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# Boston and the New Nation, 1783-1786

Myron F. Wehtje

"After independence," writes Michael Zuckerman, "no New England town remained the sole source of value for its inhabitants." Bostonians, like the people of other towns, acquired new "reference groups." Most important of all, they were citizens of a new nation. Conscious of that fact, educated Bostonians made it a point to be well-informed about national developments. This article explores the attitudes that they formed toward the Confederation and national developments between 1783 and 1786, the period preceding the calling of the Constitutional Convention to meet in Philadelphia in the spring of 1787.<sup>1</sup>

The Revolutionary War had produced a union among the thirteen states. With the return of peace in 1783, like other Americans, Bostonians could not help but consider the future of a union born of military necessity. Few of the citizens of Boston questioned the need for a permanent union in peacetime. Noting in the summer of 1783 that Congress had disbanded the army, one of them dared to suggest that Congress itself disband once the treaty of peace was concluded and ratified. He viewed the Congress as simply a "council of war." Once the war was over and the peace settled, there would be no further need for such a body, he supposed. If such a need should arise in the future, a small convention could be summoned. In a sermon delivered about a month after the celebration of the provisional peace, Henry Cumings referred to efforts to create division and discord and to "nourish and strengthen local prejudices," but he did not elaborate.<sup>2</sup>

There is much more evidence of support in Boston for the idea of a permanent union. Justice William Cushing told a group of lawyers in Boston in early 1784 that as the "union of the states" had been the "groundwork" of the Revolution, so it "must continue the basis of our liberty." Others also valued union in peacetime because of its results in wartime. In an address before the General Court, John Hancock said, "Our all depends upon our union. This is our palladium. By this we have been hitherto saved, and the preservation of it can alone continue our liberty and safety, our peace at home and our respectability abroad." The governor warned of dreadful consequences if division and jealousy developed among the states. In the fall of 1785 a writer in the *Independent Chronicle* reminded his readers: "Our interests are as much one now as when at war with Britain—we were then confederated to acquire our independence, and we are now confederated to maintain it. Destroy the union now, and in time it

must become as fatal as when America was opposed to the whole military force of Britain." John Lathrop, the pastor of the Second Church, in the North End, anticipated a bright future for the new nation, but his dreams of national greatness were contingent on an effective union of the states. In Boston's Independence Day oration in 1784, Benjamin Hitchbourn agreed that the country's "only safety lies in a firm union of the states." The most authoritative statement of all appeared in the town's instructions to its representatives in 1785. The representatives were told that the "harmony and coincidence of the several parts of our Confederacy" would determine the "general happiness and security."<sup>3</sup>

A variety of ideas for enhancing the existing union were brought forward. Tristram Dalton was not a Bostonian, but while living in Boston during a legislative session he expressed his wish that the people in general would realize more fully the "importance of a national character." A writer in the *American Herald* wanted the people of Massachusetts to remember that "our country" was more than just one state, more than just the four New England states. "It comprehends in it all those territories which are under the same federal head," he wrote. In an election sermon in May of 1783, Henry Cumings asked his audience to keep in mind the good of all the states. "The separate good of the several states," he said, should be "pursued only by such measures as shall harmonize with the good of all in the Confederacy." Cumings believed that Britain had gone to war with the colonies in 1775 because she doubted that they could achieve or maintain a union. He seemed to imply that an effective union in the postwar period would deter the British from further intervention in America. In a letter to John Hancock in December of 1783, William Cushing touched on the necessity of a state's being careful not to alienate one of her sister states. Apparently the Supreme Judicial Court had felt compelled to order the liberation of eight South Carolina Negroes who had entered Massachusetts. While defending the decision of his court, Cushing wished the governor to know that the court would be "sincerely sorry to do anything inconsistent [with] the union of the states." Samuel Adams, who had served in the Congress, believed strongly that something must be done to enhance its reputation, for he regarded the Congress as the "cement of the union of the states." In his view, the "welfare and perhaps the being of the United States" depended a great deal upon Congress's "possessing the confidence of the people at large."<sup>4</sup>

Stephen Higginson thought that the reduction of French influence was most important for the preservation of the union. He accused the French of using "every possible means to divide us, to excite jealousies and animosities between the states and different parts of the same state, to draw off our attention from those arrangements which would give us stability." French influence, Higginson suspected, lay behind such developments as opposition to the provisional treaty with Great Britain, the establishment of the Society of the Cincinnati, a boundary dispute between New York and Vermont, and opposition to the return of the loyalist refugees.<sup>5</sup>

