliminated, the Committee of Public Safety was altered, and there was a decentralization of government with frequent renewals of administrative personnel. As the reaction gathered momentum the Jacobin Club was closed, and the Girondins, once outlawed, were readmitted to public life. Even political prisoners were set free to rejoin their families. In effect, the spirit and mentality which had been embodied in the men of 1789 was reborn immediately after the fall of Robespierre. The reaction led the moderates and middle class, joined by some few aristocrats, to attempt the overthrow of the "Perpetuels" of the Convention. There was even some danger that a return to a Constitutional monarchy under Louis XVIII would be attempted. Louis XVIII, however, with typical Bourbon inability to learn from experience, did much to relieve this danger by issuing foolish statements from his exile in Italy, and the attempt to eliminate the Convention, when it was finally made, came to nought in the face of the cannon of the regular army which defended the established government. The new leaders of France, the Directory, were all middle-of-the-road revolutionaries determined to bar the way for both a royalist restoration or a new democratic dictatorship.

If the Vermont press, however, was devoted primarily to giving information about purely military and diplomatic events abroad, a deeper insight into the inner response and feelings of Vermonters may be gleaned from the reports of the activities and attitudes of the Democratic-Republican Societies within the state. Within Vermont the direct effect of the cataclysmic European events was patent in these Democratic-Republican Societies which were devoted to the principles of the French Revolution. These societies brought the spirit of French thought to American shores and attempted to apply that thought to American problems. The Vermont press gave extensive treatment to these local clubs. Analysis of this aspect of the press coverage yields a more accurate picture of the response to the Revolution on the part of the people than the bald recitals of battles and campaigns. The two fold purpose of studying the most intense reaction to the French Revolution in Vermont and the newspaper coverage of that reaction can be served by a careful scrutiny of the papers during this period. It does not result merely in a change in interpretation but rather in the addition of some new data to our store of knowledge about the effect of the French Revolution abroad.

A basic question facing the American Republic was should it "follow the democratic tendency stirred up by the Revolution, or should it turn

its feet into more familiar paths of governmental organization."² The Democratic-Republican Societies answered this question with a positive democratic affirmation. One must, however, be very careful not to confuse these societies with the French Benevolent and Patriotic Societies which had been specifically formed in the United States to support the French Revolution in all ways. Frequently the two groups were confused in the public mind, and the democratic societies were sometimes described as "Jacobin Clubs." The French Clubs were truly "Jacobin Clubs," in the French sense, while the democratic societies concerned themselves primarily with American problems.³ Contemporary opponents of the democratic societies classified them merely as replicas of the older French Jacobin Clubs. Citizen Genêt, the new French ambassador, was accused by some of having inaugurated these groups. Others have said that they were founded by citizens of French birth. And still others have said they were founded by "Yankee rascallions" under the influence of "French gold."⁴ In fact these democratic clubs were only partly modeled after those of the French Jacobins.⁵ There was clearly an interchange of ideas rather than transmission in one direction.

The first of these democratic societies was organized by the Germans in Philadelphia. It was called the German Republican Society and came into existence either in late March or early April 1793, just before the arrival of Genêt to America's shores. This group sent out invitations for the formation of affiliated societies, and met with a quick response. New democratic groups sprang up in all parts of the nation.

Part of the reason for the immediate success of the clubs was based upon the prevailing view in America that the preservation of democracy in the world was dependent upon the creation of a united front between France and the United States. As early as 1791 friends of Samuel Adams informed him that should France fall, America could not stand alone. Conscious that only by the victory of French republicanism could America itself succeed, the democrats became increasingly ardent until they incorporated this argument as a major tenet in every "statement of principles" propounded by the Democratic-Republican Socie-

2. Eugene P. Link, *Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790-1800*. (New York, 1942), 5. See also William Miller, "The Democratic Clubs of the Federalist Period, 1793-5." Unpublished Masters Thesis, New York University, 1937.

3. Eugene P. Link, *op. cit.*, 12, n. 9.

4. *Ibid.*, 19.

5. *Ibid.*, 20 "That the clubs were modeled after the French Jacobins, then, is only partially true. One must add that they were also modeled after certain English societies and that both English and French popular clubs were influenced by American Revolutionary organization."

ties.⁶ They used the opportunity to hail France as an indirect method of criticizing the errors and omissions of popular democracy at home.⁷

This was even recognized by the British minister to the United States George Hammond when he wrote to Lord Grenville that the "pernicious principles of the French Revolution have found here a soil adapted to their reception. The dangerous notion of equality of rights . . . has confirmed the prevailing opinion that the constitution may be changed or altered without danger or inconvenience at popular will or caprice."⁸ Republicans, now fully aware that American lethargy had permitted the gains made in 1776 to slip through their fingers, used French progress as a yardstick for measuring their gains and losses.

Naturally there were other reasons for the founding of these societies aside from that of expressing criticism of a government which was in the hands of aristocrats. Some Americans felt that by aiding France to subdue England they could compel the British to release the western military posts which they held in violation of the Treaty of Paris. Along the entire frontier, Vermont included, both large and small land holders were of the opinion that the British were responsible for the Indian attacks upon settlements. Even more important, these men envisaged British policy as preventing further westward expansion. The inhabitants west of the Alleghenies, therefore, committed as they were to such expansion, favored stern measures against Britain. The seizure of Niagara, cutting off Detroit and weakening British influence in the West, received strong support in Vermont. People in Vermont were ready and willing to join such an enterprise.

The American westerners, like those Vermonters from West of the Green Mountains, claimed that the more settled East was treating them in exactly the same manner that Britain had treated the colonies. That is to say, it ignored their petitions, taxed them unfairly, and dragged their citizens for trial to distant courts.

