

VOL. XXXVI No. 1

VERMONT

History



Winter, 1968

The PROCEEDINGS of the
VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



A letter by Royall Tyler is termed "one of the most persuasive and illuminating pieces of evidence which has come to light" concerning the reasons why the United States went to war in 1812. . . .

A Vermont Republican Urges War: Royall Tyler, 1812, and the Safety of Republican Government

By ROGER H. BROWN

FOR many historians, the most absorbing aspect of that famous Anglo-American conflict known as the War of 1812 has been the vexed question of the war's origins. Ever since Henry Adams, Alfred T. Mahan, and Theodore Roosevelt dealt with the matter at the close of the last century, members of the craft have been both fascinated and baffled by the manifold problems associated with the decision made by Congress in June, 1812 to engage England in hostilities. Why should the United States have chosen this moment to launch a war against powerful Britain at a time when the two nations not only had been at odds for more than half a decade, but when they were close to settling the most intractable issue between them? The natural, inevitable result of such extensive investigation has been an ever-expanding literature of interpretation, one of such richness and variety as to challenge even the most knowledgeable specialist.¹

A common characteristic of recent writing on the war's origins has been the recognition paid to maritime issues as the operative causes of the war and to the war declaration as a calculated, rational policy response to them. By those historians who have written in the 1960s the

1. For discussions of the various interpretations, see Warren H. Goodman, "The Origins of the War of 1812: a Survey of Changing Interpretations," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXVIII (1941-42), 171-86; Bradford Perkins, ed., *The Causes of the War of 1812: National Honor or National Interest?* (New York, 1962); Harry L. Coles, *The War of 1812* (Chicago, 1965), 1-37.

war is represented as the final stage of many unsuccessful attempts to defend American rights and honor against the blockades and impressment of the two great European belligerents. In this view, once America's leaders had become convinced that neither protest, negotiation, nor economic pressure would induce England to change its policies, they resolved upon force as the only remaining alternative which could bring it to do so.²

Despite a growing agreement on this question, however, there still remain other issues which have not been so successfully resolved. One concerns the problem of why the nation's leaders chose armed force rather than submit to British blockades and impressment. If those Republicans who supported war in 1812 were convinced that there was no other method of persuasion left, what elements led them to reject submission as a possible alternative? One explanation holds that concern for national honor made it impossible for men to give up a contest to which the nation was so thoroughly committed. Other explanations stress the concern for the integrity of the nation's independence, threatened by curtailment of its foreign trade, and the pressure of economic hardship, caused by the limitation of Continental markets.

Without discounting the importance of national honor, independence, and commerce with the Continent, the present writer's study, *The Republic in Peril: 1812*, attributes the war decision primarily to concern for the nation's unique system of republican government. Here it is held that those who supported the war decision believed that submission would greatly injure the reputation of the Republican party—considered by many the nation's only bulwark against a Federalist subversion of the Republic—and because they feared that submission would destroy popular confidence in the republican structure of the nation, the capacity of which for vigorous military action was still problematical. Trusting the integrity of the administration's past efforts to settle with Great Britain on a basis consistent with the nation's rights and interests, these Republicans, unlike the Federalists who opposed the war, were able to accept the reasoning that only force or submission remained for the nation to choose. With this as a premise, Republicans anticipated that submission would not only degrade the nation, infringe its independence, and injure its foreign commerce, but that it would destroy public support for the Republican party and for republican government.

2. The principal studies which take this point of view are: Norman K. Risjord, "1812: Conservatives, War Hawks, and the Nation's Honor," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XVIII (1961), 196-210; Reginald Horsman, *The Causes of the War of 1812* (Philadelphia, 1962); Bradford Perkins, *Prologue to War: England and the United States, 1805-1812* (Berkeley, Calif., 1961); Roger H. Brown, *The Republic in Peril: 1812* (New York, 1964); Patrick C. T. White, *A Nation on Trial: America and the War of 1812* (New York, 1965); Coles, *War of 1812*.

