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## Factionalism in Post-Revolutionary Boston

Myron F. Wehtje

The decline and fall of the ancient republics that Bostonians and other colonial Americans took as models for their own republican governments, were associated with factionalism. In eighteenth-century political thought it was axiomatic that factionalism was endemic in republics. Bostonians were then very alert to evidence of the existence or the appearance of various kinds of factions, which they feared would endanger the government of the town, the Commonwealth, and the Confederation.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the citizens of Boston were especially fearful of the dangers that would result from an aristocratic faction. In the fall of 1785, for example, a Boston newspaper referred to the possibility that a few people might obtain a "domineering ascendancy and despotic influence." When Benjamin Lincoln, Jr., the son of the general, defended the principles of mixed government embodied in the Massachusetts constitution of 1780, under the name of "The Free Republican," a reader responded that Lincoln's articles endorsed an "aristocratical republic." For his part, the reader did not want the wealthy few to run everything; he found the majority of the people to be trustworthy. A writer calling himself "An Honest Republican" was concerned about the emergence of "forms, ceremonies, or establishments" that he branded as "wholly inconsistent with, and entirely subversive of, republicanism." What disturbed him especially was the formation of an elite corps of light cavalry to serve under the personal command of the governor. Such a group, he thought,

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1. The author wishes to thank William W. Abbot for commenting on an earlier version of this article.

was the "very summit of kingly pomp." Similarly, the Independent Light Infantry Company was viewed by a writer who identified himself as "Brutus," as leading to an "execrable aristocracy." Its members were accused of thinking themselves superior, and of excluding "mechanics." As a part of the struggle between the factions supporting John Hancock and James Bowdoin, there were reciprocal charges and insinuations of a bent toward aristocracy, or even monarchy. Reflecting on Hancock's dominance of state politics during the first half of the 1780s, another writer, "Cincinnatus," concluded that it was a bad thing for any man to have so much influence in a republic. On the other hand, one of Hancock's supporters charged that "a certain junto" in opposition to Hancock was "a formidable combination of aristocracy."<sup>2</sup>

Non-aristocratic factions were also the occasion of much discussion in post-Revolutionary Boston. It is clear that the annual elections for offices in the Commonwealth and the town increased the near-inevitability of the rise of political factions, which were much in evidence during the Confederation period. Bostonians generally conceded their inevitability, but very few of the townspeople agreed with the writer who gave his opinion that the factional disputes that "arise from time to time at our annual elections are as necessary to the existence of a republican government as food for the nourishment of man."<sup>3</sup>

Factions may have been considered dangerous yet inevitable, but the formation of modern-type political parties would have been regarded as intolerable. Deliberately created parties were thought of as un-republican, almost unpatriotic. The papers of the period are full of denunciations of partisanship. Shortly after the tense gubernatorial election of 1785, one voter exclaimed, "Away then with a party spirit, that murderer of peace, that bane of calm reason, and enemy to common sense." A year later, another writer expressed what many saw as the ideal

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2. Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser, September 29, 1785; Gordon S. Wood, The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969), pp. 219-220 and 576-577; Lyon N. Richardson, A History of Early American Magazines, 1741-1789 (New York, 1931), p. 220; "A Real Republican," in Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser, February 16, 1786, and "An Honest Republican," in Ibid., April 26, 1787; "Brutus," in Boston Gazette and the Country Journal, October 23, 1786; "A Friend to Mechanics," in Boston Gazette, October 23, 1786; "Cincinnatus," in American Herald, April 4, 1785; and "A Real Republican," in Massachusetts Centinel, May 12, 1787.

3. Massachusetts Centinel, March 25, 1786.

position for the citizen of a republic: "Let each one of you think for himself, uninfluenced by prejudice or party, by any juntos or combinations whatever, and let your conduct be the result of cool reflection." "Mentor" agreed that a true patriot was one who stood apart from parties. The ideal representative of Boston in the General Court was "not attached to a party, but a steady friend to the public interest," wrote "An Elector."<sup>4</sup>

Some thought that the difficulties that the state and the town were experiencing in the mid-1780s were at least partly attributable to what "Impartialis" called the "clashing interests of parties." There was particular indignation over reports of caucuses meeting for electoral purposes. "How nigh does this approach to consummate impudence?" asked one man after hearing a rumor of a caucus shortly before the gubernatorial election of 1785. "Such an insult should rouse the indignation of every man who calls himself free." Similarly, some took real offense at the partisan activity outside Faneuil Hall on election day. Evidently, one voted by writing the names of his choices for the various offices on a piece of paper, and then presenting the paper at the door of the hall. It was reportedly a common practice for supporters of individual candidates to stand outside the hall, "with hands and pockets full of votes ready cut and dry," offering to save the voters the trouble of writing the names themselves.<sup>5</sup>