A panacea for most of these ills seemed to be to gain one of the rivers, Mississippi or St. Lawrence, as an outlet for the products of the western farmers. This same plea, it might be added, played into the hands of land speculators and fur traders so that it soon became the *cause celebre* of the entire west. In Vermont the question was the use of the St. Lawrence River. Vermonters had no outlet for their growing trade, with an angry New York on one side and a competitive unfriendly Canada on the other.⁹

6. *Ibid.*, 45.

7. *Ibid.*, 45 footnote 3. "Maude H. Woodfin in her thesis, 'Citizen Genêt and His Mission,' has caught the significance of the pro-French feeling. She says that the feasts for Genêt were more of a protesting by Americans of the policies of their government than an honoring of 'the citizen.' (237)"

8. *Ibid.*, 45-46.

9. *Ibid.*, 65.

The size of the western Vermont Democratic-Republican Societies is difficult to estimate because there are no extant lists. We do know that the officers of these clubs were men of extensive landed property like Udney Hay in Vermont. On the other hand, the general membership was probably composed of small farmers, settlers, and tenants. This can be surmised from their grievances against land speculation, rents, and the fact that lawyers were hired by the rich absentee landlords to defend them against the poor farmers.¹⁰ Other groups in the population also were members of these societies. Thus the manufacturers of iron implements, who had suffered since colonial days from English competition, were quite active in some of the clubs. In Vermont Matthew Lyon and the ironmonger John Burnam, who manufactured agricultural tools and nails, were strong supporters of the societies, if not active members. Some doctors must have been listed on the rosters of members. Dr. James Witherell, carrying the scars of Valley Forge, was president of the Rutland County Democratic Society. There were even gentlemen of the bar and of the cloth in the membership. Vermont had one of the two known ministers who were members of such groups. Thomas Tolman of Cornwall, Vermont, the first pastor of the Congregational Church of Cornwall, was clearly a member.¹¹ One more point concerning the membership should be made. Many of the members were former Sons of Liberty, members of Committees of Safety, and Revolutionary War leaders. Thus in Vermont Isaac Clarke, affectionately called "Old Rifle," stood in the forefront. The Democratic Society of Chittenden County was so proud of the service record of its members that it baited the aristocratic opponents to come forth and reveal their service stripes. "Where are your scars?" they queried.¹²

Genêt, who was well aware of the friction between the Northwest and Britain set about to capitalize on it. Choosing Henri Mazicèrs, a French Canadian of good appearance and an excellent speaker, as his field agent, Genêt sent him dashing about "to spread the philosophy of the 'Rights of Man' along the Vermont Frontier and Canada." That he was probably successful is borne out by the fact that all four Vermont Democratic-Republican Societies were founded and became most active within the first year of their establishment—1794. Vermont had responded vigorously by the creation of Democratic-Republican Societies, with

10. *Ibid.*, 73.

11. *Ibid.*, 85. "In December, 1794, he was charged with being deistic when he failed to give satisfactory answers to the questions: Is the Bible the word of God? Is mankind naturally depraved? Was Jesus the Son of God? In spite of his negative answers, he was informed on religion and could not be stigmatized as ignorant or insane, he was excommunicated and separated from the church body as a 'corrupt and dangerous member,' to be treated as a 'publican and beathen.'"

12. *Ibid.*, 109.

Pennsylvania as the only state which had more of these societies.¹³ All the Vermont societies were founded in the more radical western part of the state, and three of the five were clustered in the heart of the most radical section—the southwestern corner. It is highly probable that, at least in the two Rutland Societies, there was an overlapping of membership, since they encompassed the same territory.¹⁴ The membership was probably predominantly drawn from the western border regions of the state. The *Rutland Farmers' Library*, owned by the radical Matthew Lyon, reported on July 8, 1794 and again in its issue of September 30, 1794 that new members were admitted into the society from the towns of Westhaven, Fairhaven, Poultney, Wells, Orwell, and Middletown, all towns either near or on the Vermont-New York border.

The most complete coverage of the Vermont Democratic-Republican Societies was given by the *Rutland Farmers' Library*. This is to be expected because the publisher Matthew Lyon had a brother-in-law, Isaac Clarke, who was a member of a Vermont society and thus could have developed an interest aside from his political views. We are not sure whether or not Lyon himself was a member, but since he was an outspoken republican there can be no doubt that he favored the principles of the societies and gave them his support whenever possible. A great deal of space was devoted to the Republican clubs by the *Bennington Vermont Gazette* published by Anthony Haswell, a radical republican. The *Gazette*, however, offered broader coverage than the *Farmers' Library* by printing the resolutions fairly often and reporting on the activities of the Democratic-Republican Societies in other states. The *Rutland Herald*, which was the successor to the *Farmers' Library* after it was purchased from Lyon by Dr. Samuel Williams, in its first issue, dated December 8, 1794, stated that it would publish all news, but would not be partisan. As a result, it gave coverage to all the Democratic Societies in the country, but it only printed their items if it considered them newsworthy and was in fact a conservative paper. It expressed some of its publisher's views by inserting an occasional column of what might be called editorial news analysis. As will be shown later this was frequently quite a scholarly survey of events.

13. *Ibid.*, 15. Link lists the following Vermont societies: The Chittenden County Democratic Society; The Addison County Democratic Society; The Rutland County Democratic Society; The Second Society of Rutland County. Thus we see two societies being organized in Rutland. One met usually in Fairhaven or Castleton and the other at Middletown. *Ibid.*, 16. Link states that the *Vermont Gazette*, February 28, 1794, announced the attempt to form a society at Bennington, but whether or not it was realized is unknown.