The evidence which supports this thesis is to be found in the public speeches and private correspondence of Republican party members inside and outside the government who were deeply interested in the war decision. One of the most persuasive and illuminating pieces of evidence which has come to light is a letter written by the Vermont Republican, Royall Tyler, here published for the first time. Widely known as the author of an early American drama, "The Contrast," as well as other plays, poems, and a novel, Tyler was a prominent Republican leader, Chief Justice of the state Supreme Court, and the correspondent of many Vermont Republicans both at home and in the nation's capital.³ In this letter to Congressman James Fisk, a Republican from Barre, written on May 13, 1812, less than one month before Congress took up the war question, Tyler affirmed his conviction that to remain at peace any longer would be to endanger greatly the nation's republican system of government. Throughout Vermont, as he informed his correspondent, Republicans were saying that they would abandon the cause of republican government if Congress now drew back from war. If even the Republic's staunchest allies were to desert its standard, he implied, there would be no one to defend it against those enemies to republican government at home and abroad who were hoping to replace it with a different system.

Tyler's letter is not only important for the support it supplies to the argument that Republicans in 1812 were genuinely fearful that a retreat from war would imperil the Republic. It is also suggestive as a statement of the ways in which the presumed enemies of republicanism could be expected to try to embarrass, discredit, and destroy the new state. In warning against press criticism, merchant selfishness, and state government obstructionism, Tyler was opening up an issue with which many republican states have had to contend, namely: how to maintain functional cohesiveness in a government which, by its very nature, was peculiarly vulnerable to internal or external opposition. That republican governments in general were exceptionally prone to weakness, instability, and disunity was an axiomatic principle of contemporary European political theory; when the American Republic appeared to be similarly beset, it was understandable that men like Tyler should have become alarmed.

Together with many other letters between Tyler and his Vermont Republican colleagues, this letter may be found in a manuscript volume entitled "Memoirs of Hon. Royall Tyler, late Chief Justice of Vermont"

3. For details of Tyler's literary career, see G. Thomas Tanselle, *Royall Tyler* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967). Tansell errs in describing Tyler as a Federalist in 1812. Tyler had once been a Federalist, but became a staunch Republican in the first years of Jefferson's presidency.

in the Vermont Historical Society. The manuscript was written in 1873 by Tyler's son, Thomas P. Tyler, in Brattleboro, the family home. From internal evidence it is clear that the letters were copied into the "Memoirs" from originals which the author had before him; unfortunately the originals cannot be found if they still exist. The manuscript volume belongs to the "Royall Tyler Collection" owned by the Vermont Historical Society and presented to the Society by Helen Tyler Brown. Owing to the terms of the bequest, the collection could not be used by scholars until May, 1964—too late for incorporation of Tyler's letter into the proof which appears in *The Republic in Peril*. The assistance of Mrs. Dorothy S. Melville in tracing the original version of the "Memoirs" is gratefully acknowledged. The letters which appear in the "Memoirs" afford a valuable insight into the political and diplomatic history of the Jeffersonian era from both national and local points of view.

Royall Tyler to James Fisk

Brattleboro, May 13, 1812

(From Thomas P. Tyler, "Memoirs of Hon. Royall Tyler, late Chief Justice of Vermont," Brattleboro, Vermont, 1873, 301-4, Royall Tyler Collection, Gift of Helen Tyler Brown, Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier.)

Dear Sir.—

Your estimable favor of the 2d inst. was received last evening. It was doubly welcome, first because it contained information calculated in some degree to dissipate the dense clouds which overshadow our political horizon, the sombre influence of which the firmest of our Republican brethren feel in common with myself; and secondly that it assures me that you are, where you ought to be, at your post in the hour of national peril.— . . .