As the Confederation period unfolded, as the problems of the nation and the Commonwealth grew worse, Bostonians gave increasing attention to the question of unity. By the summer of 1786 many of them would have agreed with the correspondent who wrote in the *Continental Journal*: "As well may ye expect to

behold a huge camel shooting through the eye of a needle as America happy or safe without a federal government.”<sup>6</sup>

Many Bostonians believed it essential that the newly independent nation be respected as well as unified. As the war ended, they were very conscious of the fact that with its independence acknowledged, the United States was entering the family of nations. “By God’s blessing on the councils and the arms of our country, we are now ranked with nations,” Samuel Adams remarked some months after the definitive peace had been concluded. Then he added the sober observation that “Great pains are yet to be taken and much wisdom is requisite that we may stand as a nation in a respectable character.” John Hancock had earlier referred to the maintenance of “our respectability abroad” as an important objective for the new nation. From 1785 onward there was an even greater urgency in expressions of concern about the matter of respectability, or standing. Jonathan Loring Austin told an Independence Day crowd that America’s “respectability should . . . be the grand object of inquiry.” “Brutus” wrote that Europe’s eyes were on America. Consequently, the United States must prove itself an “honorable” as well as an independent nation. He urged “immediate and vigorous exertions to establish our national reputation.” A writer in the *Continental Journal* believed that the American Revolution would remain unfinished until the central government gained respectability. “Lucius,” remarking on the low repute of this country among European nations, thought that it was far from achieving respectability. Almost despairingly he prayed that America would be delivered from “so humilitating and disgraceful a character.” Another writer admitted as early as the spring of 1785 that the nation’s reputation was “sullied.” Two years later, in an especially gloomy letter written shortly before the Constitutional Convention, “Camillus” complained of “national dishonor.” In “A View of the Federal Government,” another Bostonian conceded that the nation was in a state of “debility,” but he hoped that “we shall soon rouse into vigor, and take our place with becoming dignity among the nations of the world.”<sup>7</sup>

Contemporaries of the Confederation period and later historians alike have recognized that one of the reasons why the nation lacked respectability was that its Congress was such a sorry spectacle. The Congress was relatively impotent, its members were generally undistinguished, and its meetings were poorly attended. The Massachusetts delegation added little distinction to the Congress. Less prominent men than had served during the war now made up the delegation. The four Bostonians among the fourteen who represented Massachusetts between 1783 and 1787 were typical. Only John Hancock, elected a delegate after he left the governorship in 1785, was well-known nationally, and he contributed little. Although elected president of the Congress in November of 1785, he resigned that position the following May without having served at all. The other Bostonians were Stephen Higginson, a merchant who served from 1782 to 1783; John Lowell, a lawyer who served during the same time; and Samuel A. Otis, a merchant and one-time speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, who entered Congress in 1787. Partly because none of the active Massachusetts delegates had the stature of a Samuel Adams, who had been a strong member of Congress from 1774 to 1782, and partly because they tended to be quite parochial, Massachusetts “lost much of her earlier power and influence in Congress.”

Leadership in gaining for the nation the respectability that it sought had to come largely from the Middle and Southern States.<sup>8</sup>

In the national quest for respectability, concerned Bostonians regarded one thing as especially important: the restoration of public credit. Looking back over the Revolutionary period, James Sullivan, over the signature of "Consideration," concluded that Americans had gained "every point" except the revival of public credit. He seemed to imply that the Revolution would remain incomplete until the means of paying for it had been determined. Sullivan thought that the nation's credit actually "ought to exceed that of any other nation, because our sources of wealth exceed those of any other nation, in proportion to our debt." In an address to the legislature that dealt extensively with national affairs, John Hancock referred to the revival of public credit as one of the most urgent matters confronting the new nation. Without it, he declared, the "building must fall." William Cushing was also anxious for the establishment of national credit "upon a sure and permanent foundation." In urging that the public debt be paid "as soon as possible," Samuel Adams placed special emphasis on the international debt. The United States must scrupulously pay interest on that portion of the public debt (about one fourth) owed to the French, Dutch, and other international creditors while arranging for the speedy retirement of the foreign debt. Then, once this was accomplished, American creditors should be paid as quickly as possible.<sup>9</sup>