When people in Confederation Boston referred to "parties," they most often had in mind the factions led by John Hancock and James Bowdoin, both of whom were Bostonians. These factions, which operated throughout the period, seem to have been loose and informal groupings based on personality preference more than anything else. Neither faction had anything resembling a modern party platform. There were few, if any, clear-cut differences over the important issues confronting the town, the Commonwealth, or the nation. In general, the supporters of Bowdoin had the reputation of being somewhat more conservative than the supporters of Hancock. It may be significant that Benjamin Austin, Jr., who was considered to be the most conspicuous "radical" leader in Boston, was identified

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4. "Common Sense," in Massachusetts Gazette, April 10, 1786; "Mentor," in Independent Chronicle, May 3, 1787; and "An Elector," in Massachusetts Centinel, April 20, 1785.

5. "Impartialis," in Massachusetts Gazette, May 8, 1786; "Rumblecumtumbler," in Massachusetts Centinel, March 25, 1786; and Mass. Centinel, April 27, 1785.

with the Hancock faction. The relative conservatism of the Bowdoin faction probably resulted in part from the fact that it included a majority of Boston's merchants and professional people, who were the political, social, and economic leaders of the town. The Bowdoin faction, according to Van Beck Hall, also included most of the "older Whig Revolutionaries" who had held positions of leadership. Neither the Hancock nor the Bowdoin faction had a highly developed political organization. As Hall has concluded from his thorough study of Massachusetts politics of the 1780s, the "modern institutionalized party had not yet emerged." Of course, the factions engaged in some distinctly partisan activities. A number of the caucuses held in Boston during this period were undoubtedly conducted by the Hancock and Bowdoin factions. According to one source, before the closely contested gubernatorial election of 1785, Samuel Adams "collected a number of the lower class and talked them over" to the support of his ally, James Bowdoin, "before they went up to vote." Handbills were also distributed before that election, and, of course, representatives of both factions, as usual, passed out lists at Faneuil Hall on election day.<sup>6</sup>

For two decades, John Hancock had been at center stage in the affairs of the town and the Commonwealth. During that time, he had been immensely popular with the majority of Bostonians. At the same time, however, he had acquired some important enemies. Personally ambitious, Hancock exploited his personal popularity to win the first gubernatorial election held under the new Massachusetts constitution of 1780. With his popularity, political adroitness, and wealth, Hancock was able to dominate Massachusetts politics until his death in 1793. Soon

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6. On Massachusetts politics in general, see Jackson Turner Main, Political Parties before the Constitution (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1973), pp. 83-119. For information about Benjamin Austin, Jr., see Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone et al, The Dictionary of American Biography, 23 vols. (New York, 1928-1958); and William Bruce Wheeler, "Urban Politics in Nature's Republic: the Development of Political Parties in the Seaport Cities in the Federalist Era," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1967, p. 343. On the division of occupational groups between the two factions, see "Impartial Observer," in Massachusetts Centinel, April 4, 1787. The statements by Van Beck Hall are in his Politics Without Parties: Massachusetts, 1780-1791 (Pittsburgh, 1972), pp. xi and 133. The source for the information on Adams' electioneering in 1785 is William Gordon to Samuel Holton, April 5, 1785, in H. H. Edes Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. For other references to caucuses, see "Rumblecumtumbler," in Mass. Centinel, April 27, 1785; and "A Mechanick," in ibid., April 19, 1786.

after Hancock began to build a following in Massachusetts politics, opposition to him began to coalesce around James Bowdoin, another Boston merchant. One of Bowdoin's most important supporters in Boston was Samuel Adams, the erstwhile ally and mentor of Hancock. During the course of the American Revolution, however, Adams had fallen out with Hancock, becoming his bitter opponent. Although Adams remained a powerful figure in local politics during the postwar period, he was no match for Hancock. Even in running for lieutenant governor in 1785 and 1786, against Thomas Cushing, Hancock's protege, Adams fell far short of carrying his home town.<sup>7</sup>

The factional rivalry was intense and often bitter. Supporters of Bowdoin sought to establish the legitimacy of their faction by reminding voters that before the war, Bowdoin had played a leading part "against the encroachments of Britain," while Hancock had allegedly been indecisive. Royal authorities, such as Thomas Hutchinson, had regarded Bowdoin, not Hancock, as "the patriot," wrote "An Observer." Bowdoin's followers suggested that the patriots had wanted Hancock only because of his fortune. Some of the attacks on Hancock were even more cutting. "Civis," for instance, accused him of vanity, of claiming an "exclusive right to places of honor and distinction." Hancock was said to be resentful of "those who have presumed to doubt or to deny the propriety of your pretensions." Actually, "Civis" suggested, Hancock's only justifiable boast was that he had been "occasionally used as the medium through which the popular impression was made." The same writer alleged that Hancock's only strengths were "in the common routine of executive business, in doing the honors of the table, or as master of the ceremonies." "Aristides" pictured him as a man of "slender abilities" who was without "prudence, fortitude, system, or decision," and who, "by the force of cunning and intrigue, has, in many instances, been able to direct and manage the government at his pleasure."<sup>8</sup>

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7. A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Town Records, 1784 to 1796, vol. XXXI of the Reports of the Records Commissioners of Boston (Boston, 1903), pp. 63 and 112, hereafter cited as Town Records, XXXI.

