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THE RISING OF 1798 AND THE POLITICAL FOUNDATION
OF IRISH-AMERICAN IDENTITY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

William A. Sullivan III

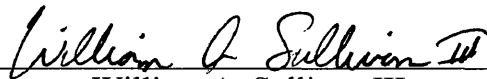
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APPROVAL SHEET

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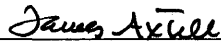


William A. Sullivan III

Approved by the Committee, December 2005



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To Nan, for patience and support through all rough drafts

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ABSTRACT

The Rising of 1798 was one of the largest rebellions against English authority in Irish history. The United Irishmen, which sought to transcend class and religious divisions with a nationalist movement, led the armed revolt after political means failed. Taking the rebellion as its central event, this study traces the evolution of American attitudes toward Ireland and the Irish from the 1790s into the early 1800s.

Although the Irish cause had many parallels with the American struggle for independence, the American political climate dampened enthusiasm for the Irish bid. In particular, the excesses of the French Revolution engendered broad suspicion of radical movements, and the renewed hostilities between France and Britain made neutrality problematic, and support of the Irish an impractical option. Flexibility was further limited by the emergence of the Federalists and Republicans as distinct rival parties.

After the Rising, thousands of Irish immigrants arrived in the United States. Their deep involvement in American politics renewed debates over the meaning of Irish rebellion. Federalists regarded supporters of the United Irishmen as disorganizers and criminals, while the Republicans welcomed them as allies. The activities of New York City's Hibernian Provident Society illustrate the way Irish immigrants organized politically and made claims for American citizenship without surrendering their ethnic identity grounded in hope for Ireland's independence from the United Kingdom. In the process, they established the basis for an Irish-American identity.

THE RISING OF 1798 AND THE POLITICAL FOUNDATION
OF IRISH-AMERICAN IDENTITY

In 1790, John Rutledge, Jr. described his impressions of Ireland in a letter to Thomas Jefferson: “I never was in a country where *the people* seemed more depress’d by the yoke of servitude. Altho I am glad the spirit of liberty began in france, because I am more partial to that country than any in europe, yet I rejoice to hear that other countries shew a disposition to cherish it. I most sincerely wish the whole nations of the earth free.” Eight years later, the “spirit of liberty” inspired a large, bloody uprising in Ireland, but news of it failed to capture much of the popular imagination in the United States. *Porcupine’s Gazette* in Philadelphia reported that the “ring leaders of the united rascals” had been arrested in County Wicklow, Ireland: “There is nothing like powder and ball and the point of a bayonet to convince these villains of their crimes.” The “rascals” were the members of the Society of United Irishmen, and their crime was rebellion against the king’s authority. A scant fifteen years had passed since Americans had secured their own independence from British rule under very similar circumstances, yet the idea of Irish independence was met with suspicion and scorn in many circles. What had changed? ¹

The present study attempts to answer that question by tracing the evolution of American attitudes toward Irish immigrants as well as the reception of events in Ireland. The broad sympathy evinced for the “unhappy Irish” eroded late in the 1790s as American political divisions disrupted the expectation that elected representatives

¹ Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 18:53; *Porcupine’s Gazette*, Jul. 26, 1798. All spelling and punctuation is exactly as it appears in the cited work.

would work together for the public good. Federalist and Republican factions evolved into competing political parties, and both interpreted Ireland through the lenses of their differing political visions. Ireland became just one more rhetorical setting for partisan political discourse. But Ireland was something more than a reflection of this ongoing contest over the meaning of the American Revolution. During these years tens of thousands of Irish immigrants arrived in the United States with their own ideas about what liberty and republicanism meant, and their participation in the ongoing debate would prove to be a powerful influence on the outcome.²

For both Ireland and the United States, 1798 was a pivotal year. For the Irish, the Rising of 1798 was the culmination of a decade-long effort by the United Irishmen to bridge the religious divide with an ecumenical nationalism. Failure soon led to political reorganization under the United Kingdom. In nationalist mythology, the rebellion still stands as perhaps the greatest “missed opportunity” to unite the island as an independent nation and to avoid the sectarian violence that has plagued Ireland to this day. For the United States, 1798 brought intensified partisan struggles as Federalists and Republicans stood particularly divided on the imperial rivalry between France and Britain. The Jay Treaty, the “XYZ Affair,” and the “Quasi-War” with France were all hotly debated, but the Alien and Sedition Acts cut right to questions of national loyalty and the legitimacy of dissent. The milieu of that year’s events placed the majority of Irish in the Republican camp and laid the foundation for an Irish-American identity that drew on the political struggles in both countries.

² Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, 9-13. Party labels evolved gradually in the 1790s. The Republicans were known by several different names, but for the sake of consistency I will refer to the parties as Federalists and Republicans.

The story begins with the close attention Ireland paid to the American Revolution. Much of the rhetoric found in the 1798 rebellion could be traced to the French Revolution, but it was the American experience that initially provided the example and inspiration for calls for political change in Ireland. Ireland occupied a very similar position to the American colonies within the British empire. Both comprised plantations primarily of English settlers who displaced native peoples. Separate Declaratory Acts had established Parliament's supremacy over both lands. Most important, the imperial scheme was designed for the economic benefit of the mother country, England.

While the imperial relationships were similar, Irish society was sharply divided on a hierarchical basis among three religious groups that had very little to do with each other. The Anglo-Irish, adherents of the Church of England and often called the "New English," wielded most of the power in Irish society, enjoying full political control and ownership of some 85 percent of the land, despite comprising only about 10 percent of the population. This "entrenched and hereditary minority" defended its privileged position in society by resisting all attempts at reform. Dissenters, mainly Presbyterians concentrated in Ulster in the northeast, were solid middle class and made up about 20 percent of the population. Catholics, comprising about three-quarters of the population, held only 10 percent of the land and had the most meager existence of the three, although some wealthy and middle-class Catholics survived. Social position and religious affiliation were thus closely tied.³

Attitudes about the American Revolution varied along the lines of these socio-religious classes. Initial sympathy for the American cause among the Anglo-Irish was

³ Palmer, *Age of the Democratic Revolution*, 2: 491-93.

rooted in the similarity of Ireland's position within the empire. The outbreak of war was unsettling, and the Anglo-Irish hoped that some compromise could be reached concerning the administration's objectionable policies. Otherwise, they feared precedents established in the American colonies on issues such as taxation would be extended to Ireland. The small Catholic elite shared many of the same concerns as the Anglo-Irish. They did not perceive the American colonies as especially friendly toward Catholics, but they hoped that the hostilities might create additional pressure for some easing of religious restrictions. The Catholic masses, on the other hand, reveled in every British defeat. Their support of the American rebels was firmly grounded in their own long-standing aggrieved status. Presbyterian Dissenters, with their close connections to Scotland and affinity for the same Scottish Enlightenment philosophy that helped to inform American revolutionaries, were the boldest supporters of the American cause. In addition to their ideological attachments, they shared extensive kinship connections to the American colonies, since the majority of eighteenth-century Irish emigrants flowed from Ulster. Many of those relations fought on the American side in the Revolution.⁴

Altogether, Irish sympathy for the Revolution was expressed from these varied viewpoints. While appeals supporting the American cause received thousands of signatures, petitions supporting the British administration had difficulty finding support. Similarly, it proved challenging for the British army to find new recruits in Ireland.⁵

When France took the American side in 1778, however, Ireland was left vulnerable to invasion and many of the Anglo-Irish rallied in defense of the empire.

⁴ Morley, *Irish Opinion and the American Revolution*, 137.

⁵ *Ibid.*

The French threat spurred the creation of Volunteer Companies, who dressed in uniform and gave middle-class political activism a public forum. Volunteer activities included agitation for free trade within the imperial system and fairer legislative representation. It did not include calls for independence, only better standing within the empire. Gradually the British government made concessions, including easing trade restrictions in 1779 and granting the Irish Parliament legislative independence in 1782. Perhaps most important, the interests of the Presbyterians and the common Irish started to converge in their responses to the American Revolution, making it possible for some to envision their future cooperation.⁶

Americans were aware that they were establishing a precedent for overthrowing monarchy and that Ireland was a likely next candidate. Any reports of disturbances created an expectation that full-scale rebellion was at hand. In 1782, for example, a Philadelphia paper reported that Ireland was “ready to follow the example of the American United States, by breaking all connection with [England].” In 1784, a New Jersey weekly reported that war seemed “inevitable,” and asked, “Can an American view the present situation...without feeling their misery, or wishing them success in the cause of liberty?” Another widely circulated article urged support for the revolution that “must certainly be not far distant.” It regarded the Volunteers as analogous to the American minutemen, and noted parallel strategies of establishing committees of correspondence and nonimportation agreements. “And not to wish them success,” it continued, “would be entertaining a suspicion of that holy flame which once shone so bright in the annals of the late revolution. They have learned the lesson from

⁶ R.B. McDowell, “The Protestant Nation, 1775-1800,” in T.W. Moody and F.X. Martin, eds., *The Course of Irish History*, 190-94; Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States*, 15-16; Morley, *Irish Opinion and the American Revolution*, 275-76.

Americans, and they are pursuing, step by step, the same course.” Despite years of unrest, however, no widespread rebellion occurred.⁷

With the French Revolution the contagion of liberty threatened to spread throughout Europe, and much of Ireland enthusiastically supported the cause. The green national cockade, “universally worn in Ireland,” became a visible sign of discontent. “It is presented to all travelers, and extremely dangerous to refuse wearing the patriotic ornament,” reported a South Carolina newspaper. “The people all exclaim against the politics of Mr. Pitt, and it is generally apprehended that without the removal of the two first judges, and the appointment of a new viceroy, tranquility can never be restored in that distracted country.” Enthusiasm for American independence thus became intertwined with sympathy for the French revolutionary cause. In the United States, however, wearing the tri-color cockade to honor the French cause displayed a partisan loyalty in the growing divide between Federalists and Republicans.⁸

In 1791 Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* became possibly the most circulated publication in the history of Ireland, with seven editions printed in under a year. Its hostility to monarchy couched in republican democratic language found a ready audience among both Dissenters and Catholics. While the Dissenters had experience with this sort of rhetoric, Catholics now used *The Rights of Man* to articulate the ideology of resistance that had long been expressed in agrarian violence. A Boston newspaper printed the observations of a Dublin correspondent: “The Roman Catholics are in almost open rebellion; I am confident, very soon we shall have some serious

⁷ *Independent Gazetteer*, Oct. 26, 1782; *Political Intelligencer*, Jul. 27, 1784; *Norwich Packet*, Oct. 21, 1784; *New-Jersey Gazette*, Nov. 22, 1784. Newspapers in at least five states carried the 1784 article.

⁸ *City Gazette*, Oct. 29, Nov. 16, 1790; Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street*, ch. 4, esp. 120, 162-63.

business; hand bills under the signature PAINE, Common Sense, Rights of Man, America, &c. &c. are pasted up every morning in the most populous parts of the city.” Thus Paine’s work helped pave the way for Catholics and Dissenters to act in concert against British authority.⁹

The United Irishmen, the organizational force behind calls for reform and the group responsible for the Rising of 1798, was also formed in 1791. As an alliance between Presbyterians and Catholics, the United Irishmen attempted to set aside religious differences for the common goal of more representative government. Initially it was committed to lobbying for legal reforms without breaking from the empire, and the American press noted its adoption of some of the rhetoric and strategies that had been used by the American colonies. Like the Americans, the Irish were at first willing to direct their accusations toward the British ministry and Parliament. A newspaper entitled the *Rights of Irishmen* condemned the Irish Parliament as “the little orators of an *aristocracy*...studiously misrepresenting a loyal people to their sovereign.” A South Carolina newspaper reported a Belfast dinner at which toasts to the king and royal family immediately preceded toasts to Paine and the United Irishmen.¹⁰

The United Irishmen became increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress and evolved into a force willing to fight for independence from Great Britain. The process of radicalization was gradual and, like its program, was contested in different aspects, but the overall trend toward violence was unmistakable. Its development and place in revolutionary history is evoked in an oft-quoted phrasing: “What have you got

⁹ Keane, *Tom Paine*, 333; Foster, *Modern Ireland*, 265; *Columbian Centinel*, Feb. 13, 1793.