By 1785 it was readily apparent that the nation was not succeeding in its effort to establish public credit on a satisfactory basis. The pre-eminent problem of the Confederation period, that of paying for the Revolution, continued to defy solution. Until the time of the Constitutional Convention, in May of 1787, Bostonians frequently expressed their strong concern about this problem. "Tribunus" insisted that no nation could exist without the "establishment of public credit." In 1786 Jonathan Loring Austin stated his view succinctly: "Neither foreign or domestic loans can ever be expected when suspicions of honor or punctuality prevail." One writer was convinced by the spring of 1785 that America's credit was "already blasted." But others remained confident that the nation could pay its debts if the people would only exert themselves. Failure to do so, "Brutus" argued, would be "political treason." He and "Honestus" asked their readers to consider the nation's prospects in a future war if it had no credit, no "public faith and honor." Without public credit, then, the nation's independence was thought to be incomplete. "Lucius" thought that Americans ought not to enjoy the blessing of independence without paying the debt of independence. It must, he wrote, be viewed as a debt of honor, a "sacred" debt. Expressing a similar thought, "Honestus" noted that in "every other country the national debt is strictly guarded as the sacred palladium of the public weal." Only in the United States were "opposite ideas . . . encouraged without a blush." Samuel Adams continued, as he had since the conclusion of peace, to urge the necessity of servicing and retiring the national debt. In a letter to John Adams, then serving as minister to Great Britain, he described "two great objects" that should preoccupy the attention of Americans: "to preserve entire our political liberties, and to support our national faith."<sup>10</sup>

At the close of the war, the plan of Congress for paying off the public debt and establishing national credit was by requisitioning the necessary funds from the states. Bostonians interested in the question of public credit gave close attention, therefore, to the operation of this plan. In addition to supporting efforts in the Massachusetts legislature to meet their own state's quotas, they observed the response of the other states in meeting their respective requisitions. It became quickly evident that the system of requisitions was in serious trouble. A few states, including Massachusetts, generally paid their requisitions, but other states paid little or nothing. By early 1785 Samuel Osgood, writing from Boston after his selection by Congress as a member of the Treasury Board, was sharing his concern about the "great inattention and neglect of the states to supply the Treasury with money." Evidently he and others were apprehensive about the future fidelity of Massachusetts, then experiencing serious economic difficulty. Osgood hoped that there would be a "sincere disposition in this state to support the credit of the United States." Later in that same year another writer urged that the Congressional requisition for Massachusetts be taken seriously. The following month "An American" commented on the "seeming indifference of almost every other state in the union." As a result, the nation had only the "feeble remains of public credit." The present requisition of Congress, therefore, demanded the "utmost attention." Indeed, the writer believed that it might be "fairly considered as a trial of the federal government." "Honestus" also found the country's credit precarious because of "procrastination" in paying requisitions. It was very important, he wrote, for Massachusetts to set a good example in 1786, for her course might determine that of other states. By this time there were suggestions that Massachusetts not comply with her Congressional requisition, that she was not obliged to do so if other states were in default. "Honestus" branded such objections "frivolous and unsubstantial." He hoped that this country, "in the dawn of life," would not lose the "lustre of her glory, by evasion and injustice." Another writer countered the arguments against paying the requisition by insisting that a state had no *right* to refuse, and Jonathan Loring Austin declared that a failure to pay "eventually tends to the subversion of the federal union."<sup>11</sup>

The debate over the necessity and propriety of paying the state's requisition came to a head in the Massachusetts House of Representatives in the spring of 1786. When the House finally voted "to grant the necessary aids to Congress," Bostonians generally approved. A writer in the *American Herald* was among the dissenters. Distinguishing between foreign and domestic creditors, he maintained that the nation could justifiably delay in paying off the latter. Americans ought not to injure themselves in trying to pay off the domestic debt. He was fearful that the majority of the people would "become bondsmen for 25 years to fill the coffers of the rich miser and speculator." "Justitia" agreed that the foreign debt must be paid in full and suggested that the domestic debt might be discounted in view of the fact that most of the original creditors had disposed of their certificates of indebtedness at a great discount.<sup>12</sup>

The failure of the system of requisitions to meet the financial needs of the new nation came as no surprise to some Bostonians. Its inadequacies had been evident during the war, and some of them had earlier supported other means of financial support for the central government, other means of establishing and

sustaining public credit. During the Confederation period some townspeople continued to search for a workable alternative to requisitions. A writer in the *Boston Gazette* regretted that estates forfeited by loyalists had not been handled more advantageously. In his opinion, the proceeds from their sale should have paid most of the war debt of the states, at least. James Sullivan and Benjamin Austin, Jr., writing under familiar pseudonyms, expressed their belief that the sale of public or vacant lands could help to clear the debt. Sullivan also pushed the idea of a duty on immigrants settling in the United States. With the establishment of peace, he was confident that "emigrants from Europe will soon pour into this glorious land of freedom." He suggested that a duty of thirty guineas would be appropriate! Taking note of this high figure, an historian must suspect either Sullivan's seriousness or his knowledge of immigration.<sup>13</sup>

