



Anticipating Antimasonry: The Vermont Gubernatorial Election of 1826

As early as the gubernatorial election of 1826, many issues that underlay the multifaceted antimasonic crusade were already being subjected to spirited debate in Vermont.

By KENNETH A. DEGREE

Discussing political antimasonry during the spring of 1829, Jonathan Allen of Middlebury commented that until recently, the “excitement” engendered by the movement had but slightly touched the Green Mountains. “The last four months, however,” he wrote, “have seen it burst upon us like the sudden explosion of a volcano.”¹ Allen leaves his readers with the impression that no one could have anticipated the antimasonic eruption, which raged throughout the state during its brief existence, leaving scorched earth, scars, and gouges in the political landscape. It would have taken quite a seer to predict the fury sparked by the disappearance and possible murder of William Morgan in upstate New York in 1826 for threatening to expose Masonic secrets. Yet in retrospect, the widespread misgivings, discontent, and concerns that accompanied the rise of the new economic order taking shape in Vermont after the War of 1812 can be viewed as the initial bursts of steam and ash from the crater, to carry this volcanic metaphor to its conclusion.

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Of course, the historian has the advantage of hindsight, and the added benefit of knowing how the story ultimately turns out. As early as the gubernatorial election of 1826, many of the issues that underlay the multifaceted antimasonic crusade were already being subjected to spirited debate in Vermont. At first glance, this election hardly seems to have been meaningful. Ezra Butler of Waterbury, capping a long and distinguished political career, captured the governor's chair with 63 percent of the vote. In this case, appearances are, indeed, deceiving. Behind this landslide lay a campaign featuring considerable sparring over the allocation of political offices, the effect religion should have on politics, the rise of the "village aristocracy," and the necessity of the legislative caucus for choosing gubernatorial candidates. The statewide discussion demonstrated a growing gulf on these critical issues, which helped set the stage for the emergence of the Antimasonic Party.

AGRARIANS VERSUS ENTREPRENEURS

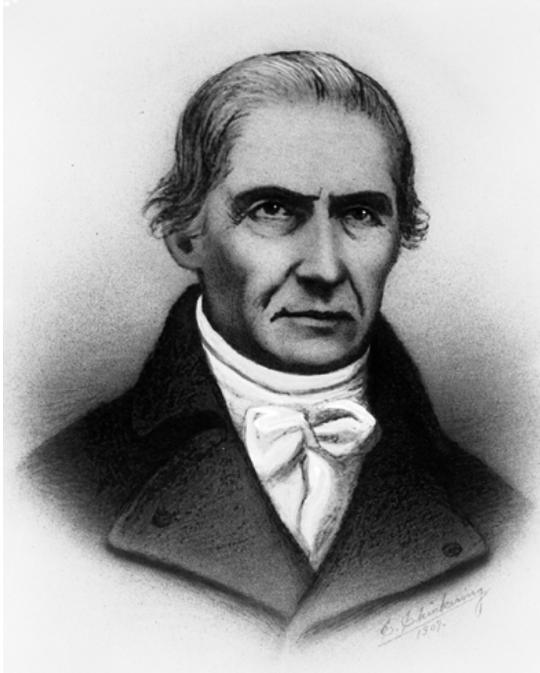
As the gubernatorial campaign of 1826 opened, many followers of the republican creed espoused by Thomas Jefferson were deeply troubled by the changes they observed on the Vermont landscape. Fiercely holding to the notion that the yeoman farmer was "the bone and sinew" of the republic, they still deemed the tillers of the soil, owners of their own land, who asked only their competence and the fruit of their labor, as the appropriate symbol of the nation. Generally, they approved of the transportation breakthroughs, such as the Champlain Canal, which helped propel the state out of the economic doldrums that had characterized the previous decade. However, these old-school republicans grew increasingly dismayed by the grasping, entrepreneurial mentality developing within the merchant class populating Vermont's emerging market towns. Such agrarian notions didn't always emanate from small towns, just as those citizens who considered the changes occurring as "progress" weren't always the residents of larger towns. Yet what emerged was a serious debate over the political economy of the state and which direction it should take.²

While the Jeffersonian disciples were heartened by the new opportunities opening before them, discomfiting signs abounded that along with providing new markets, these economic changes were also eating away at the foundation of the agrarian society that they knew. The promise that community life would go on unchanged, that farms and shops would be available for their children, was not being realized. As the price of good agricultural land rose faster than farm wages, farmers' children and laborers saw the prospect of securing their own property grow more and more remote. The opportunity to own a shop or store

dwindled as well, as market towns gained most of this growth at the expense of rural proprietorships.³ These towns were reaping the lion's share of the benefits, and were moving quickly to secure their advantage.