Since my return from the curcuit I can give you but little more than the opinion of a retired man but from what I can obtain from conversation with the Republicans in my vicinity, and from some letters from various parts of the State, I am led to conclude that the only safety for the Republican interest is to declare war immediately, or at least to take some decided & progressive step towards it;—ex gratiā, by issuing letters of Marque & Reprisal. I do not fear the exertions of the Federalists simply considered, although I expect that our Washingtonian Society will bring every party vote to the poles, and their energies will be stimulated by Atlantic influence, but what I sincerely apprehend is the loss of

Republican confidence in our government,—I mean in the very form & essence of our government. In Republican circles I hear it frequently observed: "Well, if Congress does sneak out:—if they have put us to all this expense for nothing: if they have not resolution sufficient to maintain the national rights: if they will not crush our domestic enemies: if we must be always exposed to have our rights sacrificed to the contentions and private views of our leading men, we shall be led to believe that the Federalists are right, and there is not virtue in the people to support a republican government. Why will not Congress put this great point in dispute in issue? We are ready to support the Government as it is; but if it is inherently defective, give us a government that is worth supporting."—Conversations of this kind are but too common, and are exceedingly alarming. If an Administration does wrong in any particular point we can displace it & elect another. What Republicans are in office is of little comparative importance, but that measure which tends to diminish our confidence not in men but in our republican institutions is of the highest import and ought to be avoided. We should all recollect that our Government is in a train of experiment. Those of Europe are opposed to it from principle and have no belief in its durability. Every attempt will be made to embarrass, & eventually to destroy it. Its weak spots will be successively attacked, and they will find aid from the avaricious, the ambitious, the discontented, and the feeble minded of our own citizens. The freedom of the press has long presented an inviting occasion to pervert public opinion. The Merchantile interest, weighing public good by private profit, has in all countries hung like a dead weight on the hands of Government.—Another weak spot is the arraying the Administration of one or more states against the General Government. This is next to be tried. A small exertion of this nature was evinced by the Executive of Connecticut refusing to draft their quota of the 100,000 men called for by the Genl. Govt. some years past; and should the Administration of Massachusetts be completely Federal—which, blessed be *God* cannot be this present year—you will have to contend with their Legislature—for they know that a state cannot be hung for a rebel, and they are wrought up to all opposition. If this state of things is to be apprehended,—if the Legislative opposition of [a] single large state is to be feared, much more is to be dreaded the combined opposition of the New-England states, aided perhaps by New-York. The governing principles of some at least of their statesmen seems to be to set a high value on their state influence, & carry it to the best market.—Do not conclude, my friend, from this melancholly view of our affairs that I despond. Indeed I do not. I believe you will meet all these impediments

to National prosperity with firmness. I notice these things merely to introduce an opinion that these difficulties can be avoided by a corresponding energy on the side of the Government.—If for instance Massachusetts should have a complete federalist Administration, and should pass Resolutions, and even make Laws hostile to the General Government, let the question be immediately put to issue, which shall recede: *for this question in the course of our history is one day to be tried*, if not by that state, yet in some one of the states. Men of local influence will array their particular state against the Genl. Govt. And where or when could it be tried with more favorable auspices for the National authorities? When may we expect a greater union on the floor of your House or the Senate; and when can any state be expected by the division of her political numbers to be worse prepared to contend than Massachusetts? If unhappily this state or any other should attempt such opposition, meet them boldly & instantly. If you parly the Government is lost, for your friends will believe that you have not power, or lack resolution to defend the Constitution.—Indeed I view the diminishing of Republican confidence in the National Govt. as the most to be dreaded, and I consider that it can only be secured by a Declaration of war, or at least by issuing letters of Marque & Reprisal. A declaration of war will confound the Federalists; it [will] derange their present plans which are calculated only for political campaigns; introduce new topics of conversation; invite many Federalists into the army—and soldiers are always patriotic in time of war; it will relieve commerce from the embargo, and by opening new sources of risk or gain will break the merchantile phalanx; and above all it will place the opposition on slippery ground, and drive them to silence or rebellion. I do not fear the latter.—

Yours truly R. Tyler