14. Some Vermonters like Udney Hay held membership not only in a Vermont society, but in the society of another state as well. He had membership in the New York Democratic Society as well as the society in Burlington, Vermont.

The only paper published over a long span of time in the eastern part of the state was the Windsor *Vermont Journal*. This derived from the area along the Connecticut River, the heartland of conservatism, and so it was perfectly natural that it should contain little or nothing about the activities of either the Vermont or other Democratic-Republican Societies outside the state.

Of the five Vermont Democratic-Republican clubs there are extant constitutions and published principles of formulation for three. These were not included in Link's study. The constitutions of the Democratic Society in the County of Chittenden, the (Rutland) Democratic Society, and the Democratic Society of the County of Addison were all published in one or another of the local Vermont newspapers.¹⁵ Each of the Constitutions stated that the members were merely asserting a right that they all possessed—that of association. Perhaps the Addison County Democratic Club put the idea in its strongest form when it stated "We make no apology for thus associating ourselves . . . to consider, animadvert upon, and publish our sentiments, on the political interests, constitution and government of our country; this is a right, the disputation of which reflects on political freedom, and wears an appearance peculiarly absurd, in proceeding from the tongue, or pen of an American."¹⁶

Of the three constitutions, the most carefully developed one is that of the Democratic Society of the County of Chittenden. This constitution was written by Udney Hay and was copied almost verbatim by the other societies.¹⁷ In the preamble to the society's constitution it stated "As meetings of any part of the people, for the purpose of discussing with freedom, moderation, and a due degree of respect to the governing powers, all political questions which it may deem proper, to take into consideration, will never be termed illegal, but by the national enemies to the true spirit of Republicanism, and the equal rights of Man."¹⁸ It then proceeded to justify this right by referring to the "6th, 13th, 18th and 20th articles of the Bill of Rights prefixed to the Constitution" of the state of Vermont and to Article 42 of that Constitution.¹⁹ Having

15. For the Chittenden Society see the Rutland *Farmers' Library* for April 16, 1794; April 23, 1794; April 29, 1794, the Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, May 2, 1794; May 9, 1794; May 16, 1794, and the Windsor *Vermont Journal*, April 21, 1794. The constitution of the Rutland Democratic Society is to be found in the Rutland *Farmers' Library*, May 6, 1794, and that of the Addison County Democratic Society in the Rutland *Farmers' Library*, September 9, 1794.

16. Rutland *Farmers' Library*, September 9, 1794.

17. Eugene P. Link, *op. cit.*, 143-144.

18. Rutland *Farmers' Library*, April 16, 1794; Windsor *Vermont Journal*, April 21, 1794; Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, May 2, 1794.

19. Rutland *Farmers' Library*, May 6, 1794. The Rutland Democratic Society makes its appeals to Article 15 and 22 of the Bill of Rights of the Vermont Constitution.

now justified its right to convene, the Constitution of the Chittenden Society proceeded to put forth "the general reasons and grounds" for its being formed:

1st, The open declaration in favor of Great Britain not only our former but present bitter enemy, and the undue influence, which it is said, she had acquired as well in our legislative councils, as with some of the first officers in our general Government.

2nd, The unmerited abuse with which the public papers have so often teemed against the Minister of our only ally; a nation who is gloriously, zealously, uniformly, and perseveringly beyond example, wading thro' oceans of blood, for the mere purpose of obtaining permission to establish a government for herself, upon the same plain, simple and immutable principles of truth, on which the whole system of ours is founded.

3rd, The almost total inattention (except in the Executive) which has been paid to the recovery of the posts agreed to be surrendered by the treaty of 1783 on which surrender, not only the peace and prosperity of the nation in general, but even the very existence of this Country may in some measure depend.

4th, The doors of the Federal Senate being *always* shut, in contradiction, as we conceive to the true principles of liberty, as well as to the repeated wishes of a number of the states signified publically by their respective legislatures.

5th, The construction of the Federal Judges on the suability [*sic.*] of states; thereby effectually extinguishing their sovereignty, whilst the United States are placed under no such restriction.

6th, The alarming circumstances of eleven Members of the Federal Senate having voted in the negative on a motion for laying before that body, the correspondence between our Ambassador [*sic.*] at the Republic of France, with the Minister of that nation, for foreign affairs, as well as his correspondence with our Executive and which motion was carried by a majority of two only.

The Addison County Democratic Society is equally specific in its reason for forming. Article two of their Constitution not only gives that Society's beliefs but the reasons for assembling.

Article 2nd, We declare the following, among others, to be some of our political sentiments, and principles of government, which whether in an individual or associated capacity, we are bound, under the laws of reason and morality, to maintain and defend—That all men are naturally free, and possess equal rights.—That all legitimate government originates in the voluntary and social compact of the people.—That no rights of the people are surrendered to their rulers, as a price of protection and government.—That the constitution and laws of a country, are the expression of the general will of the body of the people or nation, that officers of government are the ministers & servants of the people, and, as such, are amenable to them, for all their conduct in office.—That it is the right, and become the duty of a people, as a necessary mean of the security and preservation of their rights, and the future peace and political happiness of the nation,

to exercise watchfulness and inspection, upon the conduct of all their public officers; to approve, if they find their conduct worthy of their high and important trusts—and to reprove and censure, if it be found otherwise. That frequent elections, directly from the body of the people, of persons, to important offices of trust, have an immediate tendency to secure the public rights, as less opportunities intervene for abuse of power; that compensations for public service ought to be reasonable (and even moderate, when the debts and exigencies of a nation require it,) and a reward only for actual service; that a public debt (and a financial funding system to continue the same) is a burthen [*sic.*] upon a nation, and ought by the economical [*sic.*] exertions of the nation, to be reduced and discharged; that an increase of public officers, dependant on the executive power,—blending of the distinct branches of government together, in the functions and offices of one, or body of men;—a foolish copying of ancient, corrupt and foreign governments and courts; where the equal rights of men, are trampled under the feet of kings and lords; and standing army,—are all highly dangerous to liberty; and that the constitution, laws, and government of a country, are always of right, liable to amendment.