Annual gatherings of the legislature were turning into scums as market towns scrambled after charters for banks, insurance companies, canals, and business incorporations. The sessions of 1824 and 1825 were dominated by this commercial activity, reducing representatives from small towns to a cheerleading role.⁴ In 1821, many larger towns also threw their weight behind the proposals of the Council of Censors to amend the state's constitution to apportion the legislature on the basis of population, rather than by the one-town, one-vote method then in use, and to add a Senate selected by county. The Constitutional Convention, to which each town sent a representative, soundly thrashed these amendments. Those encouraged by the quickening of the market economy remained irritated with the undemocratic unicameral legislature dominated by small-town solons, however. They accused the small-town representatives of passing fickle legislation, especially on judicial matters, when they weren't bullying them into aiding their own quest for charters.⁵ After being thwarted in their bid for a Senate, the champions of progress endorsed the gradual assimilation of the Executive Council into a second chamber to provide needed stability. In 1801, the House came under the control of Jeffersonian Republicans for the first time. They found the fact that Vermont granted each town one representative regardless of its population undemocratic. Aware that the governor and the Executive Council were elected at large, and were probably more reflective of the popular will, they willingly conveyed upon the council the right to non-concur with a bill the House had passed. By the decade of the 1820s, however, representatives began to bristle as the incursions of the council on their legislation increased. They fought back, hoping to maintain their hegemony. They argued that their predecessors were in error, that the council lacked the constitutional authority to non-concur, and now they were willing to challenge the move in the courts and on the floor of the assembly.⁶

The choice of Ezra Butler as a candidate for governor in 1826 again provoked debate between agrarian and entrepreneur. Butler appeared to be the perfect candidate for the office, as his life typified the republican ideal. Born in Massachusetts, he traveled with his family to West Windsor before he had reached the age of seven. His mother died shortly after the journey, and young Ezra was packed off to live with his oldest brother, where he received a scant six months of education. At the age of fourteen, he was indentured to Doctor Thomas Sterne of Claremont, New Hampshire, "to learn the art, trade and mystery of a



Ezra Butler. Portrait by E. Chickering (1907).

husbandman.” He faithfully served out the terms of his indenture, leaving only for a brief stint in the Revolutionary army. Shortly after being released from his obligation, Butler and another brother traveled by oxcart and snowshoe to Waterbury, Vermont, in the early spring of 1785. He was only the second settler in the town. They selected a plot for Ezra, cleared land and planted corn, and after things were put in order, Butler went home to marry. Returning with his new bride, he discovered that he had a bad title to the land he had begun to wrench from the wilderness. Butler brought his wife back to her parents, and journeyed back to Waterbury. He selected another lot, and repeated the grueling process, finally erecting a log cabin by the fall of the year.⁷

With the same grim determination, Ezra Butler would quickly rise to prominence in his new residence and, shortly thereafter, in state affairs. He built the first frame house in Waterbury, sired the first white child, became the first town clerk, and was a member of the first group of selectmen. From 1794 until 1807, with the exception of two years, he was

chosen to be the town's representative to the General Assembly. His work there, and his growing popularity in his county, led to his elevation in the latter year to the Executive Council, where he served until he became governor, with the exception of two years he spent in the United States House of Representatives. These were the turbulent war years of 1813 and 1814, during which he labored diligently on behalf of the beleaguered Madison administration. Butler also found time to serve as presidential elector, as University of Vermont trustee, and was judge of the Washington county court for over ten years.⁸ He certainly had the laurels and experience necessary for the job, and the mien of the modest self-effacing pioneers who had served so well as Vermont leaders in the past.

However, his emergence as the early gubernatorial frontrunner did little to ease the growing tension between the yeoman and the village aristocrat. When informing his readers that Butler was the leading candidate for governor and his political contemporary, incumbent Aaron Leland of Chester, was the leading candidate for lieutenant governor, Judah Spooner, the editor of the *St. Albans Repertory* remarked,

Of the latter two gentlemen, it may be truly said, that they have acted well their part in the affairs of the state, and that their virtues and services will entitle them to the lasting gratitude and affection of their fellow citizens. But it appears to us inconsistent with the spirit of the times, and prejudicial to the interests of our growing institutions, to place at our head men whose powers and faculties must necessarily be in some degree impaired by age; who, having lived only in "bygone days" must now be found far behind that spirit of improvement, enterprise and energy, which so peculiarly characterizes the present day.⁹

Again and again, many newspaper editors residing in the larger towns attacked the sixty three-year-old Butler as being hopelessly out of date. They argued that he was "thirty years behind the times" and that "the school in which he was educated is too antiquated to give tone to the present day."¹⁰ They feared his election would inhibit the progress recently enjoyed by the state. Vermont needed a better candidate, suggested Wyman Spooner, editor of Windsor's *Vermont Journal*, to ensure that this progress continued.

Her neighbors are up and doing, successfully pursuing a wider and bolder policy. Her latent energies, too, have received a quickening impulse, and the word is, *onward*. Power and influence, and wealth, are before her; and she sees that by placing her destiny in *able* hands, she shall attain a character as elevated in the political, as her mountains are in the natural world, and like them, perennial in its beauty and glory.¹¹

To his supporters, these assaults were not just denigrating Ezra Butler; they were slanders against the republican form of government handed down by their Revolutionary fathers. Emphasizing the importance of the chase for wealth and power confirmed their suspicions of “that spirit of monied, aristocratical, monopolizing corporation mania, which so often discovers itself in populous, speculating, commercial towns.”¹² The few newspapers that still gave credence to the agrarian catechism rushed to the defense of their candidate. George Washington Hill, editor of Montpelier’s *Vermont Patriot and State Gazette*, was in the vanguard.