¹⁰ *State Gazette of South-Carolina*, May 17, Jul. 9, 1792.

in your hand? A green bough. Where did it grow? In America. Where did it bud? In France. Where are you going to plant it? In the crown of Great Britain.”¹¹

The United Irishmen skillfully employed ideological language to press its agenda, and many of its members were ultimately forced to flee Ireland because their opposition to British authority was regarded as seditious. A number of them, and some--William Duane, Mathew and James Carey, Denis Driscoll, and John Daly Burk--became influential in the United States. About twenty American newspapers were edited by Irish émigrés before Jefferson’s election. The most prominent émigré was Wolfe Tone, one of the founders of the United Irishmen, who fled to the United States in 1795. In Philadelphia, he met with other Irish political refugees and the Minister of the French Republic. After several months he moved on to France to attempt to persuade the Directory to intervene on behalf of the United Irishmen. All of those who became expatriates and continued to be active politically comprised part of the culture described as “transatlantic radicals,” who spread their ideologies and calls for revolution from the continent to America and back.¹²

In 1795 Philadelphia printer Thomas Stephens promoted an American edition of the *Proceedings of the Society of United Irishmen* as a book that had been suppressed by British government authorities, who knew that its “existence [could] only be protracted through the ignorance of the people.” Claiming that “the most enlightened characters in America” endorsed the publication, Stephens explained that the

¹¹ Foster, *Modern Ireland*, 265.

¹² Durey, “Transatlantic Patriotism: Political Exiles in America in the Age of Revolutions,” in Emsley and Walvin, eds., *Artisans, Peasants, and Proletarians*, 31n.78; St. Mark, “Wolfe Tone’s Diplomacy in America: August-December, 1795,” 3-11. For various interpretations of “transatlantic radicalism,” see Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early Republic*; Twomey, *Jacobins and Jeffersonians: Anglo-American Radicalism in the United States, 1790-1820*; and Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States*.

Proceedings were “replete with matter of the utmost importance to the whole brotherhood of man,” namely, the spread of liberty. The pitch appealed to the belief that Irish independence was following inevitably in the path blazed by revolution in America and France. Stephens mingled these lofty expectations with a more practical argument for the publication’s usefulness, which was nonetheless predicated on Jeffersonian ideals. As a “nation of agriculturists” consuming foreign manufactures, Americans should especially “wish for the freedom of those with whom we hold commercial intercourse.” The easing of “imposts, tithes, rents, and taxations” expected to accompany separation from Britain stood to help everyone.¹³

While Stephens situated the United Irishmen in an international context, the press was usually more attentive to the nature of specific Irish grievances. One widely distributed piece sympathized with the Irish in language that invoked rights Americans were likely to recognize:

Wretched is the fate of the Irish peasantry! Two million of people doomed to work like horses for 6 pence a day to support a fat idle clergy, and an absent nobility, with their petty tyrants, the farmers and stewards; and who cannot assemble to sign a petition for redress, or mingle their sighs, without the hazard of being shot as rebels...What a glorious period will that be when all King-craft, Priest-craft, feudal rights, monarchies, aristocracies, and all other tyrannies shall be swept from the face of the earth.¹⁴

Rather than focusing on issues that Americans lacked familiarity with, this writer called attention to the inability of the Irish to lawfully petition the government or to peacefully assemble. The article also illustrated the way Americans typically perceived the Irish in terms of class rather than religion: the tyranny of monarchical

¹³ *Aurora*, Apr. 6, 1795.

¹⁴ *American Minerva*, Jan. 25, 1796. The piece appeared in every state north of Virginia.

authority left Ireland with a largely undifferentiated peasantry, as titled landholders lorded over the people.

The publication also illustrated the way news like this spread in the Early National period. Newspapers were rapidly proliferating, especially in the more urban areas of the North. In a few years, partisan divisions would become clearer, but at this point there was still a fair amount of fluidity in the range of viewpoints a single newspaper would express. Within three weeks newspapers from Maine to Maryland had published the article verbatim. And in nearly every case it appeared under the local dateline, typically located on page three in a four-page paper because it was the last printed, and could include the most current news. Readers expected this position in the paper to feature local news, editorial viewpoints, and shorter miscellaneous information that did not merit a separate headline. So when readers encountered this news about Ireland, they understood it as the editor's viewpoint. When they made a judgment about what they read, it was often in this local context.

Following the ratification of the Constitution, the Irish began to arrive in large numbers. Ships set sail from Londonderry, Kelebegs, Belfast, Newry, Rutland, and Dublin, plying regular routes and delivering an average of three hundred passengers each time. Departures from southern ports like Cork, Waterford, and Limerick were less common. The Hartford *American Mercury* reported that eight to ten thousand people were expected to embark from Londonderry alone in 1792. A thousand might arrive in a single week. Overall, historian Aaron Fogleman has estimated that 149,500

Irish entered the United States between 1776 and 1809, more than half of the total European population that emigrated during those years.¹⁵

Americans who read the reports from Ireland understood that the abundant supply of land in the United States constituted the greatest attraction for the Irish. America, wrote a Dr. Linn, “waits to crown all the industrious and virtuous with plenty and happiness.” Few concerns were expressed about the assimilability of Irish multitudes. Some editors reassured those who might harbor concerns that immigrants would not become public burdens. Reporting one arrival, the *New Jersey Journal* specifically noted that “every one of [them] paid their passage before they left Ireland.” These were “valuable acquisitions”; indeed, another reported, “all who now arrive bring property with them.”¹⁶

The Swiney family arrived in Philadelphia aboard the *Queen* in 1792, bringing their children George Washington, Montgomery, and Franklin. “A Real American” praised the tribute, writing, “The idea which prompted the Hibernian to this act of American patriotism, has so far prepossessed me in favor of him, that I think he has

¹⁵ *American Mercury*, Jul. 23, 1792; *Columbian Centinel*, Sep. 26, 1792; *New-York Daily Gazette*, Jul. 21, 1791; Fogleman, “From Slaves, Convicts, and Servants to Free Passengers: The Transformation of Immigration in the Era of the American Revolution,” 43-76 (table p. 74). Descriptions of trade routes and passengers carried are based on arrivals as reported in American newspapers, 1790-1805; Bric, “Patterns of Irish Emigration to America, 1783-1800,” 5-8. Estimates of Irish migration during the 1790s and early 1800s vary widely. Differences in periodization, methodology, and groups included (all of Europe vs. British Isles vs. Ireland) further complicate direct comparisons. Of course, there is also uncertainty about how many Irish may have chosen to return home. Fifty thousand is probably a fair approximation of Irish immigration during the 1790s, but for the purposes of this study the perception is more important than the actual figure.

¹⁶ *Vermont Gazette*, Aug. 22, 1791; *New Jersey Journal*, Aug. 10, 17, 1791. The pre-famine immigration to the United States was predominantly the “class above the labouring poor,” including many farmers, artisans, and tradesmen. Americans regarded the large number of Ulster Scots who made the journey as Irish. The appellation “Scots-Irish,” though in use from the early 1700s, became commonplace only in the mid-nineteenth century as a way to differentiate them from the surging number of poor Catholic immigrants. Prior to that time, the terminology for Irish Catholics emphasized class, as in the “low,” “wild,” or “mere” Irish. See Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, esp. ch. 2; Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic*; Griffin, *The People with No Name*.

some claim to the particular protection and attention of all true Americans.” In the eyes of this writer, the naming honor established the newcomer’s worthiness and validated the family’s membership in the American community. Ideological unity seemingly precluded the need for cultural singularity. At the very least this symbolic connection was enough to overcome any concerns about an influx of “Paddies.”¹⁷

Not very long ago, numbers of the poor industrious Irish, who would have been happy to possess a few acres in our backcountry, would, nevertheless, as soon have ventured on a voyage to the moon, as to America. Exclusive of the inconveniences of a tedious navigation, they had moreover much to apprehend from scanty provisions, and bad treatment, during the passage. On the latter score, their fears are now entirely removed; and in consequence, we every day see a hardy industrious race of men pouring into this country, to settle our back lands, and to encrease the riches of the Union, from those very forests which now only serve as lurking places to a treacherous blood-thirsty foe; but which will soon by the vigor of the Irish arm, be converted into fertile plains, smiling with golden harvests and echoing with the voice of flocks and herds.¹⁸

These positive perceptions were in part occasioned by changes in the passenger trade. Indentured servitude declined precipitously during the American Revolution, when all trade was disrupted and revolutionary ideology discredited the practice. American authorities also put a stop to the practice of sending convicts to the United States. Furthermore, about two-thirds of Irish migrants came from Protestant Ulster rather than the Catholic south, hence reinforcing the new nation’s optimism about the newcomers’ ability to be acculturated.¹⁹

¹⁷ *New Jersey Journal*, Aug. 22, 1792. American Revolutionary General Richard Montgomery was a native Irishman killed at Quebec in 1775. His widow Janet traveled to Ireland in 1789, where on one visit she viewed Sir Edward Newenham’s American room, which paid tribute to patriots like her husband, and included a portrait of Benedict Arnold turned around and marked “traitor.” Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 120-125; Morley, *Irish Opinion and the American Revolution*, 115.

¹⁸ *New-York Daily Gazette*, Jul. 21, 1791.

¹⁹ Fogleman, “From Slaves, Convicts, and Servants to Free Passengers,” 60-65; Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 170; *State Gazette of South-Carolina*, Aug. 24, 1786.

Despite legal and practical restrictions, the Irish exodus was significant. In 1783 Parliament passed an act prohibiting any attempt to “contract with, entice, persuade, solicit or seduce any manufacturer, workman, or artificer” to emigrate. By the 1790s the British believed that “American emissaries” were “seducing [Scotland’s] ignorant inhabitants to emigration,” and they similarly suspected that the same recruitment was occurring in Ireland. A Providence newspaper relayed information from an Irish correspondent that English authorities were attempting to stem the tide of emigration by preventing ship’s masters from provisioning passenger ships. Still the ships were fully loaded. One captain bringing over 300 passengers across the Atlantic estimated that he turned another 150 away for fear of overburdening his ship. This writer noted the “astonishing” reports of Irish clamoring to make the journey, concluding that the reputation of the United States was “daily increasing in the opinion of the old world.”²⁰

For Americans, this was a shared national experience even if they did not live near the Eastern seaports where the passengers arrived. Characterizations of Irish immigrants were frequently printed in multiple newspapers, many in a dozen or more. Especially in cities, people gathered in public places to share the news. Post offices were a common location for reading the news aloud; the press reports were not exclusively the domain of an educated elite. In addition, not all settled in the cities where they landed. Many Irish headed beyond the urban centers of their arrival to settle in western Pennsylvania, the Ohio Valley, and the trans-Appalachian frontier. Although

²⁰ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 170; *State Gazette of South-Carolina*, Feb. 23, 1792; *Providence Gazette*, Aug. 13, 1791; *Diary, or Loudon’s Register*, Jul. 13, 1793.

undoubtedly social problems arose from the influx of newcomers, the newspaper rhetoric suggests that, at least ideologically, they were welcome in this era.²¹

At the same time, Americans retained a sense of cultural superiority to the Irish. Caricatures of Irish “Paddies” were staples of the press, offering humorous filler. These stories of “genuine Hibernianism” generally treated the Irish as loquacious but ill-educated common folk possessed of “honest bluntness” and “good-natured simplicity.” The question in the minds of Americans was whether the Irish character would prove adaptable in the United States. These responses to Irish immigration reflect a young nation actively constructing its identity. In that sense American attitudes say as much about what they saw in the mirror as what they saw in the immigrant Irish. Clearly the ideals of republican virtue and agrarian democracy still had currency.²²

Irish expatriates in some cities organized aid societies to ensure a smooth transition to life in America, offering a helping hand to those arriving without connections or employment. A number of “respectable and influential” Irish patrons formed Philadelphia’s Hibernian Society for the Relief of Immigrants from Ireland in 1790, providing funding on the basis of personal appeals from the needy. They regularly placed notices of their activities in the newspapers. Two Catholic priests, for example, received public praise for tending to the passengers of a ship on which there had been an outbreak of disease. Testimonials to ship’s captains who rendered safe and comfortable journeys for their Irish passengers practically constituted a new genre, leading one newspaper to wonder what fate would befall the poor captains who failed to

²¹ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 172.