No person reading this could have the slightest doubt that people subscribing to those terms were bound to be favorable to the French Revolution. In their view government resulted from a social compact or contract which, however, did not result in the abdication of any rights on the part of the citizenry. In Article three the French were lauded as follows: "the confidence which the French nation, in their present unparalleled struggle with despotism, have reason to repose in us their friends, from our alliance, but more from gratitude, and the goodness and greatness of their cause." The Rutland County Democratic Society constitution was even more general in its terms, stating that the members would support Republicanism, but would also "detect, discountenance, and reprobate" all men who appeared "evidently repugnant to the purest principles of republicanism."

In organization all the societies were alike. Each had its President, Vice President, Treasurer, and Secretary and followed the standard procedures. Both the Addison County Democratic Society and Rutland County Society in their constitution made a specific requirement for the creation of a committee of Correspondence to keep in contact with other democratic clubs in the United States. The Rutland Society, probably because it met (*i.e.* held a meeting) at Castleton or Fairhaven, added the requirement that "one week's notice thereof be given in a newspaper printed in the County."²⁰ At least two of the societies required that the members take a solemn oath upon being accepted. Both the Chittenden and Rutland societies used almost the exact same oath:

20. See the notice in *Rutland Farmers' Library*, July 1, 1794.

I do declare upon my sacred honor, that it is the promotion of real and genuine Republicanism, unsullied, uncontaminated with the smallest spark of monarchical or aristocratical principles, which has excited me to wish admission into the Associated Democratic Society of Chittenden—That I have no views, but what arise from principles, not men;—and that I will use my utmost exertions, in conformity with the Constitution and laws of my country, to support the rational liberty and equal rights of Man.²¹

There is no record of an oath being utilized by the Addison Society, and from the short and concise nature of the constitution it is probable that they did not use one.

Of the five societies in Vermont the one in Chittenden was probably the most influential. The Rutland *Farmers' Library* of May 13, 1794 reported that the Tammany Society of New York was so impressed with the proceedings of the Chittenden Society that it ordered their republication in the *Patriotic Register* and the *Diary*, both printed in New York City. Thus the influence of these rural groups exceeded what might normally be expected in the more settled parts of the country.

All of these societies were early forms of American pressure groups. They were primarily interested in the affairs of the United States government, and expressed their views on Shays' Rebellion, but they also dealt with relations with France and England, and on a subject close to Vermonter's hearts, relations between the state and Canada. Politically they doled out their blessings to members of Congress and actively supported for election men who reflected their views. Thus the Addison County Society complimented "the patriotic representatives" of their state in Congress.²² The Rutland County Society passed a resolution at its May 4, 1794 meeting in Fairhaven applauding "the virtuous conduct of the twelve patriotic Senators, who shewed [*sic*] their sense of truth and honor in their opposition to the 'narrowing of our relations with France.'" They further resolved "that Vermont's Senators Bradley and Robinson, are entitled to enjoy our warmest thanks for the propriety of their conduct on that occasion."²³ They were equally quick to condemn their own Senator Paine for voting in favor of the Jay Treaty ratification.

These societies were quite specific in their reasons for condemning Great Britain and praising France. The Democratic Society of Chitten-

21. The Rutland society oath is as follows: "I do declare upon my sacred honor, that it is for the promotion of genuine republicanism, that I wish admission into the Democratic Society in the county of Rutland, that I have no views but what derive from principles; and that I always will use my utmost endeavors for the exaltation of human nature, as well as for the support of rational liberty and the equal rights of man."

22. Eugene P. Link, *op. cit.*, 150. Rutland *Farmers' Library*, October 28, 1794.

23. Rutland *Farmers' Library*, May 27, 1794. Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, June 6, 1794.

den County stated "that having in the preamble to our regulations declared in general terms the apparent enmity of Great Britain to the United States" they felt it their duty "to demonstrate in a brief manner the truth of that assertion." They then listed their grievances. Great Britain was accused of not paying for the Negroes whom she had stolen "in direct contradiction to the treaty of peace." Thus, the members accepted the enslavement of Negroes as commonplace though it violated the very principles for which they stood. In that sense they were in complete harmony with the spirit of the times. In addition, the British had not returned the western posts which were to be transferred according to the Treaty of Paris. Both of these complaints were combined in still a third accusation, whereby the Vermonters maintained that the British were interfering with trade, particularly with the West Indies, and were secretly encouraging the Indians to "scalp, torture, and murder the innocent inhabitants of our frontiers." British privateering against American vessels, cruel treatment of captured seamen, impressment of Americans into British vessels, violations of the law of nations concerning American neutral shipping, which was not accorded the privileges which the British granted to Sweden and Denmark, were also condemned. Even more distant scourges than the Indians were supported by the English crown which set "her dearly beloved brethren, the bloodhounds of Algiers," who were "unnatural" as well as unchristian, against the innocent Americans. The adherents of the Democratic Society of Chittenden County expressed their anxiety over the future should the British succeed by asking the British adherents in this country to predict what would Britain's actions be like if there were nothing to stifle her freedom. They answered the question themselves by pointing out that England,

which tho' overwhelmed with distress of almost every nature, to which a nation is liable, the plague, famine, total and complete national bankruptcy, excepted, has wantonly plunged herself into a war in direct opposition to the causes of humanity, and pledged the blood of a large portion of her citizens for the destruction of France, under the frivolous pretext of aiding her allies the Dutch, who it has been plainly proved, are but little anxious about defending themselves.