It is true Mr. B. is a man considerably advanced in age; and it is equally true that he has served this state as a public officer, more years than many of those have seen, who [speak] thus diminutively of his manners and his worth. It is true that he is not one of the learned “limbs of the law,” who obtain their living by the misfortune of others, and “touch not one of their fingers” to the plough. He is a farmer of plain republican simplicity. Whoever visits his residence will find him, like our first Governor [Thomas] Chittenden and [the] venerable [Jonas] Galusha, clad in the farmer’s dress and wielding the implements of agriculture, like three-fifths at least, of his constituents.¹³

Simeon Ide, the editor of Windsor’s *Vermont Repertory and American Yeoman*, agreed with this assessment, arguing against the elevation of “any sort of *professional man*” to the office. “Our [g]overnment has been too much stocked with this class of citizens, for the good of the community, and we have paid too little attention to the class of thorough, practical and intelligent FARMERS.”¹⁴ “The yeomanry of Vermont,” G. W. Hill assured his readers,

who obtain their bread by the labor of their own hands, and who have little opportunity to riot in luxury, and indulge in the gaudy trappings in which the dandies of modern times and those who would ape them pretend that true dignity consist, we confidently believe will most cordially give their votes to Mr. Butler.¹⁵

Hill was correct, of course. Ezra Butler did win the election. Despite the clamor exhibited on the pages of the statewide press, large towns reluctantly fell in behind him. Towns with a population of more than 2,000 people cast 60 percent of their votes for the farmer, a number not substantially different than that cast by small towns.¹⁶ The chief explanation given for their submission was the dearth of other attractive candidates willing to remain in the race. This lack of competition was brought on, reasoned many market-town editors, by the paltry salary of seven hundred fifty dollars, which was insufficient to induce “gentlemen

of the first respectability and influence.” The debate on this side issue continued to widen the breach between agrarian and entrepreneur.

How could we gather more qualified candidates? The answer was clear to Wyman Spooner.

We must *dignify* the office, by filling it with a succession of those only of elevated minds and superior attainments and it will no longer be refused by men of talents and worth; and we must *support* it, by placing it at least, in a pecuniary point of view, on an equality with private pursuits.¹⁷

Spooner and his allies warned that as long as the remuneration of the governor remained so contemptible (“A less sum than is given *under* clerks in most of the minor departments of the general government.” “A payment that ‘a village clergyman would hardly be induced to accept.’”), it should be apparent to everyone that the office would “go begging,” and the state “be compelled to fill it with the *second best*.”¹⁸

The keepers of the old republican flame refused to accept this degrading complaint lightly. The notion that the office of governor went begging was ludicrous, in their opinion, the uproar “undoubtedly raised by a few designing men” in order to “favor the views of certain professional men.” Let the office be offered to the tillers of the soil, “and we apprehend no objection will be made to the acceptance of it for the want of more pay.”¹⁹ The indefatigable Hill mocked the supporters of an increase in salary.

During the long period that the venerable [Jonas] Galusha held that office, no complaint was heard, if we recollect right, about the Governor’s salary. But since the office has been obtained by [l]awyers, there has been a hue and cry set up on this subject, to procure an increase of the salary. Great complaint is made by the dandies, lawyers, and straight-laced gentlemen, that the Governor’s salary is insufficient to support the office with that dignity which, in their opinion, the respectability of the state requires. This being the case, we think it is high time that the farmers, composing by far the largest class of the electors, should bestow the office on some one of their own profession.²⁰

Farmers were successful in bestowing the office on a member of their own profession. Yet this bitter debate revealed unsettling divisions among the populace. As the market economy permeated Vermont soil, members of “the village aristocracy” in burgeoning market towns were always quick to point out how every new technological breakthrough, every canal or rise in tariff rates, was to the farmer’s advantage. Every new market opportunity helped to exalt his place as the vital element in the preservation of the republican social order.²¹ Yeoman remained skeptical as they welcomed new opportunities. The harsh rhetoric of

the governor's race of 1826 confirmed their skepticism. The thickly spread flattery was just a ruse. They were now sure that the lawyers, merchants, ministers, and politicians of the market towns were out for themselves. Therefore, is it such a stretch to believe that devout republicans who were apprehensive about the social change that had occurred over the past few years would be susceptible to the siren song of antimasonry? It would come as no surprise to them that the same members of the "village aristocracy" who had been grasping for the baubles of emerging capitalism would also dominate the ranks of Masons. Yet this was only one of the facets of this election that would fire anti-masonic sentiment. Another would come in the debate over the fate of the legislative caucus method for selecting gubernatorial candidates.

THE FATE OF THE LEGISLATIVE CAUCUS

The demise of the Federalists after 1817 left Vermont a one-party state. Republicans, however, continued the tradition of selecting their gubernatorial candidate by legislative caucus, and the few voters who bothered to come to the polls gave the choice their near unanimous support. From 1818 to 1825, the caucus candidate received at least 80 percent of the vote. The problem with the system was that, increasingly, it was viewed as an anachronism used to subvert popular will. Revolts against "King Caucus" had erupted sporadically in the Green Mountains, such as during the congressional election of 1818, or in the debate over giving the people the chance to vote directly for presidential electors in 1824. Therefore, when Governor Cornelius Peter Van Ness waited until the end of the 1825 legislative session before informing the handful of lawmakers remaining that he did not wish to run for reelection, allowing little time to choose a successor, opponents of the caucus relished the opportunity to observe an election for governor without the hated system.²² Many soon would rue what they had wished for.