²² De Nie, *Eternal Paddy*, 5-13; Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic*, 56-58. Visual caricatures of the Irish were rare in the United States, if for no other reason than the technology for mass reproduction of images was more than a generation away for newspapers.

receive a tribute. Historian Kerby Miller has suggested that the Hibernian Society operated paternalistically in deciding which people deserved help. But beyond passing judgment on the virtuousness of newcomers, the organization's presentation of itself in the public sphere attempted to put the best face on the Irish community. By helping to keep new immigrants out of "jail or alms-house," they promoted the idea of Irish self-sufficiency. The public thanks offered to ships' captains argued for the worthiness of the Irish to be treated with dignity. Finally, by operating publicly, the Hibernians asserted their own authority as Irish leaders.²³

In late 1796, reports that Ulster Irish were readying pikes for a general revolt reached the United States. "The period of Revolution," it was predicted, would quickly produce "the emancipation of this island." The information was nearly accurate. Wolfe Tone's lobbying efforts had been successful, but an "ill wind" dispersed the French fleet attempting an invasion in December. The British government became increasingly alarmed at the direction the United Irishmen were headed and attempted to round up its leaders in March 1798. Walter Corish Devereux wrote to his brother in New York as the authorities began apprehending suspected rebels:

It is the greatest happiness to you that you left this Unfortunate Cuntry...almost Every County in Poor Old Ireland under Martial Law and the Poor Cuntry Pesants Shot or hanged or Basteled without Law or form of Tryal...all our Respectable and honest Cuntry men in the Goales of the Kingdom...thank God that Irish men have Resolution and can Suffer more and Will Be free...If the times are not Settled Before Next

²³ Hibernian Society, *Incorporation, Bye-Laws, &c.*, 13-15; Miller, et al., eds., *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan*, 287-88; Bric, "Patterns of Irish Emigration," 21-22; *New-York Daily Gazette*, Aug. 25, 1791; *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser* Mar. 4, 1791; *State Gazette of South-Carolina*, Oct. 1, 1792; *Independent Gazetteer*, Sep. 18, 1790; Hood, *Brief Account of the Society of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick*, 86. For a discussion of the distinctions between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor in 1790s Philadelphia, see Newman, *Embodied History*, esp. ch. 1.

August I Certanley will then leave this Land of tiriney and Seek a land of Liberty.²⁴

Plans for a rebellion were well advanced, and despite the loss of its leadership, the Rising began on May 23. The violence quickly spread from the southeast toward Dublin and broke out in Ulster in early June. The initial successes in County Wexford, however, were soon eclipsed by severe losses at New Ross and Vinegar Hill. The bloodshed increased exponentially; the British gave no quarter to many prisoners, summarily executing them, leading to retaliatory massacres by the rebels. The rebels made an unsuccessful “last and desperate effort” to blockade Dublin, with the result that three thousand prisoners were taken, some executed, some imprisoned, some exiled, and others sent into military service for the crown abroad. Ultimately the breakdown of coordination and the failure of French support to materialize turned the Rising into a disaster for the United Irishmen.²⁵

Tone had hoped the French would send a force to Ireland when news of the premature uprising reached the continent. The French gathered forces, but they were inadequate and far too late. Napoleon sailed with his fleet at about the same time, leading to widespread speculation, especially in the American press, that he intended to join the invasion of Ireland. Rufus King, the American envoy to Great Britain, wrote Alexander Hamilton from London about Napoleon’s known departure: “The fleet is a very great one—its destination is the subject of inquietude and conjecture...If Ireland is the object, the insurrection has been ill judged and premature—in almost every instance the insurgents have been dispersed and killed, and the quarter round Dublin is now nearly restored to the Kings Peace. Still however if a moderate french force with a

²⁴ *Centinel of Liberty*, Dec. 2, 1796; Miller, et al., eds., *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan*, 41-42.

²⁵ *Connecticut Courant*, Sept. 17, 1798.

supply of arms could now be thrown into Ireland, the issue wd. be dubious, so deep and general is the Defection.” Still, it was generally believed that it would be “next to impossible that they can reach Ireland without Discovery” and that the trip would take two months in any case. But Napoleon was not headed for Ireland but for Egypt. The French squadron that finally left for Ireland had Tone on board in a French uniform, but the British navy defeated it in October. Tone was arrested and committed suicide in his cell to avoid the indignity of hanging.²⁶

So ended the rebellion, except for the occasional outburst in an outlying region. With an estimated thirty thousand deaths, the Rising of 1798 was one of the most violent conflicts in Ireland’s history. Word of the rebellion first reached the United States in early June. In the *Aurora* it was reported that Ireland was “in a very unsettled, distracted state; and declared in a state of rebellion,” but the news would continue to be vague for most of the summer. Utterly absent from newspaper reports was any discussion of the grievances of the Irish, a fact attributable to the dependence on British press accounts. As the insurgency degenerated into a bloodbath, with summary executions of thousands of Irish suspected of aiding the rebels, reports often took note of priests being charged for supporting the cause of the United Irishmen. But the insurgency was rarely considered a merely domestic event. When it came to speculating about how the Irish managed to stockpile so many weapons, the French were fingered as the source.²⁷

Seventeen ninety-eight was also an especially volatile year in American politics, and a decisive one in shaping the issues leading up to the election of 1800. The Jay

²⁶ Rufus King to Alexander Hamilton, June 6 1798, in Syrett, ed., *Papers of Alexander Hamilton* 21: 488, 499.

²⁷ *Aurora*, Jun. 2, 1798; *Connecticut Courant*, Sept. 3, 1798.

Treaty of 1795 had led to more normalized relations with Great Britain, but its wisdom was still a matter of acrimonious debate because it had turned France into a hostile nation. The “diplomatic shakedown” of United States ambassadors to France sparked public outrage when President Adams released documents related to the XYZ Affair and newspapers across the country printed them on the front page. The conflict with France remained an undeclared war, but it prompted the rapid buildup of an American navy and the recruitment of an army. It also prompted the suppression of dissent, with the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts in July, and the Kentucky and Virginia resolutions in response. Every week the newspapers carried reports of world events that might or might not prove momentous: uprisings throughout central Europe, Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt, challenges to British India, continued violence in Saint-Domingue, and, of course, the Rising of 1798 in Ireland.²⁸

As the vital center of politics in the early republic, Philadelphia reflected the range of responses to the Irish rebellion. The city was the incubator of the partisan press and the only place that could sustain multiple daily newspapers in an era where weeklies were the norm. In the 1790s, partly due to the conscious efforts of Jefferson and Madison to promote vehicles for dissent against the Federalist policies that held sway, Philadelphia became the home of several partisan newspapers. In other states the process developed more slowly; widespread antipathy toward the evils of “faction” meant that some printers were reluctant to recognize the need to take sides in the political debate.

But in Philadelphia there were at least four newspapers of political consequence, an importance that derived from their advantageous position near the seat of power.

²⁸ Palmer, *Age of the Democratic Revolution*, 2:19, 327-32; Tindall, *America*, 307-15.

Their widespread influence was ensured by government policy. “Newspaper exchanges,” the free mailing of papers among printers, had been customary since before the Revolution. The Post Office Act of 1792 authorized the practice while also establishing cheap rates for mailing newspapers to the general public. As a result, regional newspapers were easily able to reprint items from all over the country, allowing news to spread quickly through the states. International news usually came from ships’ captains bearing newspapers from their ports of departure. As the press became divided along party lines, editors increasingly reprinted news only from newspapers whose politics they shared.²⁹

In both the newspapers and in government circles, the main fault line visible in perceptions of the Irish rebellion was connected to the hostilities between Britain and France. Federalists, largely satisfied with the Jay Treaty and emphasizing American security and a desire for order in the world, treated the Rising as a French plot disruptive of American interests. Republicans stressed that the insurrection was an authentic revolution on behalf of natural rights and patterned on the American struggle.

Philadelphia’s *Aurora*, run by Benjamin Franklin Bache, namesake and grandson of the illustrious statesman, was by most accounts the most audaciously Republican newspaper in America. Bache possessed something of a secular millennial vision which, together with his continued support of France, informed his commentary on the Rising. Boston’s *Independent Chronicle*, edited by Thomas Adams, led the way for New England Republicans, inserting many pieces from the *Aurora* and adopting an equally strident tone. In a denouncement that illustrated the potential of a partisan newspaper to gain strength by being part of a wider network, Abigail Adams deemed

²⁹ Pasley, *Tyranny of Printers*, 48-49.

the *Chronicle* worse than the *Aurora* because it “has more the true spirit of Satan, for he not only collects the Billingsgate of all the Jacobin papers but he add[s] to it the Lies, falshoods, calimny and bitterness of his own.”³⁰

The *Aurora*'s uncertain early reports of insurrection began to get more specific in August and seized on the hopeful notion that it was a coordinated rebellion of all the people of Ireland against foreign foes. The paper received “details of a vast, universal, and decisive revolt.... The rising is stated to have been on the same day and form throughout the whole Island...between a numerous body of the English & Hessian troops and the revolters, in which great obstinacy was manifested on both sides and the slaughter dreadful.” The *Independent Chronicle* echoed the *Aurora*'s portrayal: “The vaunted tranquility of Ireland has ended in a Civil War (if it so ought to be called) between the native Irish and their Infamous & brutal oppressors, dispatched from the Royal presence of England by his Britannic Majesty in person, to hold in fetters of iron those honest but degraded people, the half starved Peasantry of Ireland.” In such a description, Ireland was not so much a colony as an occupied country.³¹

Religious divisions in Ireland were alleged to be the result of a conscious British strategy to “divide & conquer.” The cross-religious alliances featured in the organization of the United Irishmen threatened British rule by forging an alliance of Catholics and Protestants. What the people of Ireland wanted, said the *Aurora*, was reform based on the just democratic principles of the age; instead, the “enemies of

³⁰ Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States*, 41; quoted in Smith, *Freedom's Fetters*, 248.

³¹ *Aurora*, Aug. 1, 1798; *Independent Chronicle*, Aug. 6, 1798.

toleration, and friends of feudal privileges” had devised a plan to reduce the country by “savage massacres.”³²

Both Republican papers were concerned with the fact that they were dependent on English and loyal Irish papers for all news of the rebellion. The *Independent Chronicle* lamented its lack of success in acquiring any French newspapers, which it was in the habit of reviewing, and which might have offered more authoritative information about the possibility of French intervention. As it stood, detailed accounts of the fighting from Dublin and London newspapers were printed in the Republican newspapers because they were the only ones available. Bache thus counseled his readers to treat the reports from Ireland critically. The “English prints” were the same that had “systematically misrepresented” the course of the American Revolution and had little incentive to be truthful since habeas corpus had been suspended. Furthermore, “even after their arrival here, the accounts are still further mutilated and distorted by the servile creatures into whose hands they have first fallen, with the mean purpose of soothing the perturbed feelings of *the leader of our infatuated politics*,” a clear reference to the alleged aristocratic leanings and attachment to England of President Adams.³³

The Rising of 1798, claimed one New York paper, was in the same mold as the American Revolution, a demand by a subjugated people for rights, and the destruction of monarchy. “The spirit of 1775 is now inspiring the people of Ireland.... The Cause...is the same with that of America during their Revolution, and none but an

³² *Aurora*, Aug. 1, 1798.

³³ *Aurora*, Aug. 14, 1798.

enemy to the American Independence, but will offer prayers to Heaven for their Prosperity.”³⁴

Republican papers also tended to see Irish independence as an event in the gradual democratization of all nations. It was a moment deserving of poetry: “Soon will the republican Harp of emancipated Hibernia sound its most melodious notes to an improving and enlightened yeomanry; no longer slaves to the soil, but the sovereign lords of the glebe.” The rebellion was a “long expected explosion” of forces that could no longer be contained:

Ireland is the last prop of British despotism, if this is thrown down the whole system of tyranny which has covered the world in tears and blood for this last century, in Asia, Europe, and America, will be shook to its foundation.... A brave people like Irishmen emancipated, will in its time lead the European world to freedom. The fire of liberty will spread, and in connection with the sacred flame of France, will illumine the benighted corners of the earth.³⁵

Faced with disastrous reports, Bache and Adams both clung for as long as possible to their determination that Irish independence was inevitable. They tended to read into the news any remote hint of positive developments, picking up items that suited their millennial worldview even if it flew in the face of all other reports. On the same day that the *Independent Chronicle* carried news of dreadful Irish defeats, they opined, “Hail auspicious day; welcome thrice, welcome this political millennium!!!” In another example, an extract from a letter printed in *Carey’s Recorder* stated that the

³⁴ “New York, August 11,” reprinted in *Independent Chronicle*, Aug. 16, 1798.