The Vermonters, like good news commentators, which they were not, analyzed the current world situation in their minutes by revealing that the English government used only pretexts to mask its true motives and describing what the "virtuous part of mankind," and the "honest part of her own (*i.e.* the British) subjects, assign, as the *real* reason which induced her to commence so bloody, so barbarous, so cruel, and so

disgraceful a war." As seen with unflinching wisdom of the Vermont pundits, England stood on the verge of a tremendous social and political upheaval and had "strong apprehension of the downfall of her own corrupt and motley government." With a well chosen metaphor, the frontier philosophers stated that the British were fearful of the justice emanating from France "from whose electrical machine of liberty . . . some particle of Republican fluid, might glance to her own territories and create that degree of light: which would bring clearly to view the errors and impositions which they have long been dupes of." The British aristocracy's villainous disposition caused England to reject any offer of a just peace, and as a result Britain "justly merited the stroke of heaven for her many and unparalleled iniquities." The members of the Democratic Society of Chittenden County expressed the pious hope "that a war commenced in dishonour, and continued with injustice," would "terminate in disgrace and eternal infamy to the promoters of it." England was lavishing her blood and treasure liberally in an unjust war without taking notice of the "contradiction to her beloved and refined system of maintaining the balance of Europe" by overlooking "the unnatural aggrandizement of Russia." England "winked at the robbery of Prussia, and suffered the dismemberment of Poland without a feeble effort to prevent it; without a sigh for this public and unprecedented act of villany, an act of too base a nature, too deep a dye, too black a hue, too glaringly villainous [*sic*] to have been perpetrated by any but ROYAL ROBBERS." Among England's blackest crimes was the disarming of the Irish volunteers, "Those brave and virtuous guardians of her honor in a former hour of distress." The final indictment of England by the Democratic Society of Chittenden County, clothed in all its virtue, should perhaps be quoted in its entirety.

Has she not for many, many years, in contradiction to the true spirit of religion, both natural and revealed prohibited her Roman Catholic subjects and dissenters from enjoying the natural privileges of citizens, tho' in her kingdom of Ireland they compose nearly seven-eighths of the whole people—has she not in contempt of the laws of uninformed nature, as well as of enlightened reason, and the laws of God, forced Genoa and Tuscany from their state of neutrality—In short, has she not spent very nearly one-half of the last hundred years in shedding the blood of the human race?²⁴

The Rutland County society was equally specific in its condemnation of Great Britain. By resolution it stated "that it is the opinion of this Society, that the attachment shewn [*sic*] to the Leeks and Onions of

24. Rutland *Farmers' Library*, April 16, 1794. Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, May 2, 1794. Windsor *Vermont Journal*, April 21, 1794.

Britain have tended to encourage that haughty nation to proceed with their own depredations on the trade of this country; to set on the pirates of Barbary in their cruel and unprovoked robberies; as well as to retain our forts for the support of a scalping set of savages who destroy our frontiers, and whose greatest delight is in butchering defenceless women and harmless babes."²⁵

One of the major areas of concern for the western Vermonters was Canada. The refusal of Great Britain to evacuate the western posts in itself caused ill feelings on the part of the Vermonters. This feeling reached a climax when Dorchester, in February, 1794, in a speech to the Indians declared that the British-American impasse might lead to war. This was taken by Vermonters as a direct threat to themselves. The advance of John Graves Simcoe to the Maumee River only served to heighten the tension. When Mad Anthony Wayne defeated the Indians at the Battle of Fallen Timbers it appeared as though the United States and Great Britain were on the verge of war.²⁶ This new crisis served to divide Vermonters once again on the role they should play in the impending struggle. There was still a strong group that favored neutrality, or, if possible, alliance with Great Britain. Still another group beat the drums for war. The underlying purposes of both segments of the population were the same—land speculation in Canada, and free navigation of the St. Lawrence River. The faction in favor of neutrality was led by Ira and Levi Allen and Governor Thomas Chittenden, while the war party drew its support and leadership from members of the Democratic Societies. Even these societies, who drew the greater part of their membership from the farming and artisan classes, had such substantial landowners and businessmen on their rosters as Silas Hathaway of St. Albans, and Levi Allen's brother-in-law, William Coit.²⁷ The Allens themselves secretly sympathized with the aims of the Democratic Societies, but discreetly managed to disassociate themselves from such groups publicly because their land speculation outweighed all other considerations. The societies, on the other hand, were not confined in their activities to Vermont alone but maintained connections with Americans and Canadians in Lower Canada who shared their views and ambitions.²⁸

Ardent democrats on both sides of the border hoped to secure French Canadian support by arousing their lingering attachments for France and

25. Rutland *Farmers' Library*, May 27, 1794. Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, June 6, 1794.

26. On this subject of Vermont's relations with Canada see Chilton Williamson, *Vermont in Quandary 1763-1825* (Montpelier, 1949).