On June 20, 1826, a group of gentlemen from Orange County and surrounding towns met at the courthouse in Chelsea to nominate Ezra Butler as governor and Aaron Leland as lieutenant governor. This choice was seconded by "a large and respectable meeting of freemen" from Washington County, which had met in Montpelier on the Fourth of July.²³ If these supporters believed that jumping in early would somehow stanch the flow of other candidates, they were wrong. Many prospective voters agreed with Judah Spooner, editor of the *St. Albans Repertory*, who wished for a man "who has higher claims to the office than the gentleman that has been nominated."²⁴ By the end of the month, editors or their readership had nominated no fewer than fifteen

men for the office of governor. As J. W. Copeland, editor of Middlebury's *National Standard*, fretted,

The more the subject has been canvassed, the less ground of hope appears of [a] union of strength upon any one individual. Every week brings forth a fresh brood of candidates whose pretensions are urged with great confidence and high commendations, constantly decreasing the chances of meeting with a gale of popular favor sufficiently powerful to waft any one of them into office.²⁵

Although Copeland conceded that “the old method of caucus nominations” had been scoffed “out of existence,” the current gaggle of gubernatorial aspirants made many realize that “it was not after all a bad” method to winnow the field. If a return to this formula was unlikely, the Middlebury scribe urged that any other “procedure to designate candidates for office would be far better” than what was presently unfolding. “The inevitable result” of the current canvass was to transfer the power of election away from the people and once again back into the hands of the legislature if no candidate could be found with the ability to garner a majority. Yet one citizen under the pen name “Some of the People” ridiculed those who were “alarmed at the great number of candidates, and regret exceedingly that the legislature had not, before they separated last fall, as usual, assumed to themselves the right of pointing out to us the man for whom we *must* vote.”²⁶ He counseled patience, confident that a candidate would emerge.

Darius Clark, editor of Bennington's *Vermont Gazette*, while endorsing Ezra Butler, cautioned his readers that many of the other candidates “have been presented to the people wholly against the wish or consent of the persons themselves, without the least hope or expectation of their success, but with a view to distract the public mind, and prevent an election by the people, and thus open the door for intrigue and speculation.”²⁷ Many accused outgoing governor and current senatorial candidate Van Ness and his followers of deliberately attempting to rig the process, hoping that they might be able to stock the General Assembly with allies and then be able to choose a candidate of their own liking. Those who discounted such a conspiracy still had the fresh memory of the unpleasant conclusion of the formless presidential election of 1824, also brought on by a covey of candidates. Rather than be a party to mischief or confusion, many gubernatorial hopefuls began to recuse themselves from the race. By the middle of August, only Butler, Middlebury attorney and perennial candidate Joel Doolittle, and a small coterie of regional candidates remained.²⁸ Butler then captured the contest with the smallest percentage garnered by the victorious candidate in ten years.

Most Vermont National Republican politicians were unwilling to undergo another such campaign. Unable to bring themselves to trust the people, they were only too ready to return to the predictability of the legislative caucus for choosing gubernatorial candidates after 1826. How were they to know that its efficacy was to be short-lived? The agonizingly narrow defeat of Cornelius Peter Van Ness in the balloting of the Joint Assembly for United States senator that fall set in motion the rise of a new party system in Vermont, leaving politicians scrambling for alternatives to the caucus. It would be left to the Antimasonic Party, with a faith in the people born out of grassroots meetings held to denounce the fate of William Morgan and other purported infidelities of the ancient craft, to introduce the state to the new style of mass politics. They turned to the statewide nominating convention, which was used in Vermont for the first time in 1829 and eventually emulated by the other two parties. The people would choose delegates from their towns, and these delegates would, in turn, choose statewide candidates and the platform. Whereas the National Republicans leaned on the caucus because they did not trust the will of the oft-erring common herd, anti-masons were willing to ride public opinion into office.²⁹

ROTATION OF OFFICE

By the 1826 election season, regionalism had become a corrosive force infecting Vermont politics. It could be seen as towns battled for banks and canals in the state legislature. In Addison County, for example, the choice of a site for the county bank was delayed for three years as Vergennes and Middlebury bitterly struggled for the honor. Northern county towns lined up behind Vergennes, while southern towns backed Middlebury. It could be seen in the selection of candidates for public office. In the race for United States representative from the state's fourth congressional district in 1826, consisting of Chittenden, Franklin, Grand Isle, and Orleans Counties, Franklin County nominated Benjamin Swift of St. Albans, while Chittenden County chose Heman Allen of Milton. Rather than effect a compromise, a bitter battle was joined for regional supremacy. Candidates received overwhelming support from their home counties, scant support from the others. The contest left Grand Isle and Orleans Counties with the balance of power, but it made mortal enemies of the dominant counties in the district. In other districts, attempts were made to alleviate this internecine warfare and to keep all regions happy. Some succeeded, while some didn't.³⁰

It was in this spirit of conciliation that many west-side residents agreed it was time for a governor to come from the east side of the mountains. In Vermont's brief half century of existence, the only east-side man to

serve as chief executive was Paul Brigham of Norwich, who as lieutenant governor ascended to the post upon the death of Thomas Chittenden. Many west-side editors agreed with J. W. Copeland, who thought “it is no more than equitable,” that the east side be provided “her share of the honor and perquisites of the office.”³¹ Editor Spooner of the *Vermont Journal* stood ready to take up the offer on behalf of his section.