³⁵ *Independent Chronicle*, Aug. 6, 1798.

Irish rebels had 120,000 men in arms not including Ulster, and that Lord Camden had fled to England for his own safety.³⁶

Bache himself was dead a month later, a victim of the yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia. The *Aurora* ceased publication for two months, its Federalist opponents happily assuming its bitter end to be both permanent and well-deserved. Jack Fenno, who took over publication of the *Gazette of the United States* upon his father's death a week after Bache's, wrote, "The star of jacobinism must soon cease to shed its malign influence; for shadows, clouds, and darkness rest upon it."³⁷

Fenno and the many others who thought that Bache's demise signaled the decline of the opposition were surprised to discover that the Republican newspaper network was just beginning to surge. A number of the editors of those newspapers had Irish connections. This group included William Duane, Bache's successor when the *Aurora* resumed publication, who, although born in upstate New York, grew up in Ireland before returning to the United States.³⁸ Duane soon drew a much closer parallel between the Irish and American experiences than Bache had:

If the Irish wish for an elective government and freedom for other religious societies besides the church of England...will they be more to blame in asking for and using foreign assistance than they were?...If taxation and representation in 1775 were held to be inseparable for two millions of Americans who made many of their own provincial laws, why ought they not to be held inseparable for three millions of Catholics in Ireland who have not had (Great God of Liberty) a single vote?³⁹

³⁶ *Independent Chronicle*, Aug. 9, 1798; *Aurora*, Aug. 16, 1798. Camden was, in fact, recalled partly by his own request, and replaced with Lord Cornwallis, who was able to exercise military leadership; see Pakenham, *Year of Liberty*, 265-66.

³⁷ *Gazette of the United States*, Oct. 23, 1798, quoted in Rosenfeld, *American Aurora*, 235.

³⁸ Durey, "Transatlantic Patriotism," in Emsley and Walvin, eds., *Artisans, Peasants, and Proletarians*, 13.

³⁹ *Aurora*, Nov. 3, 1798.

Duane thus combined the classic complaints of the Revolutionary era, taxation and representation, with contemporary Republican calls for religious toleration. When news of the death of Wolfe Tone by his own hand came from Dublin, Duane lamented the apparent shortcomings of the parallel between America and Ireland: “The victory of French forces in America gave America her independence and gave George Washington his presidency. The defeat of French forces in Ireland has left Ireland in British servitude and has cost Ireland’s would-be George Washington his life!”⁴⁰

Duane and other Republican editors, in particular, would continue to use the Irish rebellion to advance their visions of what should constitute the equitable form of the United States government, printing pamphlets about the rebellion over the next several years. And within a year, both the *Aurora’s* Duane and the *Independent Chronicle’s* Adams would be prosecuted under the Sedition Act.

In the Federalist press, no editor equaled the paranoia and vitriol of William Cobbett, known as Peter Porcupine, who published *Porcupine’s Gazette*. Cobbett was an Englishman who had been exiled first to France, then to the United States, as a result of his incendiary writings at home. Expecting a land of liberty and democracy, he was quickly disillusioned by the realities of an American society that fell short of those ideals and he reverted to a hard-line opposition to Jeffersonian republicanism. To Cobbett, the conflict between France and England was absolutely defining and there was no middle ground. He was therefore suspicious of the Irish connections with France, and he applied that distrust locally by targeting the United Irishmen as a

⁴⁰ *Aurora*, Jan. 29, 1799, quoted in Rosenfeld, *American Aurora*, 577.

movement geared toward undermining the United States government and bringing French-style revolution to American shores.⁴¹

Cobbett's response to the Rising displayed his strange combination of Federalism and renewed respect for the British crown. After reports that the British forces were successfully suppressing the rebellion, he wrote, "I hope and trust that the traitors have actually bled; not a drop or two, but *to death*. The bayonet! The bayonet! This is the only instrument that ought to be employed in probing the [illegible] hearts of the United Irishmen." Cobbett's contempt for the Irish paralleled his opinion of those who dissented with Federalist authorities: "Ungrateful monsters! The reign of the present king has been one continuous series of condescensions and favours towards them, and they reward him with rebellion! He now sees, I hope, that *lenity* is no more than the food of faction."⁴²

Cobbett's enthusiasm is partly explicable by the local atmosphere he faced. First, Philadelphia was teeming with exiles, particularly French who had fled revolution in Saint Domingue. Second, the Irish had arrived in substantial numbers and had become active participants in politics. A "letter from Philadelphia" illustrated the manner in which such a scene could cause the sort of disorder that was so threatening to the Federalists. Forty men "in a body" wearing "the National cockade of France" gathered outside the home of President Adams, "loitering about, and seeming to have no particular object." A crowd soon gathered, a magistrate appeared, and when the men refused to disperse, "the citizens flew to arms," brawling with the men and stomping on their cockades. They broke up this particular group, but their concern was great enough

⁴¹ Wilson, ed., *Peter Porcupine in America*, 1-35.

⁴² *Porcupine's Gazette*, Aug. 2, 1798.

that “several bodies of volunteer horse and foot patrolled the streets all night.” The writer made clear that he believed that the French supporters were testing how much resistance they would face when they decided to make a real fight of it. “There are a great many Frenchmen in and about the city, and with assistance of such of our own people as are attached to France, and may be deluded into violent measures, might very much disturb the publick peace.”⁴³

The *Columbian Centinel* in Boston, Federalist nemesis of the *Independent Chronicle*, particularly relished stories about the atrocities of the United Irishmen:

The Reverend Mr. Hayden, A Protestant Clergyman, much esteemed having had some of his neighbors to spend the evening with him, a Miss Clifford residing in his house, whose beauty and whose virtue made her the admiration of the country was requested to sing, “Croppies lie down,”—she did so little thinking her compliance would be the cause of her death! The next morning the House was attacked by a party of insurgents, and the whole family massacred with circumstances of the most horrid cruelty.—The servant who attended the family at supper the previous night, snatched a pike from one of his brother demons, and plunged it into the beautiful bosom of Miss Clifford, exclaiming at the same time, “There you d—d w—e, take that for your Croppy lie down!” Four infants were not spared, but tossed in hellish sport, on the point of the pikes!”⁴⁴

Alongside reports of the Irish Rising, the *Centinel* printed a verse of sorts that captured the essence of the Federalist viewpoint of world events. Entitled *Statistic of Europe*, it catalogued events abroad in a way that made understandable the need for order and stability:

France tries to bully all the world.
America does not.
Spain cannot help us.
England fights for every body.
The Emperor gives up half.
Russia comes forward a step.

⁴³ *Connecticut Courant*, May 14, 1798.

⁴⁴ *Columbian Centinel*, Aug. 22, 1798.

Denmark arms.
Sweden shuts her ports.
Portugal hangs between *France* and *England*.
Turkey begins to see clear.
Holland has paid her all.
 The Pope has nothing left.
Ireland is turned French.
 If this does not unite us, may the Lord have mercy upon us.⁴⁵

To Federalists, it was clearly a nightmare of discord and disorder, not the peace of a secular millennium, that was truly at hand. Amidst the chaos, the practical need to establish control over events became the most important consideration. The United States, argued the Federalist press, should be unified in opposition to the European turmoil, which was plainly of French making. This was the position enthusiastically espoused by Philadelphia's *Gazette of the United States*, the most ardent defender of John Adams and the Federalists. John Fenno had begun publishing the *Gazette* in New York with ambitious if unrealistic visions of nationwide distribution. When the capital moved to Philadelphia, so did the paper. Along with dutifully reporting Congressional activities, Fenno aggressively defended all Federalist policies, including the Alien and Sedition Acts. When Fenno succumbed to the yellow fever, his son picked up publication where his father had left off, asserting the need to suppress dangerous dissent and to block the entry of immigrants who would spread dangerous revolutionary doctrines. Catching up after a brief interruption in publication, Fenno printed items about the progress of events in Ireland that had already appeared in other Federalist papers. These attempted to cast doubt on the idea that the rebellion enjoyed popular support by detailing its alleged destructiveness. A *Gazette* report with a Dublin dateline described the United Irishmen as "banditti" and "desperadoes" who were committing

⁴⁵ *Columbian Centinel*, Aug. 29, 1798.

“the most wanton depredations on the property of several industrious and peaceful inhabitants.”⁴⁶

The *Gazette* repeatedly highlighted the French role in Ireland. In October, Fenno printed a mock “manifesto” that claimed to be an address from a French general to the people of County Mayo:

The Great Nation has sent me to you with a band of heroes, to deliver you from the hands of tyranny; fly to our standards, and share with us the glory of subduing the world. We will teach you the arts of war, and to *despise* the low pursuits of *toil* and *industry*. You shall live on the spoils of war, and the labour of others. The acquisition of wealth is the acquisition of misery, and the enjoyment of ease is glorious. We have made all the nations we have conquered happy, by arresting their property; by applying it to the common cause, and consecrating it to the champions of liberty! Property is a *common right*, belonging to the *valour* that seizes it....⁴⁷

Although the satire was surely apparent to readers of the *Gazette*, the address was close enough to the Federalist view of the French to make for persuasive rhetoric. It expressed the arrogance, ambition, and aggression of France, while making it plain that the values of that country were at odds with American ideals of hard work, private property, and a peaceful way of life.

Fenno argued that French aggression, engaged in its dangerous “fairy dance around the globe,” was a threat to the economic and political independence of the United States. He highlighted its pernicious influence in a number of ways, including the suggestion that good will toward France was misplaced because the French did not understand America: they “entertain the most contemptuous ideas of our power and resources; and uniformly display a consummate ignorance of the real state of the country, its policies and views, its spirit, and means of resistance to their schemes of

⁴⁶ *Gazette of the United States*, Nov. 22, 1798.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Oct. 17, 1798.

tyranny and oppression.” French conceptions of virtue bore little resemblance to the American idea of republican liberty, and those who believed otherwise had simply been fooled.⁴⁸

A lengthy piece under the pseudonym “Observer” elaborated the argument that distinguished the Irish context from the American struggle for independence:

How often have you been told, that the *good people* in Ireland wanted nothing more than the preservation of their constitutional privileges; that they intended no encroachment on the prerogative of the crown; that their opposition consisted in petitions and remonstrance; that these were the only arms of defence and protection that they sought, and provided they failed in their efforts with them, they would rest satisfied, that they had discharged their duty to themselves, the present, and the rising generation?

Observer went on to warn readers that the rebellion had ramifications for America. The “perfidious band” of United Irishmen, supplied by France and loyal to the principles of that revolution, not the American, was now infecting American society:

Now, citizens of the United States, consider who are among you—have not many leading characters of the now detected conspiracy arrived among you? Have you not often heard them open their mouths against the measures of the government of the United States; and vindicate the spoils and insults offered by France?—You have no doubt read the constitution of the United Irishmen, that has been secretly printed and perfidiously circulated among you—That *Stamina* which produced the great conspiracy and rebellion in Ireland, is among you in full vigor; its roots are spread in the affections of the citizens to alienate them from the counsel and authority of those worthy men whom they have ever found faithful.

They who speak evil of the powers that be, who are infidel in principle, and immoral in practice, sapping the foundations of that confidence which renders commerce secure, and society happy—outlawed by their native country, and objects of her vengeance, on whom you can never depend with safety, or associate with honor, whose atmosphere you ought to dread as a burning volcano. If you listen, they will lead you,

⁴⁸ *Gazette of the United States*, Oct. 20, 1798.

step by step, until unawares, you are brought to the brink of irretrievable destruction. Let the fate, the destruction of all the republics, who in Europe listened, ring loud in your ears!