27. Chilton Williamson, *op. cit.*, 206-207.

28. *Ibid.*, 208.

their antipathy to the feudal institutions which the British had perpetuated in Lower Canada. Vermonters had never abandoned their belief in the utility of democratic ideas. Democratic propaganda had helped them to separate the grants from New York and it might now aid them to detach Lower Canada from the British Empire.²⁹

Simcoe in Upper Canada and Dorchester in Lower Canada were greatly alarmed by the clandestine activities of the Democrats. In fact Dorchester reported that the French population of his district was almost universally favorably inclined towards such foreign schemes. The *Vermont Gazette* of March 15, 1793 even reported the formation of Democratic-Republican Societies in Canada which were allied in aims with those in the United States. The situation had become so critical by the summer of 1794 that Dorchester was compelled to call out the militia "to protect the government against any eventuality."³⁰

As the Anglo-American crisis deepened the Democratic-Republican Societies heaped fuel on the flames. The Chittenden Democratic Society passed a resolution to the effect

that Lord Dorchester's reply to the speech of the Indians, given at the Castle of St. Lewis, in the city of Quebec on the 10th day of February last contains expressions so injurious to the common feelings of humanity, so inconsistent, we are certain with the sentiments of the people whom he governs, so defamatory to the government of the United States in general, and of so interesting a nature to the people of this country in particular, that it would be improper to let it pass in silence. . . .

They then wrote an open letter to Dorchester in which they condemned his actions and threatened an invasion of Lower Canada in which disaffected Canadians would join the invading American forces.³¹ The Rutland Democratic Society went further and passed a resolution concerning the Canadian question.

That while on the prospect of a war we hear with particular satisfaction of the fortifying several places from north to south on the seacoast, it gives us alarm to hear of no preparations for defending the avenue through Lake Champlain, which the British in the last war spent so many men and so much money fruitlessly to obtain and keep possession of; and although we are under no apprehension from the inhabitants of Canada, and we are sensible of the strength of our country when put in a defensive posture, yet, while the river St. Lawrence is open for the reception of bands of mercenary troops, the slaves of the ROYAL ROBBERS OF EUROPE: we know no reason why this important avenue should be neglected at a time

29. *Idem.*

30. *Ibid.*, 209.

31. *Ibid.*, 209-210. *Rutland Farmers' Library*, April 23, 29, 1794. *Bennington Vermont Gazette*, May 9, 16, 1794.

when the fortifying of so many places on the seacoast seems to engross the attention of the public and participate in a share of the care of Congress.³²

Vermonters habitually demonstrated their feelings of fraternity toward France on almost all public occasions. Thus on Christmas Day 1793 some gentlemen from Burlington and its vicinity met "for the purpose of enjoying and indulging that mirth which ever ought to be considered laudable, and gratifying, and at the same time for the purpose of congratulating each other of the late success, and future prospects of the Republic of France."³³ Fifteen toasts were offered of which two concerned France. "*The French Republic*—May their glorious revolution, be crowned with success to that nation; and the sweet blessings of peace and equality run thro' the world as a perpetual reward for its exertions." "*The Minister of France in the United States*—May he stand or fall in his present dispute on the real genuine principles or republicanism."³⁴ Again on March 4, 1794 gentlemen from Vergennes met "to celebrate the day with joy on the success of the arms of our French brethren, the citizens of France."³⁵ Here they gave still more pro-French toasts: "The Republic of France: May wisdom shield, freedom inspire, and fortitude protect & defend her; and may justice, equality, and hospitality, be the characteristic of her citizens." "May the success of the brave Sans Culottes speedily relieve all the noble souls oppressed by tyranny and break every link in the chain of despotism throughout the world."³⁶ What is interesting about this meeting, however, is that there was a citizen of France present and he offered this toast. "May mutual esteem and pure friendship unite the hearts of the free citizens of the Republics of France and America."³⁷ The Democratic Clubs were quick to utilize this technique to establish a bond of friendship between the two republics. Thus the Rutland County Democratic Society, celebrating July 4, had as their guests at the meeting at Fairhaven Captain Cutler's artillery, and a series of toasts were drunk celebrating the ideals of the Revolution and the French Republic.

1st; The Rights of Man—May they be fully understood, inviolably secured, & universally enjoyed.

2d; The United Democrats through the American States commemorating

32. Rutland *Farmers' Library*, May 27, 1794. Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, June 6, 1794.

33. Rutland *Farmers' Library*, January 13, 1794.

34. *Idem*.

35. Rutland *Farmers' Library*, March 12, 1794. Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, March 7, 1794.

36. *Idem*.

37. *Idem*.

the fourth of July; May the Freedom of America be coeval with its annual existence, through the revolving periods of time.

6th; The Brave who have fallen in defence of the Rights of Man.

8th; May anarchy, despotism, and licentiousness find a common tomb with the present convulsions of Europe.

15th; The Republic of France—May wisdom & candor direct their counsels, unanimity attend their measures, & victory their arms to the total abolition of tyrants;—and may lasting peace close the scene.³⁸

These activities of the Democratic Societies were not to go unopposed. The Bennington *Vermont Gazette* of August 1, 1794 published a letter from Judge Chipman which had originally been published in the “*Herald*” a New York paper, in which he asserted that the Democratic Societies in America are not merely useless, but mischievous, and a very dangerous imposition.” Chipman then went on to say that he felt that the Democratic Societies were the ones that whipped up the northern frontier rebellions. He mitigated this charge somewhat with the remark that the societies were probably unaware of what would be the likely consequences of their actions otherwise they most certainly would never have encouraged the people to revolt. What was more shocking to Chipman, however, was that the Democratic Club of the County of Chittenden quoted in their constitutional articles from a small tract written by him entitled *Sketches of the Principles of Government*. This Chittenden Constitution was published both in New York and Philadelphia. Chipman maintained that the fomentor of that society and the author of their “late productions” was an inhabitant of New York State residing primarily in the City of New York. Thus the Society could not claim a purely Vermont origin. Chipman declared that only the author of the Constitution itself knew why he had cited Chipman in support of such an association. From reading the passages cited improperly by the Chittenden Society one might gain the false impression that the judge favored anarchy and was actually against representative democracy. This he denied with the strong statement his writing did not “even remotely imply, an approbation of selfcreated societies; and Clubs formed for the purpose of censuring the proceedings of government in transition, of anticipating the deliberations of constitutional bodies, or dictating the measures, which those bodies ought to pursue.” In Chipman’s view such societies were meaningless and useless. He deprecated and indicted them as demagogic.