8. "Philo-Civis" in Massachusetts Centinel, May 25, 1785; "An Observer," in idem; Independent Ledger and the American Advertiser, April 4, 1785; "Civis" in Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser, May 19 and 26, 1785; and "Aristides" in Boston Gazette, and the Country Journal, May 23, 1785.

After Hancock resigned the governorship in February of 1785, leaving Thomas Cushing to complete his term of office, the Bowdoinites had much less to say against him. A few months after Hancock's resignation, Bowdoin won the governorship from Cushing, the perennial lieutenant governor. In 1786 Bowdoin faced no significant opposition for a second term. When Shays' Rebellion erupted a short time later, however, Hancock again appeared to be a serious threat to Bowdoin, who as governor had the difficult responsibility of putting down the insurrection. Of course, members of the Hancock faction did not hesitate to say that Hancock would have prevented the crisis, or at least handled it more effectively, if he had been governor. When Hancock decided in 1787 that he would be willing to serve again as governor, the factional rivalry reached its highest degree of intensity. Predictably, Bowdoin's supporters attempted to identify Hancock with the Shaysites. Hancock was very popular in the disaffected areas, and so it was easy for a member of the opposing faction to conclude that he "must be a favourer of the rebellion." If Hancock were not actually in league with the rebels, others wrote, he was at least a "trimmer," failing to take a stand against them. Shortly before the gubernatorial election of 1787, a handbill designed to hurt Hancock's chances was circulated in Boston. It claimed that Hancock had promised a group of insurgents that if he were elected, there would be an emission of paper money to bring them relief. Hancock's supporters quickly labelled the handbill "scurrilous" and a "scandalous and infamous libel."<sup>9</sup>

Because of Hancock's personal popularity, his followers generally took a different tack. Emphasizing Hancock's good qualities, they spent less time attacking the leader of the opposing faction. Criticisms of Hancock were dismissed as the "intrigues and artifice of disappointed ambition." Hancock was said to have served with "immortal honor to himself, and reputation to his republic." A writer in the *Boston Gazette* acclaimed him as the "first of patriots," and "Fair Play" praised him for remembering the "distresses of the poor." When Hancock stood for the governorship in 1787, he was presented as "our American Joshua," as the one man who would "restore peace, union, and prosperity to

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9. Hall, *Politics Without Parties*, pp. 83-84, 136, and 232; "A Watchman," in *Massachusetts Centinel*, March 24, 1787; "Vox Populi, Vox Dei," in *ibid.*, March 31, 1787; and *Independent Chronicle*, March 29, 1787.

our distracted country." "A Republican" believed that popular confidence in Hancock would "greatly tend to subside those jealousies which at present inflame our state."<sup>10</sup>

Hancock won the election of 1787 handily, but in Boston his margin of victory was only 775 to 724. The importance of the election to the two factions, and the interest it generated in the town, is reflected in the total of 1,499 votes, which was more than fifty percent higher than the previous high of 951 votes cast for governor in 1785. The total in 1787 was almost three times the total of 570 votes cast for governor in 1784. But even in years like 1784 and 1785, Bostonians were extraordinarily active; Van Beck Hall has found that the "voting rate in Boston was almost double that of the remainder of the Commonwealth."<sup>11</sup>

In the thinking of many Bostonians, republicanism was a peculiarly vulnerable system of government. They feared that it could be destroyed by factionalism, among other dangers. They worried that the town, the Commonwealth, and especially the nation, lacked the unity essential to the success of the republican governments of America. Realization of that lack of unity and recognition of their vulnerability to factionalism led increasing numbers of Bostonians to support the proposed new Constitution, in 1787.

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10. "Observator," in Boston Evening-Post and the General Advertiser, November 29, 1783; Boston Gazette, April 2, 1787; "Fair Play," in Massachusetts Centinel, March 31, 1787; "Patriotism," in The American Herald, April 2, 1787; and "A Republican," in The American Herald, March 19, 1787.

11. Town Records, XXXI: 15, 63, and 145; Hall, Politics Without Parties, p. 171. On the suffrage in state elections, see Jackson Turner Main, The Sovereign States, 1775-1783 (New York, 1973), p. 181.