Survival demanded that citizens become more vigilant against the outsiders who were attempting to subvert the American way of life. “These men [United Irishmen and opponents of Alien and Sedition Laws] want a change (they say) in representation; but a change in the constitution, is what they seek.”⁴⁹

The official responses of the United States to the Irish rebellion reflected the Federalist viewpoint. In 1798, few Republicans were in positions of authority besides Vice President Thomas Jefferson. Federalist Rufus King, a staunch supporter of the Jay Treaty, had given up his Senate seat to take the position of U.S. envoy to Great Britain in 1796, giving him perhaps the closest view of the progress of events in Ireland. He considered the Irish “ignorant, ill governed, oppressed, and wretched,” and when the prospect arose that United Irishmen might be allowed exile to the United States, he stepped in on behalf of the Adams administration to prevent more Irish radicals from entering the country. Reporting the end of the uprising to Hamilton, he wrote, “In Ireland the Rebellion is suppressed, and our Government will I hope have the power and the inclination to exclude those disaffected Characters who will be suffered to seek an asylum among us.”⁵⁰ They represented disorder, summarized King, and threatened the attempt the Federalists were making to establish consensus. “A large proportion of the emigrants from Ireland, and especially in our middle states,” he explained, “has upon this occasion arranged itself upon the side of the malcontents.” George Cabot

⁴⁹ *Gazette of the United States*, Oct. 29, 1798.

⁵⁰ Ernst, *Rufus King*, 216-18, 261; Rufus King to Alexander Hamilton, Jul. 31, 1798, in Syrett, ed., *Hamilton Papers* 22:45. See Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals*, and Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States*, for treatment of many of these “disaffected characters.”

congratulated King for “the great service you have rendered the Country in shutting its doors against Irish Desperadoes.”⁵¹ Timothy Pickering, the secretary of state, wanted King to get a list of the names and descriptions of the Irish prisoners to ensure that they would not attempt to enter the United States by way of another country.⁵² These attitudes expressed Federalist fears of disorder and dissent. Rather than an echo of the American Revolution, the Irish Rising was considered a threatening disorder spurred by Jacobin ideology and tangible French support.

In May 1798, newspapers across the country carried news that Congress was considering “An act authorizing the President of the United States to raise a Provisional Army.”⁵³ If the conflict with France should degenerate into war, many believed that an attack on American soil was possible, a fear summarized by Timothy Pickering in a letter to Alexander Hamilton:

The successful invasion of England—or even of Ireland...would put us in jeopardy. If England still struggled, France might be induced to keep all her force in Europe until the conquest was complete: but considering that she has a redundancy of soldiers, and a natural expectation would be presented of an easy conquest and submission here if she made a sudden and unlooked for invasion—I own that the danger would then appear to me imminent—and I think it is so imminent even now, that the army ought forthwith to be raised.⁵⁴

Thus, the conflict with France had relegated Ireland in some minds within the United States government to the status it had held for England for centuries: a buffer against French military threats.

⁵¹ Quoted in Morison, *Life and Letters of Harrison Gray Otis*, 1:107n; Ernst, *Rufus King*, 264.

⁵² Ernst, *Rufus King*, 264.

⁵³ See, for example, *Connecticut Courant*, May 28, 1798.

⁵⁴ Timothy Pickering to Alexander Hamilton, Jun. 9, 1798, Syrett, ed., *Hamilton Papers* 21:505.

Hamilton shared these concerns; in a June 16, 1799 letter to James McHenry, he believed incorrectly that the French fleet would sail for Ireland, but took precautions to guard the American coast; see Syrett, ed., *Hamilton Papers* 23:193.

Federalists not only feared a French invasion but the erosion of the virtuous republic they were building from within. The French example illustrated the danger of the unvirtuous gaining power, and the Irish were closely associated with them. King had termed them “ignorant” and had worked to exclude them from American society.⁵⁵ Uriah Tracy of Connecticut wrote of seeing “many, very many Irishmen” in Pennsylvania, “and with a very few exceptions, they are United Irishmen, Free Masons, and the most God-provoking Democrats on this side of hell.” Harrison Gray Otis of Massachusetts warned that “If some means are not adopted to prevent the indiscriminate admission of wild Irishmen & others to the right of suffrage, there will soon be an end to liberty & property.”⁵⁶ Arguing in 1797 for legislation to restrict immigration, he said:

It will tend to foreclose the mass of vicious and disorganizing characters who cannot live peaceably at home, and who, after unfurling the standard of rebellion in their own countries, may come hither to revolutionize ours. I feel every disposition to respect those honest and industrious people...who have become citizens...but I do not wish to invite hordes of wild Irishmen, nor the turbulent and disorderly of all parts of the world, to come here with a view to disturb our tranquility, after having succeeded in the overthrow of their own Governments.⁵⁷

South Carolina Federalist Robert Goodloe Harper, in a letter to his constituents in which he praised the Alien and Sedition Acts as “proper and expedient” measures, emphasized that the Rising was not a homegrown insurgency but merely another stage on which the war between France and England was being fought. The British fleet had soundly defeated the late-arriving French force of “seven or eight thousand troops,” reducing the rebels to “some detached bands of robbers that had escaped, and still

⁵⁵ Ernst, *Rufus King*, 261.

⁵⁶ Morison, *Harrison Gray Otis*, I, 107.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 108.

infested certain parts of the country.” This was not a picture of a revolution but of an invasion. Confessions by Irish leaders allegedly proved that the rebellion had been “instigated and upheld by France, for the purpose of dividing and destroying the British power.”⁵⁸

Another reason for Federalist disapproval of the Irish rebellion involved its potential to disrupt trade. In the years immediately following the Revolution, trade symbolized the autonomy and independence of the new nation. In the 1790s, attacks on American shipping were not only violations of sovereignty but signs that the European nations did not respect the United States. The détente with Great Britain established by the Jay Treaty represented a normalization of trade relations that promised stability, and the Irish Rising presented the possibility of disrupting that arrangement. Jefferson had noted in 1795 the usefulness of trade with Ireland:

The freedom of commerce between Ireland and America is undoubtedly very interesting to both countries. If fair play be given to the natural advantages of Ireland she must come in for a distinguished share of that commerce. She is entitled to it for the excellence of her manufactures, the cheapness of most of them, their correspondence with the American taste, a sameness of language, laws and manners, a reciprocal affection between the people, and the singular circumstance of her being the nearest European land to the United States.⁵⁹

Hence the general silence of the Jeffersonians on the issue of the Irish Rising is puzzling. James Monroe had taken the most active role among them as minister to France. He gave Wolfe Tone advice on how to deal with the French government, lent him money, and introduced him to Thomas Paine. Monroe clearly sympathized with the Irish cause. But by 1798, Monroe, because of his support for France and opposition to the Jay Treaty, had become hopelessly out of step with the Federalist administration.

⁵⁸ Cunningham, Jr., ed., *Circular Letters of Congressmen to Their Constituents*, 151.

⁵⁹ Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* 9:27-28.

He was recalled and replaced by Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, whose hostile reception by the French government precipitated the XYZ Affair. Back in the States, Monroe remained publicly silent on the subject of Ireland.⁶⁰

Jefferson similarly did not comment on the situation in Ireland. Perhaps he thought it best not to predict the course of events. In 1789 he had written: “I have so much confidence in the good sense of man, and his qualifications for self-government, that I am never afraid of the issue where reason is left free to exert her force; and I will agree to be stoned as a false prophet if all does not end well in this country [France]. Nor will it end with this country. Here is but the first chapter in the history of European liberty.”⁶¹ Perhaps in a new era of spreading democracy, he was as fearful as hopeful of the potential of an independent Ireland. Or, as many Federalists alleged, he may have pondered the likelihood that the Irish would be exchanging their English dependency for a French one. In any event, he did not characterize the Rising as an echo of the American struggle for independence. Beyond a couple of passing factual remarks in letters, the closest he came to taking a position was in 1799, when he wrote to Madison, “I wish the affairs of Ireland were as hopeful” as the situation in the East Indies, where “a most formidable co-operation has been prepared for demolishing the British power.”⁶² The surest revelation of a position on the Rising might have been found in the concreteness of government policy, but the Republicans had virtually no standing at all in 1798. Jefferson had in fact retreated to Virginia in disgust over the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts in July.

⁶⁰ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence*, 286-87, 306, 335.

⁶¹ Quoted in Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation*, 385.

⁶² Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Jan. 30, 1799, Mattern, ed., *Papers of James Madison* 17:224.

One exception was Charles Holt, the radical editor of the New London *Bee* whose widely-reprinted bombastic rhetoric would soon land him in jail under the Sedition Act. An English paper had written, “—let us hope that half a million [Irish] may be slaughtered by the English, and the remainder be submitted to the powers that be.” Holt linked these sentiments to the quelling of political dissent in the United States, writing, “What a true ass! Yet a true federalist!”⁶³

The rhetorical battle extended to the language used to describe the combatants. Federalist and Republican papers both described the Rising as a rebellion or insurgency most often. The Republican *Aurora* did raise objections to calling the Irish “rebels” during the fighting, leading Federalist papers to needle the newspaper about its inconsistency. There had been no similar reticence about calling the French “rebels” during their Revolution. The Federalist papers sometimes referred to the United Irish as “banditti,” and the English described the forces they attacked as “the loyal Irish.” While both sides often wrote about the rumors and possibilities of French “invasion,” that similarity glossed over very different interpretations about what that intervention might mean. For Federalists, it was about nothing less than control of Europe, since Ireland had long been perceived as a “back door” to attempting the conquest of England. Rebel leaders like Napper Tandy were dismissed as “Irishmen in the military service of France.” The United Irishmen insisted, however, that French aid would not come at the cost of autonomy.⁶⁴

The Rising of 1798 had little apparent impact on the general public in the united States. For most people, it was at best a sideshow of the events occurring on the main

⁶³ *Vermont Gazette*, Sep. 8, 1798; *Courier of New Hampshire*, Dec. 1, 1798; *Greenleaf's New York Journal*, Aug. 25, 1798.

⁶⁴ *Columbian Centinel*, Aug. 22, Sep. 8, 1798; Apr. 10, Mar. 16, 1799.

European stage. Still, it was part of a very important story that newspaper readers could not have missed. All over the world, it seemed, were uprisings and convulsions—1798 was indeed, in R.R. Palmer’s words, the “high tide of revolutionary democracy.” But as party lines were being drawn more sharply leading up to the election of 1800, choosing sides meant Britain or France, not Britain or Ireland. For most of the 1790s, Democratic-Republican societies were celebrated the French Revolution and anticipated the spread of similar movements throughout the world. They offered toasts in their celebrations that looked forward to Irish independence in particular. One example: “*Ireland*: may she gain by the energies of her arms, what has always been refused to the earnestness of her entreaties.” But by 1798, such toasts were generally limited to groups such as the United Irishmen who had a specific interest in that political goal. Hopes for the worldwide spread of liberty were in steep decline.⁶⁵

A letter from an Irish immigrant in North Carolina to his father in County Donegal expressed a deep concern for suffering among the people, but little sympathy with the strategies of the United Irishmen: “Our public prints ha[ve] given us several accounts of the French making a descent upon England and Ireland but that the[y] were in every attempt disappointed. However the[y] have not laid aside their plan of invading you. Now I think from the dread of a foreign Invasion with the internal commotion of the Country that you must live in the utmost disqui[e]tude.” Here is a rare glimpse into the mind of an ordinary person considering what to him were the real

⁶⁵ Palmer, *Age of the Democratic Revolution* 2:327; Foner, ed., *Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790-1800*, 217. The example is from New York; for similar examples for South Carolina and Massachusetts, see pp. 386, 429.

consequences of the Rising. His letter is a useful reminder that whatever we know about elite opinion, it has a limited claim to representativeness.⁶⁶

In the end, the Irish Rising of 1798 failed to excite more than a very limited ideological interest in America. It was the victim of an array of circumstances rooted in the tangle of that year's events. On a pedestrian level, the Rising was not just the victim of bad timing in terms of French participation, but also in terms of the eighteenth-century news cycle. By the time most Americans heard about it, even in official circles, it had already failed. When ships arrived in America, they brought weeks, even months, of news; in this case, news of the rebellion and news of its suppression arrived almost simultaneously. Thus, there was no suspense, no side to take, with an outcome still in doubt.

Furthermore, in the capital of Philadelphia, those with the resources to escape its fetid summers usually did. Adams had returned to Boston and Jefferson to Monticello; Congress had adjourned and its members had also made their assorted retreats, dispersing the political community in which the news from Ireland might have otherwise been more volatile. The fact that news of the Rising arrived the very same week of the yellow fever outbreak in Philadelphia subsumed its importance. Staying alive took precedence over spending much time debating the merits of resistance. The deaths of Bache and Fenno silenced two of the era's most engaged and colorful commentators and silenced their presses for brief periods.