Our self-created societies and clubs, as it appears to me, have a tendency, directly or indirectly, to introduce into the measures of government, all

38. Rutland *Farmers' Library*, July 15, 1794.

the precipitation, all the heat and ungovernable passions of a simple democracy. Have we reason to believe that these self pronounced dictators, have a free access to the means of information, that they have been able more fully to comprehend the present circumstances, the principles and reasons which ought to direct public measures, than those to whom the people have confined that talk? Or, even than their mere peaceable and quiet fellow citizens? Certainly they have given us no unequivocal proof of either.

He accused the societies of assuming a "dictatorial Style" and berating those who disagreed with them. More aggravating to Chipman was the claim of the clubs that they represented the majority of the people while in reality only a minority were members of such organizations. Nevertheless, he maintained, they should not be disallowed, but should be compelled to stand or fall on their merits. His only requirement would be the publication of the number of members so that the public would have an accurate idea of their strength.³⁹

Judge Chipman's letter did not go unanswered. The Bennington *Vermont Gazette* of August 29 and September 5, 1794 printed a letter of reply from a New Yorker on the subject of Democratic Societies. This may have been the same man whom the Judge accused of "fomenting" the society. The letter writer expressed doubt about the authenticity of the Chipman letter. Nevertheless, he decided to answer it. The New Yorker denied categorically that the creation of the Chittenden Society and its constitution were the work of one man. In fact, he said, it was the handiwork of several people and the writing of its constitution consumed at least two meetings of active discussion in which the draft was reviewed article by article before it was ratified. He emphatically rejected the view that the societies had tried to assume control of the

39. Windsor *Vermont Journal*, September 22, 1794. Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, August 1, 1794. The portions of Chipman's *Sketches of the Principles of Government* referred to were printed in Rutland *Farmers' Library*, April 16, 1794; Windsor *Vermont Journal*, April 21, 1794; Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, May 2, 1794. It reads as follows: "For some part of the approbation referred to, see Chipman's Principles of Government, p. 55 where, speaking of the advantage arising from the social sense being connected with any society—he says, 'If it be not the germ of every social attachment, it certainly gives strength to the attachment, and vigor to patriotism itself, it is a very necessary part of the social nature of men, and of great importance to government.'—p. 138. 'An interest in the approbation of the public and a strong sense of accountability to them, in all official conduct, is the greatest, or rather the only effectual security against abuses in those, who exercise the power of government.'—p. 139. 'Banish mystery from politics, open every channel of information, call for investigation, tempt a discussion of measures, and the public sentiment will be the best criterion of what is right and of what is wrong in government'—p. 164. 'In a Republic, the powers of government are supported not by force, but by the sentiments of the people—It is necessary to cultivate a sentimental attachment to the government.'—p. 236, 'The Government of the several American states, as well as that of the Union, are of the Democratic-Republican kind—We ought to know their principles, to study well their tendency, and to be able, both in theory and in practice, to exclude all foreign principles.'

government or to act tyrannically. Judge Chipman, however, issued a rejoinder that, regardless of what was said, the Chittenden Society resolutions were the work of one man who resided in New York. He would, however, grant that they might have been submitted to the group for approval, but in essence they were still the work of one man. Furthermore he emphasized that he was appalled at the vilification heaped upon the President of the United States because he had requested the recall of Citizen Genêt.⁴⁰

The Democratic Societies did not sit idly by and permit calumnies to be heaped upon them. The Vermont papers published answers from the various societies throughout the country. The radical *Vermont Gazette* published these rejoinders with the obvious intent of justifying the activities of the societies. The conservative *Vermont Journal* published them also, but for the purpose of demonstrating that the societies were on the side of evil and sin.⁴¹ When, however, the criticism of the Democratic-Republican Societies reached the floor of Congress the debate came to a white heat. The Chittenden Society of Vermont published a long and denunciatory reply to each of the Congressmen who had condemned the organizations.⁴² That feelings were at a fevered pitch may be gathered from the letter published in the *Hartford Gazette* and republished in the Bennington *Vermont Gazette* of February 27, 1795. Its ironic quality makes it worthy of complete publication.

To the Democratic Society of the county of Chittenden, and state of Vermont. *Gentlemen*—or if that address is aristocratic *Democrats*, I recollect having seen when I was a boy a little poem, in which were two lines

‘John wak’d, and thus began to pray—
The devil take all fools, I say.’

Now, pray be so good as to tell me how many persons belong to your society; because the Devil is a gentleman from whom I have a peculiar kind of respect, and therefore I shall never dare to join John in his prayer again if you are very numerous, lest my old Friend should have his dominions overstocked.

This address came to you, in consequence of the arrival of the head and shoulders of your Resolves, &c. of January 8, 1795. I have seen it, admired it—but not read it. Be not surprised at this remark. It would be impossible for a man to read it, and live, whose nerves were not larger than a linsey woolsey apron string, or a spinning wheel band. It plays TAG with a man’s sen-

40. Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, September 19, 26, 1794.

41. For the Democratic Society of Baltimore see the Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, January 9, 1795. That of the Democratic Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, see the Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, January 16, 1795. The Tammany Society of New York reply is found in the Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, February 6, 1795, and Windsor *Vermont Journal*, March 2, 1795. The reaction of the Massachusetts Constitutional Society are to be found in the Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, February 13, 1795 and the Windsor *Vermont Journal*, February 9, 1795.

42. Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, February 20, 27, 1795. Windsor *Vermont Journal* February 16, 1795.

sibility, and chases it up and down his frame like a bum-bailen after a pick-pocket. To account for my feelings you ought to know one thing, however, I am a physiognomist, and believe much in first impressions. As ill luck would have it, my eye stumbled upon the passage directed to Mr. Ames, and I cannot get rid of the effect it produced upon my mind. I venture to say that there is not a passage in Homer, or Milton, in any measure to be compared with it. Alas! what will become of the little tiptoe frowning—into—nothing moonarian, when this bombshell of seventy, this cannister of pungency, this minced meat—and turnip dish of Chittenden County composition meets his eye. I dare say that in the first moments of his astonishment and rage he won't—mind it, anymore than he would reading the last will and testament of the *youngest son* of an English *mosquito*.

Gents—Democrats, I mean (Pardon me, I am so used to addressing gentlemen, that I cannot without difficulty recollect that the title does not belong to you) why will you not tell Mr. Tracy's constitutens all you know about him—They ought to know it, and they cannot read, and find it out themselves. They already look up to Chittenden Democrats for intelligence. Besides it is no more than fair play. We have told you something about your pious fellow labourer, and co-adjutor, old N-s; that is, that he is, what is called among blackguards, a d-'d liar—among DEMOCRATS a BROTHER. Why will you not accuse Mr. Dexter of ignorance—Mr. Sedgwick of cowardice—Mr. Ames of being under petticoat government—Mr. Smith of being a master of good style, and Mr. Dayton, and Mr. Murray of nothing at all! Everybody, if your address had not been printed, would have judged a Democratic Society in Chittenden County, to be competent judges of *ignorance*, of *petticoat government* and of nothing at all. You have been over modest—you have underrated your own abilities, if you have omitted these things from a diffidence of your own competency.

But, Democrats, let me ask, why have you stirred on this general convulsion of Democratic Societies? Is it guilt that has disturbed you, and forced you to *cry how*, with the rest of the kennel? I will venture to say, that neither the President, nor the Senate, nor the 46 vicious Representatives, who voted against 'self-created societies,' had any kind of regard, or reference to Chittenden County. The President may possibly have heard of your governor's name; but I do not believe he ever heard that the governor had hatched a county, much less that the county had hatched a Democratic Society. Why, Democrats, the President does not know anything more about you than he does about the *posy* on Queen Mob's wedding ring; and he cares as much less about your Resolves, than he knows about your person, as Queen Mob's wedding ring is smaller than Saturn's ring.

Ge—there I had like to have transgressed again—Democrats, have you ever read Parson Osgood's sermon? No—I suppose you cannot read. Did not you never feel plaguily frightened in riding home thro' the woods after one of your meetings? Democrats, do tell me whether, I may safely join John in this prayer hereafter; because I long to a little.

FALSTAFF"

Falstaff's letter brought a quick response, and the first reply came in the form of some rather unimpressive, but colorful rural poetry in the

Bennington *Vermont Gazette* of March 6, 1795. Nor was this the only reply to Falstaff. A subsequent issue of the *Gazette* contained an article which said that despite all the puns hurled against the democratic societies, still they did a good job.⁴³

As the power of the societies seemed to grow the conservatives mustered their forces for a stronger attack. "The apprehensiveness of 'the few' approached irrational fear, which breeds spleen and invective, when they saw the close association that existed between the democratic societies and a democratic militia."⁴⁴ Thus in Vermont, when Captain Cutler's artillery celebrated the Fourth of July with the Rutland County Democratic Society, horror must have passed through the minds of the conservatives.⁴⁵ Some of the large landholders who were members of these societies began to desert the ship. Nevertheless, the societies were beginning to lose their unity as well, and this is illustrated by a letter to the editor of the *Rutland Herald*:

Sir,

I did not expect the proceedings of the Democratic Society in the County of Rutland, would have been offered to the public; (as no direction of that nature was at the meeting) but since you feel that these proceedings will appear in your next—in order to do justice to the Society, I wish now to mention, that but a bare majority of the little number mentioned in your last, were persuaded to approve of those Resolutions; and as a member of said society, I am unwilling that such invectives and abuses, which are the production of disappointed individuals, should ever be considered as the deliberate sentiments of that Society, which wish to be considered as friends to the rights of Man.

a Member of said Society⁴⁶

The conservative press began its assault upon the societies by falsely announcing that first one and then another of these clubs disbanded. This mode of attack, which was designed to minimize the influence of such organizations, was begun by Loring Andrews, of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, when he published the statement that the Chittenden Society had only twelve members. Anthony Hasewell, the publisher of the radical Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, called Andrews a "liar" and claimed that he could prove that the society in question actually had 84 members. This did not daunt Andrews who proceeded to publish the report that the Addison County Democratic Society had passed a motion to burn its paper and adjourn *sine die*. This was obviously

43. Bennington *Vermont Gazette*, March 13, 1795.

44. Eugene P. Link, *op. cit.*, 178.

45. Rutland *Farmers' Library*, July 15, 1794.

46. *Rutland Herald*, March 23, 1795.

false, for the *Rutland Herald* records at least two meetings of the supposedly 'dead' society. Finally the conservative *Vermont Journal* took up the cudgels, and on November 8, 1796 it published a bold statement that the Chittenden Society was dead, "even though Udney Hay delivered a Fourth of July oration before that very-much-alive organization in 1797."⁴⁷ Even though societies may not have been dead at that late date their effectiveness was clearly gone. The conservative campaign had achieved its objective.

47. Eugene P. Link, *op. cit.*, 190-191.