However, there is no doubt about the seriousness of another proposal supported by many Bostonians: an impost that would be collected by Congress in all of the states. This proposal had originated well before the end of the war. In fact, shortly before the ratification of the Articles of Confederation on March 1, 1781, the Continental Congress had proposed an amendment to the Articles providing for a duty of five percent on the value of all imports into the United States. The revenue from this impost was to be applied to the war debt. Twelve states, including Massachusetts, quickly ratified the proposed amendment. Rhode Island, the thirteenth state, finally decided in November of 1782 against ratification. Before Rhode Island could be persuaded to change its position, Virginia rescinded its ratification of the amendment, dooming the proposal.<sup>14</sup>

At the beginning of 1783 a number of Bostonians were discussing these developments and the merits or deficiencies of the 1781 proposal. "Probus," who viewed the question of finances as the "grand object" now before the nation, pointed out that Congress had been obliged to propose an impost because of the "delinquency of the states" in paying their requisitions. Another writer, responding at length to a defender of Rhode Island's position, saw the impost as the easiest, safest, and most equitable way of raising money. "Grotius," however, regarded the impost as potentially "destructive to our freedom." He believed that it contained the "seeds of slavery" because it gave Congress a "permanent revenue which they can hold independent of the people." In other countries, he noted, such an "independent revenue" had proven to be the "foundation of tyranny." Although opposed to a Congressional impost, "Grotius" indicated that he would have no objection to an impost administered by the separate states.<sup>15</sup>

In the spring of 1783 a new financial plan involving a federal impost was approved by Congress. This provided further fuel for the debate already in progress. Opposition among Bostonians was led by Stephen Higginson, one of the Massachusetts delegates in Congress. Higginson strongly disliked Robert Morris, the superintendent of finance and one of the principal advocates of the impost, and he was generally suspicious of efforts by "aristocrats" from the Middle States to strengthen Congress and consequently gain greater power for themselves. In a letter to Arthur Lee, Higginson suggested that "ambitious and designing ministers" might "misapply" the impost. The author of a long series in the *Independent Chronicle* also feared that the impost might "create an influ-



ence” that would be “subversive to the liberties of particular states, and the body of the people through the continent.” In response to the proposal of the Congress, he suggested that the states should collect the impost, protecting their sovereignty. Moreover, he proposed that the impost be reduced to two and one-half percent and that it be limited to fifteen years. In spite of considerable opposition, including that of half of the state’s delegation in Congress, in October of 1783 the Massachusetts legislature approved of the new proposal for an impost.<sup>16</sup>

While the debate over this plan continued in the legislatures of some of the other states, Bostonians watched with interest. A committee report approved by the town meeting of March 15, 1784, provides a good indication of the town’s sentiments. Reacting to protests against the planned impost by leaders of several other towns in Suffolk County, the town declared that “we are of opinion that if we ever mean to be a nation we must give power to Congress, and funds, too; for without them we can never pay our debts.” Benjamin Hitchbourn probably spoke for the majority of Bostonians two months later when he said in his Independence Day oration that no “ill-grounded jealousy” should keep the Congress from obtaining “permanent revenues.” Early in 1785 a writer in the *American Herald* insisted that a general impost was still the best plan available for clearing the national debt. The danger of Congressional misuse of the power to levy an impost was “chimerical,” he thought. The long effort to win acceptance of the Congressional impost came to a climax in 1786. By August of that year every state except New York had given its approval. In the spring and summer the Boston papers reflected a renewed interest in the subject. One supporter of the impost said that it was needed because the nation had been driven “to the edge of the precipice.” Another writer thought that the decision on the impost might decide the fate of the union. To a writer in the *Massachusetts Gazette*, the impost was “calculated to cement the union of the states.” And another Bostonian found it “astonishing” that “after the experience of so many years—while Congress every year have demonstrated the unavoidable necessity of this measure”—there was still opposition to the impost. Nevertheless, New York refused to endorse the impost. By that time, of course, increasing numbers of people, including many Bostonians, had reached the conclusion that a convention to redesign or replace the Articles of Confederation was necessary.<sup>17</sup>