We care not for the local situation of candidates, but there is a courtesy due from the different sections of the state towards each other, which goes far to create and preserve harmony and good feeling. In the exercise of this courtesy, we ought, if possible, to gratify the wishes of our western brethren, and give them a governor among ourselves.³²

The arrangement seemed to be settled. However, when the number of candidates began to proliferate, and, then, when the choice seemed to come down to Ezra Butler, more than a few west-side editors began having second thoughts on their offer. William Fay, editor of the *Rutland Herald*, went so far as to nominate his town’s favorite son, attorney Robert Temple, a move quickly seconded by the *St. Albans Repository*. Fay sneered his willingness to drop the Temple candidacy if the east siders could come up with “a prospect of uniting on any other man of talents and worth,” rather than the mediocre Butler. “Freeman of the East” took issue with the Rutland editor, suggesting that after it was acknowledged that the next governor should come from the east side, “we would take it more kindly if the freemen on the west side would have the goodness to let *us* nominate the candidate.”³³

The results of the election demonstrated that an acceptable mechanism for rotating office had yet to be found in Vermont. The east side eagerly gave their favorite 68 percent of their votes, and if the contrary former Federalist bastion Windham County is excluded, it swells to 77 percent. However, Butler was barely able to secure a majority of west-side votes. Only 38 percent of Butler’s 8,066 votes came from the west side of the mountains. Although an attempt had been made, rotation of the governor’s chair would have to wait for the rise of the Republican Party in the 1850s and its use of the “Mountain Rule” to maintain hegemony.

Without any method to dilute its effects, regionalism would go on to play a significant role in the success of the Antimasonic Party. Again the Fourth Congressional District provides a fine example. Here the election for a representative in 1830 was once more paralyzed by regionalism. Many Franklin County National Republicans, after a few fruitless trials, rejected Heman Allen and threw their support behind

the Antimasonic candidate, despite showing little hatred for masonry before the election. The result was deadlock. With state law requiring that the winning candidate receive a majority, the existence of three viable political parties combined with a poisonous regionalism to give birth to the longest political campaign in Vermont history. It dragged on for almost two years and required the untimely death of one of the candidates before Heman Allen was able to secure a majority of the votes.³⁴

CHURCH AND STATE

The year 1826 saw not only considerable hand wringing over the impact of new market opportunities on the economic life of Vermont communities. It also witnessed increasing concern over how these changes contributed to the creeping secularization infecting Green Mountain churches. Many of the faithful felt that their houses of worship had become too accommodating to the status striving and worldliness of their membership, relaxing the obligations that they felt were vital to Christian life. Therefore, as many citizens urged a return to the first principles of political economy voiced by their forebears, so did many urge a return to an older, communitarian Christian faith that imposed more rigorous standards of behavior. As the clergy attempted to strengthen their moral authority, many members rebelled against this imposition on their ability to do as their conscience dictated. The struggle to define Christian duty in this age of change would prove to be a divisive one for Vermont churches.³⁵

The gubernatorial campaign of Ezra Butler was also drawn into this debate. For not only was Butler one of Vermont's most popular politicians, he also labored as a Baptist clergyman. Therefore, as many churches began calling on their neighbors to join their crusade for a moral regeneration, many of the less zealous saw Butler's nomination as yet another manifestation of an attempted union of church and state. The situation was fraught with irony, for at the beginning of the century, Butler and Lieutenant Governor Aaron Leland, also a Baptist elder, had been two of the most vociferous opponents of the standing order. They worked tirelessly to establish Baptist churches throughout the state and, in the political realm, played an instrumental role in the passage of the Ministerial Act of 1807, which once and for all prevented dissenting sects from being forced to pay to support the majority churches in their towns.³⁶ By the election of 1826, however, with the churches wrestling over what it meant to be one of the faithful, Butler and Leland were seen as betraying their old cause. As *Vermont Journal* editor Alden Spooner offered when their election seemed assured,

.....

So it may be now confidentially asserted, that Elder Butler will be our next governor, and Elder Leland our lieutenant governor,—Church and State, will, therefore, have been literally *united*, by the same people who have hitherto stood first and foremost in opposing their union.³⁷

Whether or not the two clerics should be candidates became one of the leading questions of the campaign. As “One of Many” argued, Butler and Leland possessed the necessary qualifications for the office,

but their profession as clergymen, in the opinion of many, is a reason why they should not be concerned in politics. In as much then, as we respect their learning and piety, and value their usefulness—we should leave them free from the cases attendant on the stations to which their misguided friends would devote them.³⁸

“Anti-Clerical Magistrates” wondered whether the state was really “under the desire of resorting to such a course,” asking, “Shall such a nomination, started by an inconsiderable few in Orange County overwhelm us, and put church over state? No! - No! *Give us some other candidates!*”³⁹

The editor of Poultney’s *Northern Spectator* dismissed the idea “that the occasional elevation of clergymen, to political stations, was a formation of the hated league between church and state.” The church, he cautioned,

has a moral effect upon society at large, as virtue always will have, and ought to have, the government and laws still enforcing no opinions, yet protecting every man in the enjoyment of such as he may choose. It would seem, therefore, that there can be no more union of church and state to allow ministers to hold offices, than there would be a union of the cooper’s or tailor’s *trade* with the *state*, because coopers or tailors were elected to public station.⁴⁰

“Civis” remained unconvinced, finding that “the civil and ecclesiastical interests of the state” would be better served “by keeping their duties distinct.” How would Butler handle such incongruous obligations?