The sheer volume of political events also tended to subsume sustained debate over the merits of Irish independence. But it also demonstrated how much energy had been exhausted by the French Revolution's failure to yield a society Americans could

⁶⁶ Miller, et al., eds., *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan*, 113.

recognize and appreciate as reflecting their own struggle. Most important, perhaps, American reaction to the Irish rebellion illustrated the fragility of the American experiment and the broadly defensive posture taken against anything that threatened it. Obviously, Federalists and Republicans measured this differently, but they shared a similar attitude. One could fairly argue that the American urge to remove itself from European affairs encouraged the idea that the United States was exceptional and that its continued independence required formulations different from those that supported the nations of the old world.

In the wake of the rebellion, the Irish Parliament was abolished and the British Parliament passed the Act of Union in 1800, bringing Ireland under closer control. Pitt's ministry reasoned that the move made redress of some Catholic grievances possible while protecting the Protestant minority in Ireland by subsuming the Catholics within the United Kingdom. New arrivals in America from Ireland still recounted tales that the French were "hourly expected," a belief that persisted. The last gasp of rebellion came with a doomed uprising led by Robert Emmet in Dublin in 1803. With its failure, the brand of Irish nationalism that sought to include both Protestants and Catholics on an equal basis failed as well. Emmet immediately entered the pantheon of Irish heroes who had given their lives for the "cause." The courtroom speech he delivered before being sentenced to death was widely reprinted in the United States. One newspaper prefaced it by describing Emmet as "An IRISH PATRIOT, less fortunate than WASHINGTON, HANCOCK, and ADAMS, but engaged in the same cause, viz, that of attempting to rescue his country from British tyranny." A poem penned in tribute by "Harmodius" and printed alongside the speech emphasized Irish and American

parallels. Emmet was fighting for the same “blessings Columbians prize.” The Irish were duty-bound to continue that struggle: “on with your armour, and swear by his name!” But ultimately this was a Republican appeal, revealed mainly in a stanza that linked Emmet’s rebellion to the American Revolution:

Our Adams*, our Hancock, and Washington too,
By the hand of some grovelling slave would have died;
If our fathers had not, to their fore-fathers, true
Stood firm, and the malice of Britain defied.*

**Samuel Adams*

With an asterisk this Republican writer made it clear that John, the Federalist Adams, had disqualified himself from this select company. In a party age, Republicans had to be particular about their heroes.⁶⁷

Irish and English writers began assembling the history of the rebellion almost before the fighting had ended. Early accounts favored the English perspective. In 1801 Sir Richard Musgrave, an Irish politician who shared his father’s “very strong Protestant ascendancy convictions” as well as a pointed contempt for disorder, published his *Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland...with Particular Detail of That Which Broke Out the 23rd of May, 1798; the History of the Conspiracy Which Preceded it, and the Characters of the Principal Actors in It*. Musgrave dedicated the tract to Lord Cornwallis, the British general responsible for suppressing the rebellion.⁶⁸

By early 1802, ships delivered copies to American booksellers, who advertised its availability alongside other new items. Three editions appeared within two years of

⁶⁷ *Gazette of the United States*, Aug. 12, 1801; *Political Observatory*, Dec. 17, 1803; *Kline’s Carlisle Weekly Gazette*, Nov. 30, 1803.

⁶⁸ Musgrave, *Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland*; Robert E. Burns, “Musgrave, Sir Richard, first baronet (c.1755–1818),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.wm.edu/view/article/19663> (accessed November 7, 2005); Savage, *’98 and ’48: The Modern Revolutionary History and Literature of Ireland*, 73n.

its initial publication. Perhaps coincidentally, the book was not advertised in the Republican newspapers. Francis Plowden, a Catholic Englishman whose more evenhanded writings on Ireland found places with the same booksellers as Musgrave, called the work “an undigested heap of acrimonious falsehood and obloquy.”⁶⁹

Eventually, historians would dismiss this first history of the rebellion as a “historically worthless sectarian diatribe.” But in 1802, it was the most complete account available to the public, and Irish partisans soon sought ways to blunt its portrayal of them as unworthy of the same rights as Englishmen or Americans. Irish printers and editors sympathetic to the cause of independence issued a number of pamphlets, but few had witnessed the rebellion and many sought to downplay its radical characteristics.⁷⁰ One Republican in a United States newspaper lamented the absence of a more patriotic history:

An impartial history of the struggles in Ireland for freedom and independence is much needed. The world, as yet, know but little of the sufferings of her patriots, and of the magnanimity and fortitude with which they have suffered. British cruelty has inflicted upon the men of Ireland tortures in their most refined form, and British oppression, locking up the press, has hindered the cries of the agonizing victims from reaching the public ear.⁷¹

In 1803 Francis Plowden published his *Historical Review of the State of Ireland*, in which Irish nationalists found some support for their criticism of the British ministry. That same year, Catholic Edward Hay described events he witnessed near his home in his *History of the Insurrection of the County of Wexford*. Its sympathy for the rebel cause was undermined by the fact that Hay, who was imprisoned for several years after

⁶⁹ “Sir Richard Musgrave,” *DNB*; Savage, ‘98 and ‘48: *The Modern Revolutionary History and Literature of Ireland*, 73n; *Gazette of the United States*, March 4, 1802; *New Jersey Journal*, Aug. 24, 1802.

⁷⁰ “Sir Richard Musgrave,” *DNB*.

⁷¹ *Republican Watch-Tower*, Aug. 18, 1804.

the rebellion, was attempting to justify his own role in local events rather than to explain their broad sweep.⁷²

Rev. James Gordon's *History of the Civil Wars in Ireland from 1782 until the Suppression of the Revolt of 1798*, published in the United Kingdom in 1801, seems not to have been imported to the United States before its second edition appeared in 1803. At that point, an American printer soliciting subscriptions sought to distance Gordon's account from Musgrave's. Republican newspapers carried advertisements for the new printing, promising an "impartial account of the proceedings of the Irish Revolutionists" and a response to that "agent of the government," Musgrave. "Those approving of the rising of the people," they quoted Gordon, "will have an opportunity of seeing their side of politics ably defended."⁷³

However, American readers found fault with Gordon's account, too, and some printers soon began to turn this "party work abounding in misrepresentations" to their own ends. In 1804, Pennsylvania printer Archibald Loudon announced that he would publish *The History of the Late Grand Irish Rebellion* by subscription. Loudon planned to cobble together a narrative from multiple sources. He pitched the book, "impartially collected from Hay, James, Stephens, Gordon, &c.," to "the American citizen, the politician, and the philosopher" as well as to those of Irish descent.⁷⁴

Loudon's editing project took advantage of the inadequacies of existing accounts of the Rising to craft an original version without actually adding anything new.

⁷² Thompson Cooper, "Plowden, Francis Peter (1749–1829)," rev. Adam I. P. Smith, J. T. Gilbert, "Hay, Edward (c.1761–1826)," rev. Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); *Albany Centinel*, May 17, 1805.

⁷³ *American Citizen*, Aug. 17, 1804.

⁷⁴ W. T. Lowndes, *The Bibliographer's Manual of English Literature*, 4 vols. (1834), quoted in C. L. Kingsford, "Gordon, James Bentley (1750–1819)," rev. Philip Carter, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; *Kline's Carlisle Weekly Gazette*, Oct. 26, 1804.

His marketing strategy situated the book very differently from the first loyalist portrayals, even though he used them. He downplayed the significance of French involvement; who knew “whether the great body of the Irish nation would *join the invaders or oppose them*”? This was a “grand” rebellion, not an “invasion” or a “civil war” or the violent outgrowth of “conspiracy.” Instead, he drew Americans’ attention to the parallels between the 1798 Rising and the American Revolution. “The flourishing republic of America,” he wrote, “is itself the fruits of a great revolution, the importance of which is continually developing itself.” This history would illustrate the “hardy, courageous, but similar effort to throw off the yoke of more than six centuries.” Although the Irish ultimately failed, it was “the greatness of *their struggle*” that mattered. They were “like the Americans, quitting their fields and peaceful occupations, utterly ignorant of war—with no support but their zeal—with scarcely any arms but pikes.” Of course, Loudon did not need to point out how very different they were. Readers could decide for themselves whether the American cause succeeded through luck or republican virtue.⁷⁵

The following year the Baltimore printing firm Pechin & Frailey published an American edition of Gordon’s *History of the Civil War in Ireland*. Like Loudon, they sought to reshape the narrative. Gordon had written “as impartially as circumstances would permit; but very differently to what he probably would have done had he written in the United States.” His need for British government approval precluded a free hand in writing the whole story, but Pechin & Frailey explained that they had been successful in “remedying these deficiencies.” Specifically, they had corrected and supplemented Gordon’s text by referring to banned Irish pamphlets and histories by Hay, Cowper, and

⁷⁵ *Kline’s Carlisle Weekly Gazette*, Oct. 26, 1804.

Plowden. Although their precise motivation is unclear, it is notable that the printers made such an effort to present the public with “the most faithful History of the Revolution ever printed.”⁷⁶

The handful of works that emerged in the decade after the Rising was not supplanted for decades. A few enterprising printers altered their work, but like the news of rebellion filtered through the London and Dublin papers, the perspective was generally favorable to the British. The Irish, however, had other tools at their disposal. Social organizations and newspapers provided the settings for assertions of American citizenship that did not sacrifice an Irish identity. The 1798 rebellion and its aftermath proved to be a unifying force for these early Irish-Americans, and just as often the source of suspicion for the general public.

In an odd linguistic convergence, three events that perhaps signaled a change in the political atmosphere in 1810 involved a central symbol of Ireland. As Americans grew outraged over British privateers preying on American trading ships, it again became useful to align American grievances with those of the Irish.⁷⁷ Commentators eager to point out British sins invoked the ghosts of the Rising of 1798. In the fall of 1810 Edward Gillespy sought a way around the enforced partisanship of Irish-American politics. He announced his intention to publish a New York weekly newspaper, *The Shamrock; or Hibernian Chronicle*, which would “be almost exclusively devoted to the affairs of Ireland.” But, the announcement read, “Mr Gillespy disclaims the idea of taking any part in local politics, at the same time the principles avowed and advocated

⁷⁶ *Independent Chronicle*, Jul. 1, 1805.

⁷⁷ In a search of the Evans Early American Newspapers, thirty-two of the sixty-six occurrences of “shamrock” in News/Opinion sections in the period covered here (1790-1810) were in the latter half of 1810.

will be decidedly republican, and friendly to the constitution and government of the United States.”⁷⁸

Irish emigration to the United States surged again after the rebellion. An Irish clergyman wrote to his brother in New York of “the strongest desire to emigrate you ever saw or heard of.” Their numbers now included many who departed for political reasons. Some credited the Irish with giving Jefferson decisive support in the 1800 election. The Alien and Sedition Acts had given the Irish reason to support the Republicans in overwhelming numbers. Those restrictive measures expired with the end of the Adams presidency, but suspicion about the loyalties of foreigners remained. Estimating that two thousand immigrants from the British Isles had arrived in just a few weeks, the Federalist *Centinel* called on President Jefferson to remedy “the growing evil.” The president, however, was open to Irish immigration. He halted ongoing prosecutions under the expired acts. To a group of Irish immigrants in Pennsylvania he wrote, “Born in other countries, yet believing you could be happier in this, the laws acknowledge your right to join us in society, conforming, as I doubt not you will do, to our established rules.” The Alien and Sedition Acts were an aberration, “temporary departures from the system of equal rule” under which he expected to govern.⁷⁹

Irish aid societies continued to extend a helping hand to newcomers; many of their activities became more public as they expanded. Beyond the usual efforts of wealthy patrons to help immigrants find their way, the societies grew into more conscious assertions of group identity. The Republican newspaper network covered

⁷⁸ *Hornet*, Oct. 17, 1810; *Mercantile Advertiser*, Oct. 17, 1810; *Independent American*, Oct. 23, 1810; *Star*, Oct. 25, 1810; *Farmer’s Repository*, Oct. 26, 1810; *Courier of New Hampshire*, Oct. 31, 1810; *Otsego Herald*, Nov. 3, 1810; *Independent Chronicle*, Nov. 26, 1810; *Columbian*, Dec. 18, 1810.