From the beginning of the Confederation period there were strong nationalists in Boston who favored a powerful central government and a close union of the states. There evidently were also a few Bostonians who preferred a weak central government, if any, and a loose confederation of the states. For much of the period, however, most Bostonians who were interested in national affairs could probably be best described, in the phrase of Robert A. East, as “moderate nationalists.” Dominated by the merchant class, they generally favored the strengthening of Congress. Specifically, they believed that Congress should be able to secure an independent revenue by means of an impost. When the effort to amend the Articles failed and Shays’ Rebellion occurred, many in that group were prepared to support a more radical restructuring and strengthening of the central government. Boston would firmly support the establishment of a truly national government for the new nation.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

1. Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1970), p. 295.
2. *The Boston Evening-Post: and the General Advertiser*, June 28, 1783; Henry Cumings, *A Sermon Preached Before His Honor Thomas Cushing, Esq; Lieutenant-Governor, the Honorable the Council, and the Two Branches of the General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, May 28, 1783. Being the Anniversary of General Election* (Boston, 1783), p. 38.
3. William Cushing, "Address to the Barristers, February Term, 1784," in Cushing Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; *The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser*, Oct. 2, 1783; "A Friend to Commerce," *Ind. Chron.*, Oct. 13, 1785; John Lathrop, *A Discourse on the Peace: Preached on the Day of Thanksgiving, November 25, 1784* (Boston, 1784), p. 25; Benjamin Hitchbourn, *An Oration, Delivered July 5th, 1784 at the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston; in Celebration of the Anniversary of American Independence* (Boston, 1784), p. 16; *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Town Records, 1784 to 1796*. vol. 31 of the Reports of the Record Commissioners of Boston (Boston, 1903), pp. 76-78; hereafter cited as *Town Records*, XXXI.
4. Tristram Dalton to Elbridge Gerry, Feb. 11, 1784, Elbridge Gerry Papers, MHS; "Speculator," *Am. Herald*, Jan. 3, 1785; Cumings, *Sermon*, p. 37; William Cushing to John Hancock, Dec. 20, 1783, Cushing Papers (1780-1814), MHS; Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, Sept. 9, 1783, in Harry Alonzo Cushing, ed., *The Writings of Samuel Adams* (New York, 1968 reprint), pp. 286-287.
5. Stephen Higginson to Jonathan Jackson, June 7, 1784, in Putnam, Jackson, and Lowell Papers, MHS.
6. *The Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, Aug. 31, 1786.
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8. On the Massachusetts delegates in Congress and the issues with which they dealt, see H. James Henderson, *Party Politics in the Continental Congress* (New York, 1974), pp. 318-529. For information about individual delegates, see *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1961* (Washington, D.C., 1961) and Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone *et al.*, eds., *The Dictionary of American Biography* (23 vols., New York, 1928-1958). Van Beck Hall discusses Massachusetts' loss of influence in his *Politics Without Parties: Massachusetts, 1780-1791* (Pittsburgh, 1972), p. 143.

9. "Consideration," *The Boston Gazette, and the Country Journal*, July 14, 1783; *Ind. Chron.*, Oct. 2, 1783; Cumings, *Sermon*, p. 39; Cushing, "Address to the Barristers;" Samuel Adams to John Adams, Nov. 4, 1783, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, ed. Cushing, IV: 290.
10. "Tribunus," *Ind. Chron.*, April 26 and May 17, 1787; Austin, *Oration*, p. 17; "Pro Bono-Republicae," *Am. Herald*, April 25, 1785; "Brutus," *Ind. Chron.*, Feb. 23, 1786; "Honestus," *Ind. Chron.*, March 10, 1785; "Lucius," *Ind. Chron.*, Nov. 10 and 17, 1785; Samuel Adams to John Adams, July 21, 1786, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, ed. Cushing, IV: 322.
11. Samuel Osgood to Elbridge Gerry, Feb. 18, 1785, Elbridge Gerry Papers, MHS; "Lucius," *Ind. Chron.*, Dec. 1, 1785; "An American," *Ind. Chron.*, Jan. 26, 1786; "Honestus," *Ind. Chron.*, Feb. 2, 1786; "H ---," *Ind. Chron.*, Feb. 9, 1786; Austin, *Oration*, p. 14.
12. *The Massachusetts Centinel: and the Republican Journal*, June 10, 1786; *Cont. Jour.*, July 6, 1786; "Jus," *Am. Herald*, June 12, 1786; "Justitia," *Ind. Chron.*, June 22, 1786.
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15. "Probus," *Ind. Chron.*, Feb. 20, 1783; *Ind. Chron.*, Dec. 19, 1782, and Jan. 2 and 16, 1783; "Grotius," *Boston Gaz.*, Feb. 10, 1783.
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