Will he put on the clerical insignia; the cassock and the surplice on the Sabbath, and put on the regal ensigns on other days? Will he at one time preside at the sacramental table, handling the sacred emblems—at another, act as “*Captain General*” in the military field handling the sword? Will he attend military *parades* and *reviews* in his civil or ecclesiastical capacity? And address the troops as “Fellow soldiers” of the *cross* or of the *crown*?⁴¹

The election of Ezra Butler as governor brought discomfort to many because he was a Baptist elder. However, to others, the pace of the social change being experienced called out for divine intervention. They agreed with the correspondent “Ichabod” when he wrote

Although it may not be proper, under ordinary circumstances, to call a Clergyman from the desk, to officiate in a political capacity; yet cases may occur, when the good of the state requires it.—Such a case now occurs.⁴²

The religious rhetoric of the gubernatorial campaign of 1826 was yet another signpost on the road to the antimasonic revolution. Those members of the public and the press who voiced a mild apprehension over clergymen who left their pulpits to occupy the two highest state-wide offices, would soon be overwhelmed by the phalanx of ministers who would occupy vital positions in the antimasonic crusade. The purported death of William Morgan and the events that followed in up-state New York provided the faithful with a convenient target in their battle to reassert moral authority. Soon, many of the clergy were working to spread the antimasonic gospel throughout their communities. They went to work editing newspapers, writing tracts, and delivering sermons devoted to destroying the ancient craft. They demanded public confessions from church members who were Masons, similar to confessions of sin. When the movement migrated into the political realm, the men of the cloth followed.⁴³ The Cassandras of 1826, who considered the gubernatorial election as a movement toward the union of church and state, took cold comfort in the accuracy of their prediction.

CONCLUSION

The gubernatorial campaign of 1826 was significant in Vermont politics, as it exposed unmistakable fault lines developing within the state in this time of social upheaval. Despite Ezra Butler's landslide victory, the issues heatedly debated over the course of the summer and fall of that year visibly demonstrated the existence of decided differences of opinion over changes convulsing the countryside.

On the surface, Vermont politics returned to normal after the 1826 election season. The Horatio Seymour–Cornelius Peter Van Ness senatorial battle that occurred the same year precipitated this turn of events. A joint assembly of the House and the Council narrowly decided the contest in favor of the incumbent Seymour. A bitter Van Ness accused the Adams administration of meddling in the election and by the spring of 1827 took up the banner of the Jackson party. Alarmed supporters of President Adams called for party loyalty after the Van Ness apostasy, and the majority of Vermonters were successfully brought back into line. The legislative caucus was revived to renominate Butler in 1827, and Samuel Crafts the year after. Republicans exhorted against the Jacksonian menace and its possible impact on the economic well

being of the state, and were able to garner overwhelming support for New England's favorite son in his quest for reelection in 1828.⁴⁴

Yet the divisions that appeared in 1826 smoldered below the surface like a spark in damp straw. The disappearance of William Morgan and the subsequent trials in New York grasped the attention of many Vermonters. Although they remained receptive to National Republican entreaties, the emergence of grassroots meetings throughout the state on the masonic question clearly gave the lie to the notion of a united citizenry. By 1829, antimasonry had become a political manifestation and though it had an awkward birth, it clearly demonstrated a terrible power over the populace.

By the 1830 election season, the Antimasonic Party stood poised to gain control of the state. At the Antimasonic state convention held at Montpelier, the president of the proceedings was none other than the lieutenant governor of 1826, Aaron Leland. His speech to the throng used notions eerily familiar to followers of that campaign. Leland warned the crowd that the republican principles they held so dear were in danger. Aristocracy still stalked the land and would rule when any distinction was allowed among citizens "which confers upon a part, privileges which are not common to the whole."⁴⁵ Masonry had become yet another method by which the aggressive merchant class in market towns had sought to gain advantage.

Yet Leland remained confident that the people would destroy the institution "by public disapprobation." This was the same faith that many felt would allow the people to elect a governor in 1826 without the aid of a legislative caucus. As Leland assured the crowd,

In a government, where public opinion is omnipotent, however much they strive to avoid its scrutiny, there is no ultimate escape for the works of darkness or the mysteries of iniquity. To be placed under the ban of public opinion, is not only the most effectual remedy for an evil, but it is also, by far, the severest rebuke which man can suffer at mortal hands.⁴⁶

The speech also carried a reminder of the religious underpinnings of the 1826 campaign. Leland provided the gathering a public confession. He admitted to his listeners that he had once been a member of the Masons. However, the Baptist minister soon began to find his religious sensibilities offended. Leland "felt that it destroyed my devotion to God." After his initiation,

I yet began to feel myself a man of consequence. I was *hailed* by the members, and was greeted as a *brother* by men of all creeds—of no creeds—by the unprincipled, by infidels!—This afterward led me to reflect.⁴⁷

Shortly after Leland's speech, members of the gathering recognized former governor Ezra Butler in attendance and he was called on to offer his thoughts on the subject. Already on record as charging Masonry with being "both in its structure and tendency anti-Christian," he called on those present to study the institution and if they found it evil as he did, to destroy it at the ballot box.⁴⁸

It would appear, then, that the antimasonic movement did not actually come upon Vermont with the suddenness of a volcanic eruption. The issues of concern to those that followed this new party were hardly novel. They had been heatedly discussed during the gubernatorial election of 1826, before the disappearance of William Morgan. The same concerns about the fate of republican society in the face of change that led many Vermonters to ignore convention and choose Ezra Butler as governor, found them following their chief executive into the Anti-masonic Party.

NOTES

¹David Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 115–116.

²Paul Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England, 1826–1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 20–24; Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 12–17.

³Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic*, 37–39; Randolph Roth, *The Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791–1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 118–130; P. Jeffrey Potash, *Vermont's Burned-Over District: Patterns of Community Development and Religious Activity, 1761–1850* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1991), 100–116. A similar study of the preindustrial transformation in another New England state is Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990).