⁷⁹ *Herald of Liberty*, Jun. 22, 1801; *Newburyport Herald*, Jun. 19, 1801; Carter, “A Wild Irishman Under Every Federalist’s Bed,” 332-33; Smith, *Freedom’s Fetters*, 304-305; *City Gazette*, Jun. 24, 1802.

their myriad activities: holding regular meetings, turning people out for a funeral, celebrating St. Patrick's Day, joining in Independence Day parades, and giving dinners and "public entertainments."⁸⁰

The development of the Hibernian Provident Society of New-York illustrates aspects of the evolution of Irish-American identity in the early nineteenth century. Its public activities were played out in the context of an increasingly partisan atmosphere. With the exception of the American Revolution, the political history that was significant to them—the French Revolution, the Alien and Sedition Acts, the Rising of '98, and Jefferson's victory in 1800—placed them firmly in the Republican camp. As a result, their claims to citizenship were evaluated through the same partisan lenses.⁸¹

Founded in 1801, the society quickly grew into one of the largest Irish societies in the country. Two local Republican newspapers, the *American Citizen* (appropriately enough) and the *True Republican*, publicized their activities extensively from the very beginning. The organization's notices typically stated the purpose of a meeting or event. Reports of the attendance of the mayor or other distinguished citizens lent their events public respectability. Unlike the secretive United Irish gatherings of the late 1790s, Hibernians announced their activities in ways that communicated both their Irish heritage and a commitment to American ideals that grew into claims for citizenship.⁸²

The society marked the anniversary of its founding with annual St. Patrick's Day dinners, and the toasts they offered captured the Irish-American self-image. The

⁸⁰ *American Citizen*, Aug. 22, 1801, May 8, 1804; *Commercial Advertiser*, Mar. 4, 1807; *Columbian*, Jun. 30, 1814.

⁸¹ Douglas Bradburn has recently made a similar argument, particularly in the context of Philadelphia. See Bradburn, "Revolutionary Politics, Nationhood, and the Problem of American Citizenship, 1787-1804," esp. ch. 5.

⁸² Miller, et al., *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan*, 288; *Mercantile Advertiser*, May 21, 1801.

Irish had been celebrating St. Patrick's Day in a number of cities since at least the 1770s. In 1797, the New York *Diary* marked the day thus:

This is the day which our Hibernian friends devote themselves to mirth, and glee, and jocular festivity. The green shamrock displayed upon their hats reminds us of the approach of that happy season when nature will become cloathed in rich attire, and every tree and every plant assume a splendid and luxuriant foliage.

With the organization of the Hibernians, such banal sentiments were replaced by expressions of affinity for America's revolutionary legacy and the continuing hope that its ideals would prevail in Ireland. The toasts at Provident Hibernian celebrations commingled calls for Irish independence from Britain with praise for both heroes of the 1798 Rising and the American Revolution. "The memory of Washington, Franklin, Montgomery, and the other departed worthies of America" was observed alongside "Orr, Harvey, and Bond, and their brave and virtuous co-patriots" in Ireland. With other toasts the Irish linked American political freedoms with those they hoped to acquire in Ireland, such as religious freedom or what they termed "the political Trinity of freemen...Universal suffrage, trial by jury, and the, liberty of the press." One saluted "William Penn, and the first Europeans who settled in North America—Ever honoured be that noble spirit which preferred liberty in a wilderness, to slavery in their native land." For the Hibernians, then, celebratory toasts constituted public affirmations of political and ethnic community.⁸³

⁸³ *Diary, or Loudon's Register*, Mar. 17, 1797; *American Watchman*, May 30, 1811; *American Citizen*, Mar. 20, 1801, Mar. 19, 1802. Toasts, as David Waldstreicher argues, "enacted American belonging." Rather than mere decoration, they were an integral part of the festive culture of the Early Republic. Toasts declared the political values of whatever organization or party offered them, often after considerable disagreement and negotiation. Thus they did not simply reflect a consensus; they advanced arguments and drew figurative lines that defined political communities. See Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 33 passim.

In the beginning, the toasts suggested that many Irish newcomers expected to return to Ireland. One offered at the initial gathering, for example, hailed the “exiled patriots—May they be speedily recalled to enjoy the sweets of liberty in their native land.” Another declared that the “Republican Irish, resident in the United States, ever gratefully acknowledge that they are indebted to the American people for an asylum from oppression.”⁸⁴

As the years passed, the subjects of the toasts gradually shifted toward American political issues and the rhetoric reflected a growing sense among the Irish that they were also Americans. Thus, asylum seekers became “adopted sons.” Revolutionary heroes were praised as “departed worthies” rather than “departed worthies of America.” The Hibernians toasted “The free navigation of the Mississippi, the outlet of our Western produce—should negotiation fail to establish our natural rights, American Bayonets, wielded by a Republican youth, will not.” Similarly, they hailed “George Clinton, our Governor,” and “Our Sovereign—The American People.” Use of the first-person voice signified that the Irish had begun to consider the United States home.⁸⁵

The central mission of the Provident Hibernian Society remained the oversight of Irish immigrant arrivals, but the group was also taking on a more social and political role in New York. The society claimed hundreds of members in 1804 and one thousand by 1807. On the Fourth of July, they marched in Independence Day parades along with the city’s coopers, mechanics, hatters, and other societies, preceded by their standard, “Liberty presenting Hibernia to America.” At the same time, their identification with the Republicans became more explicit. Meeting announcements specified that “Each

⁸⁴ *American Citizen*, Mar. 20, 1801, Mar. 19, 1802.

⁸⁵ *American Citizen*, Mar. 20, 1801, Mar. 22, 1803, Mar. 22, 1804; *Morning Chronicle*, Mar. 21, 1805.

member is at liberty to introduce one or more REPUBLICAN friends” solidifying the society’s close association with Republican politicians and newspapers. Published accounts of their festive gatherings, in the common style of the day, typically noted their “harmony and conviviality” and their “good order.” In 1806 these commonplace expressions were replaced by an announcement and toasts that specifically referenced their “Democratic Republicanism.”⁸⁶

In 1807, New York readers opening their newspapers the week of St. Patrick’s Day found the text of a new city ordinance that suggested the “jocular festivity” of the day was giving way to politicking before the spring elections. The regulation stipulated a ten dollar fine for anyone caught carrying, dragging, or exhibiting for the purpose of ridicule an “effigy of Saint Patrick, or any other Titular Saint.” Almost as an afterthought, the measure also prohibited “any shew of a similar kind,” but clearly the Irish Patron had been the target of some earlier indignity that the Common Council now sought to discourage.⁸⁷

Shortly thereafter, Thomas Addis Emmet instigated a political ruckus when he used the forum of the annual St. Patrick’s Day meeting to deliver an “inflammatory” speech insisting that members of the Hibernian Provident Society had a duty to support only Republican candidates in the upcoming election. Emmet, the brother of executed rebel leader Robert Emmet, was an Irish barrister who back in Dublin had been in the executive leadership of the United Irishmen. The British government arrested him for his treasonous activities in the roundup of suspected rebels that preceded the Rising in 1798. The government never formally charged Emmet, but they imprisoned him for

⁸⁶ *American Citizen*, May 22, 1801; *Republican Watch-Tower*, Mar. 21, 1806, Jul. 4, 1806, Jul. 18, 1806; *New-York Evening Post*, Mar. 17, 1804; *Morning Chronicle*, Mar. 21, 1805.

⁸⁷ *Republican Watch-Tower*, Mar. 12, 1807; *American Citizen*, Mar. 16, 1807.

four years with some twenty other United Irish leaders while trying to broker a deal with another country willing to grant them exile. Rufus King's objections prevented their emigration to the United States until 1804.⁸⁸

Now King, who was the Federalist candidate for vice president in 1804, was running for a seat in the state assembly, and Emmet used the Hibernian meeting to deliver a speech viewed as an attack on King and his party. The particulars of the speech are not known. The president of the society, George Cuming, said that Emmet spoke only after some members requested that he relate "the nature of those transactions so disgraceful to the British government, in which Mr. King was a party." In the heat of the election season, the Federalist press described it as "violent phillippic against the constituted authorities" and "a torrent of billingsgate on the federalists," while Republican newspapers defended it as a "recital of [Emmet's] sufferings," the "plain truth" of King's involvement in his captivity explained "among his own countrymen." In any event, the meeting underscored the widespread Irish belief that the Republicans better supported their ideological goals. After Emmet finished speaking, John Caldwell proposed a motion "that any member of the society, who at the ensuing election should vote for Rufus King, Andrew Morris, or any other on the federal ticket, should be expelled as unworthy members thereof."⁸⁹

In response, the Federalist press denounced the Hibernians' apparent embrace of partisan politics. The *Morning Chronicle* declared them a "Jacobin club," and the *New York Evening Post* railed that the society had been "wickedly converted into an

⁸⁸ *New-York Evening Post*, Apr. 4, Apr. 20, 1807; Haines, *Memoir of Thomas Addis Emmet*, 67-82; Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals*, 154-56.

⁸⁹ *New-York Evening Post*, Apr. 4, 1807; *Morning Chronicle*, Apr. 11, 1807; *Republican Watch-Tower*, Apr. 17, 1807.

electioneering engine.” This “dangerous and licentious body of *foreigners* [is] prostituting their benevolent institution to the profligate purpose of trenching upon and destroying the freedom of election in their adopted country.” Contradicting the unanimity claimed by the leadership of the Hibernian Provident Society, Federalist editors recounted that “more than thirty” members “retired in disgust” from the meeting in response to the politicking. Federalists also suspected that the Hibernians had deceived the state legislature into allowing their incorporation, even as they planned to abandon their charitable purposes to become a partisan political group. One editor speculated that Emmet had cemented a deal in “midnight caucusses” with Albany politicians to use the “society of foreigners to controul our elections.” In this conspiratorial account, the “moderate Mr. Emmet return[ed] to New York [City] foaming at the mouth with patriotism—the flaming instrument of faction.”⁹⁰

The argument soon grew into the central debate of the campaign, pitting Federalist and Republican ideals in the context of the 1798 rebellion. Central to the debate was Rufus King’s role in keeping suspected Irish rebels from entering the United States when he was emissary to Great Britain, a position he held until 1803. Republican newspapers reprinted a letter originally appearing in the *Washington National Intelligencer* that detailed the circumstances of “Mr. King’s prohibition.” The writer, whose identity the *Intelligencer* concealed, directly blamed King for four years in a “tomb” and detailed the hardships he and his family endured as they sought a new home after banishment from Britain. The Federalist press reprinted the letter but expressed doubt about its authenticity, declaring their suspicion that, even if it was genuine, the

⁹⁰ *Republican Watch-Tower*, Mar. 12, Mar. 20, Jun. 16, 1807; *American Citizen*, Mar. 16, 1807; *Morning Chronicle*, Mar. 16, Apr. 27, Apr. 28, 1807; *New-York Evening Post*, Apr. 4, 1807.

placement of private correspondence in the federal government's newspaper of record stood out as an election tactic.⁹¹

The letter in the *Intelligencer* set off an extended debate over the characters of King and Emmet in which each side used its conduct in the events surrounding the Rising of '98 to make an argument about its integrity. The Federalist press quoted United Irish newspapers and Emmet's own testimony to raise questions about his motives. Many assumed he would be leading the Republican ticket as a candidate before the slate was announced in mid-April. Republican newspapers similarly seldom looked beyond King's tenure as minister to Britain for evidence of his unfitness for office. A somewhat broader perspective offered by the *Republican Watch-Tower* nonetheless shows how central the question of character was:

That Mr. Emmet is superior to King in all that makes one man superior to another, is certain. As a man, Emmet is humane; whereas, judging of King by his interposition with the Irish state prisoners at the beck of the British cabinet, King is cruel; and as mean as he is cruel. As to talents, & their uses, what comparison is there between them? Emmet lives by professional merit and industry; King, by a lucky marriage. Emmet is useful to society; King is a mere drone, himself rioting in wealth acquired by wedlock, while his poor family in Massachusetts, his brothers and sisters, linger out, unnoticed by him, a miserable existence.⁹²

On the night Emmet gave his speech, a toast to "the virtuous patriots who fell for Ireland" was immediately followed by one to "the illustrious REBELS who established America's liberty and independence." The rhetorical juxtaposition of "patriot" and "rebel" argued for the similarity of the causes. Although the Provident Hibernian Society and other Irish organizations had long been making this correlation, the political contentiousness of 1807 brought the issue to the fore. A Federalist editor

⁹¹ *Republican Watch-Tower*, Apr. 3, 1807; *Commercial Advertiser*, Apr. 4, 1807.