⁴A cursory examination of the *Vermont General Assembly Journal* for the years cited would lend credence to this statement. Also, see Kenneth A. Degree, *Vergennes in the Age of Jackson* (Vergennes, Vt.: The author, 1996), 26–52; Kenneth A. Degree, "Legislative Voting Patterns on Banking in Vermont 1803–1825," *Vermont History* 69 (Winter/Spring 2001), 163–169; Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 139–140.

⁵Paul S. Gillies and D. Gregory Sanford, eds., *Records of the Council of Censors of the State of Vermont* (Montpelier: State of Vermont, 1991), 236–277; Daniel B. Carroll, "Development of the Unicameral Legislature in Vermont," *Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society* 3 (1932), 15–18; Daniel Chipman, *Speech Delivered in the Convention Holden at Montpelier on the sixth of January, 1836* (Middlebury, Vt.: E. R. Jewett, 1837), 14–19.

⁶Carroll, "Development of the Unicameral Legislature in Vermont," 18–22; Degree, *Vergennes in the Age of Jackson*, 37–41; Gillies and Sanford, *Records of the Council of Censors*, 295–297.

⁷Theodore Graham Lewis, ed., *History of Waterbury, Vermont, 1763–1915* (Waterbury, Vt.: The Record Print, 1915), 17–20. When Waterbury's original settler, James Marsh, died in 1788, Butler assumed the role of town father.

⁸Lewis, *History of Waterbury*, 21; Prentiss Dodge, ed., *Encyclopedia Vermont Biography* (Burlington, Vt.: Ullery Publishing Company, 1912), 33. Butler is described as having a form that was "slightly stooping, his complexion dark and sallow, and his whole appearance quite unprepossessing; but his penetrating black eye and the calm tones of his voice, quickly told of intellect and will of no common order." Reverend Henry Crocker, *History of The Baptists in Vermont* (Bellows Falls, Vt.: P. H. Gobie Press, 1913), 398.

⁹St. Albans *Repertry*, 3 August 1826. Aaron Leland served as lieutenant governor from 1822 to 1827.

¹⁰*Vermont Journal*, 1 July 1826; *Vermont Gazette*, 3 August 1826.

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¹¹ *Vermont Journal*, 15 July 1826.

¹² Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 140.

¹³ *Vermont Gazette*, 3 August 1826 (reprint of an article from the *Vermont Patriot and State Gazette* submitted by a correspondent who styled himself "A Freeman").

¹⁴ *Vermont Repertory and American Yeoman*, 22 July 1826.

¹⁵ *Vermont Patriot and State Gazette*, 5 September 1826.

¹⁶ The figures were calculated using towns with a population of 2,000 in the 1820 census.

¹⁷ *Vermont Journal*, 1 July 1826.

¹⁸ *Repertory*, 22 June 1826; *Vermont Watchman*, 22 August 1826.

¹⁹ *Vermont Patriot and State Gazette*, 15 August 1826.

²⁰ *Vermont Gazette*, 3 August 1826 (reprinted from the *Vermont Patriot*, see note 13 above).

²¹ One such example can be found at a meeting of Bennington town leaders called to discuss economic matters in 1823. The gathering, of which few were farmers, decided that manufacturing and agriculture shared common interests. See Robert Shalhope, *Bennington and the Green Mountain Boys: The Emergence of Liberal Democracy in Vermont, 1760–1850* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 291–298.

²² Along with almost unanimous consent came an alarming drop in participation. Voters in gubernatorial elections, who had numbered almost 36,000 during the tempestuous years of the War of 1812, had withered to nearly one-third of that total by 1825. See Christie Carter, ed., *Vermont Elections 1789–1989* (Montpelier: State of Vermont, 1989). For examples of the revolt against the caucus, see J. Kevin Graffagnino, "I saw ruin all around" and "A comical spot you may depend"; Orsamus Merrill, Rollin Mallory and the Disputed Congressional Election of 1818," *Vermont History* 49 (Summer 1981): 159–168; and Kenneth A. Degree, "The Watershed Election: Cornelius Peter Van Ness, Horatio Seymour, and the United States Senate Campaign of 1826," *Vermont History* 71 (Summer/Fall 2003): 152–179.

²³ *Vermont Journal*, 1 July 1826; *Repertory*, 3 August 1826.

²⁴ *Repertory*, 6 July 1826. Spooner also insinuated that the Orange County caucus was actually the handiwork of Washington and Windsor County politicians. See *Repertory*, 10 August 1826. However, the vote totals suggest a different story. Orange County cast 1,521 votes for Ezra Butler, more than any other county, and just 82 votes for Joel Doolittle, with 122 scattered. Butler thus carried 88 percent of the vote in the county. The towns of Corinth, Orange, Strafford, Topsham, Vershire, Washington, and West Fairlee cast a total of 657 unanimous ballots for Ezra Butler.

²⁵ *Vermont Gazette*, 3 August 1826 (reprinted from Middlebury's *National Standard*). The fifteen men who received nominations were Butler, Joel Doolittle of Middlebury, William Griswold of Burlington, William Jarvis of Weathersfield, Chauncey Langdon of Castleton, Aaron Leland of Chester, Charles Marsh of Woodstock, Ezra Meech of Shelburne, Henry Olin of Leicester, Samuel Prentiss of Montpelier, Samuel Strong of Vergennes, Robert Temple of Rutland, Lemuel Whitney of Brattleboro, Charles K. Williams of Rutland, and Norman Williams of Woodstock.

²⁶ *Ibid.*; *Vermont Aurora*, 3 August 1826. Simeon Ide agreed, suggesting that the people "are as capable of judging and acting correctly on this subject as any body of men they may delegate to judge and act for them." See *Vermont Repertory and American Yeoman*, 29 July 1826.

²⁷ *Vermont Gazette*, 3 August 1826.

²⁸ For the alleged Van Ness conspiracy, see Degree, "The Watershed Election."

²⁹ Kathleen Smith Kutolowski, "Antimasonry Reexamined: Social Bases of the Grass-Roots Party," *Journal of American History* 71 (September 1984): 287–292.

³⁰ The bank struggle can be followed in Degree, *Vergennes in the Age of Jackson*, 26–52; the 1826 congressional race in the Fourth District can be followed in Kenneth A. Degree, *Deadlock, Deceit, and Divine Intervention: The Politics of Regionalism and the Longest Political Campaign in Vermont History, The Fourth Congressional District 1830–1832* (Vergennes, Vt.: The author, 1997), 7–13. In the first trial, Heman Allen rolled up almost 88 percent of the Chittenden County vote, while Benjamin Swift collected 73 percent of the Franklin County ballots. It took three elections before Swift was declared the winner, but the votes they garnered in their home counties varied only slightly.

In the 1826 congressional race in the First District, consisting of Bennington and Windham Counties geographically separated by the Green Mountains, efforts were made to prevent such a struggle. Some Windham County men were willing to concede the choice to Bennington County when it was suggested that ex-governor Richard Skinner would be nominated. When Skinner declined, the deal dissolved into petty regionalism and it took three elections to determine a winner. See the *Vermont Gazette*, 26 July, 3 August, 15 August, 22 August 1826, and *Northern Spectator*, 30 August 1826. I have found that many other congressional elections, such as in the Fifth District in 1828, or the special election in the Second District in 1831, were significantly impacted by such parochialism.

³¹ *National Standard*, 17 August 1826.

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³² *Vermont Journal*, 5 August 1826.

³³ *Rutland Herald*, 1 August 1826; *Repertory*, 27 June 1826; *Vermont Patriot and State Gazette*, 3 August 1826.

³⁴ For a portrayal of, and a testimony to the efficacy of, the Mountain Rule, see Lyman Jay Gould and Samuel B. Hand, "The Geography of Political Recruitment in Vermont: A View from the Mountains," in *Growth and Development in Vermont*, ed. Reginald L. Cook, the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences, Occasional Paper No. 5 (1970), 19–24; Samuel B. Hand, "The Mechanisms of Control: The Mountain Rule," *Vermont History* 48 (Fall 1980): 198–201; Samuel B. Hand, Jeffrey D. Marshall, and D. Gregory Sanford, "'Little Republics': The Structure of State Politics in Vermont, 1854–1920," *Vermont History* 53 (Summer 1985): 141–166; and Samuel B. Hand, "Mountain Rule Revisited," *Vermont History* 71 (Summer/Fall 2003): 139–151. For the longest election in Vermont history, see Degree, *Deadlock, Deceit, and Divine Intervention*.

³⁵ Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic*, 54–79.

³⁶ For information on the passage of the Ministerial Act, see Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont*, 102–103; T. D. Seymour, *The Gods of the Hills: Piety and Society in Nineteenth-Century Vermont* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 2000), 103–132; and the *Vermont General Assembly Journal* (1807), 118–120. Butler, a member of the Executive Council, voted for the act. Leland, a member of the House, did not vote.

For Butler and Leland's work in the Baptist church, see Crocker, *History of the Baptists in Vermont*, passim., but particularly, 182–184, 396–398, 427–428. At the first Baptist state convention, held in Montpelier in 1825, Butler was chosen president and Leland vice president. Their tenures were not without conflict, however. Leland briefly became the center of controversy in the Chester Baptist church, where he would serve for forty-three years, as eleven members of his congregation charged him as having, ironically, "exhibited a spirit more ambitious for secular honors." Although the majority of his church ultimately supported him, the incident left him chastened. The encounter may have been due to his flirtation with Masonry.

Butler was engaged in a battle with the Reverend Jonathan Hovey. Hovey had been called to settle over the Waterbury church in 1802. Butler had been ordained the previous year and had been ministering to the congregation. Covetous of the minister's right, Hovey called into question the regularity of Butler's ordination. When the town requested that Hovey quitclaim any right in the lot before he was settled, the whole thing ended up in court. Butler eventually prevailed, and the land was deeded to the town for school purposes. See Lewis, *History of Waterbury*, 39–41.

³⁷ *Vermont Journal*, 12 August 1826. Wyman Spooner ran the newspaper during this campaign until this date, when Alden Spooner assumed the controls.

³⁸ *Rutland Herald*, 1 August 1826.

³⁹ *Rutland Herald*, 15 August 1826.

⁴⁰ *Northern Spectator*, 16 August 1826.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Northern Spectator*, 23 August 1826.

⁴³ Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic*, 54–61.

⁴⁴ Degree, "The Watershed Election"; Donald J. Ratcliffe, "Antimasonry and Partisanship in Greater New England, 1826–1836," *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (Summer 1995): 207–215.

⁴⁵ *Proceedings of the Anti-Masonic State Convention, 1830* (Middlebury, Vt.: O. and J. Miner, 1830), 14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13, 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 18–19.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 23–24; Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont*, 102–103.