⁹² *New-York Evening Post*, Apr. 13, 1807; *Republican Watch-Tower*, Apr. 25, 1807.

wrote that the attempt to link the American and Irish revolutionary causes was “one of the most daring insults ever offered to the American name. The impudent effort to level Americans to the standard of United Irishmen, can never pass unnoticed by one who has the least feeling for his national or private character.” Another appealed directly to the memory of the Revolutionary cause: “Go then set your faces against those modern upstarts, who would heap dishonour and reproach on the grey heads of the heroes who once led you on to victory!” A “Friend to Republicanism” responded in kind, asking, “Fellow citizens, what would you think of the man who would brand with infamy, the conduct of Washington, of the heroes of your revolution, who bravely drew the sword to resist oppression? Who would presume so far, but those who have been the common oppressors of America and Ireland [?]” The central feature of the political campaign was this ideological battle over the parties’ differing views of the American and Irish rebellion.⁹³

Twice Emmet publicly challenged King to explain his actions regarding the United Irish prisoners. “I request to be informed,” he wrote, “whether you propose submitting to the world any explanation of your interference with the British government, respecting the Irish state prisoners in the year 1798.” Rufus King maintained a public silence throughout the debate, but the Federalist press took up his defense and attacked Emmet. The *United States Gazette* excerpted his “confession,” the transcript of oral testimony Emmet gave as part of the bargain for his release. It detailed his activities with the United Irishmen and explained the organization’s political goals without giving up the names of any compatriots. The *Gazette* put it forth

⁹³ *Republican Watch-Tower*, Mar. 20, Apr. 17, 1807; *New-York Evening Post*, Apr. 9, 1807; *Morning Chronicle*, Apr. 27, 1807.

as evidence that Emmet was a dangerous figure with questionable loyalties: “Behold! Americans, behold the man who has impudently thrust himself forward to turn the fate of your election. Behold him through the grates of a prison, and hear him repenting of his offences, and confessing that he was one who applied to France to furnish money, arms and ammunition to be employed in the overthrow of his own government.”⁹⁴

Federalists saw the Hibernians as a secret society that demanded political loyalty from the Irish immigrants it aided. The Hibernian meeting revealed that “an unnatural conspiracy of foreigners” was unduly influencing the democratic process, threatening a “horrible surrender of the right of franchise.” “They have detached their interests from ours,” railed “An American” in the *Morning Chronicle*. The Hibernians were “of all institutions, the most dangerous that has been established in our country.” At their “secret cabals,” they made “secret and diabolical plans” to defeat their political opponents. “They pretend to be republicans, yet allow not their members independence of sentiment and action.” In Ireland, the *Evening Post* reminded readers, “those who called themselves the *republicans*...perished on the scaffold as traitors to their own country.” Far from sharing the American Revolutionary tradition, they were “DECEIVERS, TRAITORS, AND PATRICIDES.” “Cato Ninetails” parodied the idea that the Hibernians were “true republicans”: “they have all resolved to watch over our liberties, and to knock everybody down who does wrong, and to tend at our polls and see that nobody votes contrary to the *Irish interest*.”⁹⁵

In the days before the election, ward-level organizations for both parties published campaign resolutions in the newspapers. The preoccupation with Emmet and

⁹⁴ *Republican Watch-Tower*, Apr. 7, 1807; *American Citizen*, Apr. 9, 1807; Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals*, 153; *United States Gazette*, Apr. 9, 1807.

⁹⁵ *New-York Evening Post*, Apr. 13, Apr. 20, May 1, 1807; *Morning Chronicle*, Apr. 22, 1807.

the Hibernian society, expressed by a clear majority of the resolutions, illustrated the degree to which Irish topics dominated the debate. The American Young Men of the Second Ward, for example, resolved “that the insolent and aspiring temper of many Foreigners; their restless and plotting ambition and haughty pretensions have been endured with too much apathy, and that the American Public ought to unite to repel the imputation of being led and governed by the outcasts of Europe.” Invariably, the Federalist resolutions praised Rufus King and condemned the “wanton calumnies” published against him. They likewise denounced the “conversion” of the Hibernian Provident Society and the “interference” of the alien Emmet. Character was more important than specific issues, and the Rising of ’98 became the prism through which fitness for office was measured.⁹⁶

The Provident Hibernian Society did nothing to curtail its political activities. At a special meeting, the membership issued a statement asserting their “right as freemen.” “We explicitly declare,” it read, “*our decided opposition to federal men and federal measures, and we claim the right as individuals, and as a society, of expressing our opinions of them, and of using every constitutional exertion, in co-operation with our republican fellow citizens, to prevent federal men from again assuming the reins of government.*”⁹⁷ The Federalists, running on the “American Ticket” in 1807, promoted their slate of candidates under the banner of “Patriotic Americans and Honest Foreigners...No Emmet. No Clinton. No Dictators. No Jacobins.” The Republicans supplemented their general election day notice with a lengthier appeal to “Irishmen,”

⁹⁶ *New-York Evening Post*, Apr. 20, Apr. 22, Apr. 25, 1807; *Republican Watch-Tower*, Apr. 28, 1807.

⁹⁷ *American Citizen*, Apr. 20, 1807.

and Catholics in particular. “A TORY is a TORY all the world over,” it declared, calling for the defeat of the “BRITISH TICKET.”⁹⁸

The latent threat of violence characterized much of the Federalist discourse. Although they rarely referred to the “wild Irish,” Federalists continued to view them as a group that threatened social disorder. The party newspapers characterized the Hibernian’s St. Patrick’s Day meeting, for example, as “nothing but noise, uproar and confusion.” The terminology employed to describe the Irish advanced this unruly image; the Irish were disorganizers, jacobins, rebels, and conspirators. When New York’s newspapers described a mob in 1807, it was typically an Irish gathering. The *Morning Chronicle* had described an organizational meeting of the Republicans in March as a “mob meeting,” leading the *Republican Watch-Tower* to ask if this was how it labeled all political opponents. A few days before the election, the following characterization appeared in the *Morning Chronicle*:

What nation stocks our state prison with convicts? The Irish.
 What class of people disturb the public peace with riots and murder our watchmen? The Irish.
 Who are the characters who are almost always concerned in private quarrels and battles? The Irish.
 Who are the men who we constantly witness staggering about our streets, brutalized with liquor? The Irish...
 Are we to continue to groan under the ascendancy of the vagabonds of the community, or are the sons of the American soil to quit the country?

Whatever degree of mayhem Irish New Yorkers were actually responsible for, this critique linked Irish political activism with social disorder. Thus, the Federalist press described them as “an ignorant, drunken, vagabond race” in a political context. “Those who differ in opinion from them,” wrote one Federalist editor, “are restrained by the

⁹⁸ *New-York Evening Post*, Apr. 29, 1807; *Morning Chronicle*, Apr. 30, 1807; *American Citizen*, Apr. 30, 1807.

fear of mobs, of popular tumults and personal violence. It is by these means that [Republicans] seek to carry their point.” Federalist fears of losing political control were intertwined with the fear of losing social control.⁹⁹

Republican campaign tactics were central to this perception. At Catholic church services five days before the election, Irish Republicans outraged Federalists by posting handbills at the church and passing them out to parishioners as they left. The handbills were reprints of an article in the *American Citizen* targeting Andrew Morris, a member of that church who, as an Irishman, had been a primary object of the Hibernian resolution to expel those voting for Federalists. The handbill compared the Federalists to British rule in Ireland because New York had only recently repealed, under the Republicans, a religious test that had excluded Catholics from the state legislature. The *Evening Post* denounced the “scandalous” distribution of electioneering materials at a place of worship, asking if the church was to be “turned into a Beer House.” It argued that the Federalists were the “best friends” of the Irish, citing the support of the bishop and “the most respectable Dign[i]taries.”¹⁰⁰ Taking issue with the Republican claim that Federalists were oppressors of the Irish, the *Evening Post’s* editor took another shot at the Hibernians:

I am confident their artifices, brought forth at this late hour, this critical period, will not and cannot avail. I trust you will gladly seize this fair opportunity to shew the world that you hold very different sentiments from those disorganizing, discontented, illiterate, ungrateful set of your countrymen among us, who are doing all they can to render the name of Irishmen odious and disgraceful throughout this country—On you it principally rests to rescue your national character from the foul aspersions

⁹⁹ *Morning Chronicle*, Mar. 4, Apr. 11, Apr. 27, 1807; *Republican Watch-Tower*, Mar. 10, 1807, Sep. 27, 1808; *Federal Republican and Commercial Gazette*, Aug. 26, 1808.

¹⁰⁰ *American Citizen*, Apr. 25, 1807; *New-York Evening Post*, Apr. 25, Apr. 27, 1807.

to which the Provident Hibernian Conspiracy have done and are doing all they can to bring upon it.¹⁰¹

On election day, both parties stationed observers at the polls. The Republican press urged party workers to stay at their posts even if they were being harassed. The Federalist newspapers expressed alarm about the threat of violence even when it did not occur. In a circumstance “which ought not to be overlooked nor forgotten,” the *Evening Post* reported an election day “disturbance” during which “the Irish clapt a small bit of white paper in their hats to distinguish one another by, in the battle which was expected to ensue.” That night, “a mob, consisting of some hundreds, marched from Martling’s, their headquarters, and paraded the streets with fife and drum.” They visited the homes of Rufus King, Andrew Morris, and other Federalists, “knocked against the windows, rapt violently at the door, and made all sorts of violent noises, hooting, howling, and acting the part of drunken blackguards, calling out, ‘Emmet and liberty.’” Although no violence seems to have occurred, the tone of the news reports suggests that the fear of violence was real. Three weeks later, the Republicans celebrated their electoral victories with another boisterous march in the streets.¹⁰²

In 1809 the Hibernians claimed a thousand members. The society continued to be the source of political activism in both the American and Irish arenas. It held dinners for people with links to the Irish nationalist cause. William Duane was fêted, as was Wolfe Tone’s widow, who received a special medallion. Tone’s sixteen-year old-son was presented with a sword. It defended its “two-fold tendency, of relieving the distresses” of Irish immigrants and “erecting a rallying point around the constitution and

¹⁰¹ *New-York Evening Post*, Apr. 25, 1807.

¹⁰² *New-York Evening Post*, May 1, 1807; *Morning Chronicle*, Apr. 11, Apr. 27, 1807; *American Citizen*, Apr. 29, 1807; *Columbian Centinel*, May 2, 1807; *Litchfield Monitor*, May 13, 1807.

laws [of the United States under] republican principles.” The society followed through on its resolution to expel members who failed to adhere to these tenets, banishing member John O’Neil for his “dereliction from Republican principles” and publishing the account of his “trial” in 1809.¹⁰³

Perceptions of the Irish in the early Republic became charged because of their visibility and political activism. The prominence suggested by their numbers was augmented by their participation in newspaper politics and organization of aid societies. The Rising of 1798 and the Alien and Sedition Acts of the same year helped to cement Irish community solidarity. Forged in the party conflict leading up to the election of 1800, their outlook embraced both Irish nationalism and American political activism. While the Rising attracted only limited attention in the United States, it proved to be pivotal as a source of Irish-American unity and Federalist suspicion. While Irish-Americans found unity in the nationalism of ’98, Federalists saw the failed rebellion as evidence of dubious loyalties and a dangerous propensity toward violence and disorder. Though critics would define groups like the Hibernian Provident Society as “secret cabals” inimical to American values, many Irish would continue to find in them a means of asserting republican citizenship without sacrificing Irish identity.

¹⁰³ *American Citizen*, Apr. 22, 1809; *Boston Patriot*, Oct. 4, 1809; *True Republican*, Oct. 21, 1807; *New-York Evening Post*, Apr. 20, 1807; *Republican Watch-Tower*, Apr. 21, 1809.

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