

The Causes of Collapse: The Death of the Federalists and the Legacy of America's First Political
Party

Christopher Fuqua

Though the two-party system of American politics has been in place since the late 18th century, exactly which two parties are contending for control of the government has occasionally shifted. One of the powerful political entities that formed at the beginning of this period, the Federalist Party, built up a large, well-known presence in the early republic, advocating for centralized government and banking, and a positive relationship with the British as the way forward for the burgeoning United States government during the period surrounding the turn of the 19th century. This affinity for the United States-Britain relationship and the accompanying overseas trade practiced by the United States would eventually spell doom for the future of the Federalist Party as a national political power. The Federalists' opposition to the War of 1812, along with issues of political organization, caused the collapse of the first American political party and paved the way for the first major shift in American political party dynamics. Opposing the War of 1812, particularly in the United States where the struggle for independence was still fresh in the minds of many early 19th century Americans, proved to be disastrous to the public image of the Federalists. The War proved to be both popular among Americans and politically successful, two descriptors that could never again be used to describe the Federalist party following the United States' victory against the British; the Federalists ceased to matter as a national political force almost immediately in the wake of the War of 1812. Their legacy, on the other hand, proved to be tremendous; their political opponents, Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans, ultimately adopted many of the Federalist policies against which they formerly fought. Jefferson's Democrats, after the War of 1812, even established a central banking system (founding the Second Bank of the United States in 1816), a cause once

championed endlessly by the Federalists. A conciliatory and cooperative relationship with Great Britain, later in the 19th century, became an important pillar in American foreign policy that continues to exist today. The fact that their policies were enacted following their collapse shows clearly that the Federalist party didn't fail due to policy issues, but rather the unfortunate circumstance of being on the wrong side of public opinion following a risky war, a casualty of bad choices rather than bad policy.¹

The lead up to the War of 1812 and the War itself decisively affected American politics. For the Democratic-Republicans, and for many American citizens still reveling in the glory of independence, the War of 1812 was a true continuation of the American Revolution, a chance for the United States to establish itself on the world stage as capable of protecting its interests and territory against any and all threats to its sovereignty. For those Americans for whom the Revolution was still a very real, ongoing process, the treatment of the United States by Great Britain demanded reprisal, as it would be a stain on the honor and image of the United States to allow the British actions to go unchallenged.² Particularly galling to Americans was the British use of impressment to capture American sailors and force them into duty on the ships of the British Royal Navy. On the issue of impressment, former editor of the Baltimore *Evening Post* and publisher of *The Weekly Register*, Hezekiah Niles passionately wrote, “the indignity, abuse and destruction of our seaman, and through them, the violent assault on the sovereignty of the

¹ Steven Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 282.

² “The Kentucky Legislature Calls for Action” Niles’ *Weekly Register*, I, January 11, 1812.
<http://webs.wofford.edu/byrnesms/1812.htm>

country itself, has cried for revenge.”³ For many pro-war Americans, to allow the Britain’s Navy to impress American seamen without consequences would be to kneel at the feet of the throne of England all over again; to allow such aggressive actions to go unchecked would be to trod on the graves of those who died to establish American independence. No truly independent nation could allow another to treat its citizens in such a way;⁴ the Congress of the United States Committee on Foreign Relations wrote, “Our citizens are wantonly snatched from their Country and their families; deprived of their liberty and doomed to an ignominious and slavish bondage.”⁵ This painting of impressed sailors as being deprived of liberty by the British Royal Navy was powerful for those who had either fought in the American Revolution themselves, or lost loved ones in the battle for the establishment of American independence. For Jefferson and his Democratic-Republicans, to idly accept such injustice would be to trample upon the entire American Revolution, for the Revolution would be meaningless if it did not secure the liberty of Americans from foreign tyranny.

In addition to the decrying of impressment of American soldiers, Democratic-Republicans saw the trade blockades being practiced by Great Britain and France as patently illegal under international law.⁶ With the Napoleonic Wars raging in Europe, both the British and the French were intercepting and blockading United States ships in an attempt to interrupt supply lines for the opposing side.⁷ President James Madison called this British practice

³ Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: Writings from America’s Second War of Independence* (New York, Library of America, 2013), 38-39.

⁴ Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 16-17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷ Doron S. Ben-Atar and Barbara Oberg, *Federalists Reconsidered*, (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1998), 212-213.

“a flimsy veil” and accused the British Navy and by extension the British government of “abandoning still more all respect for the neutral rights of the United States.”⁸ The United States, neutral in the ongoing European conflict between Britain and France during this period, saw no cause for which Great Britain or France should prevent the United States from exercising its sovereign right to conduct trade with whoever it chose. The French, sensing a possible conflict between the United States and Britain and hoping to distract the British and hurt international opinion of Britain, eased their own war-time trade restriction policy (particularly as it related to the United States) and implored the government of the United States to force Great Britain to respect her right to remain neutral and engage in trade as she saw fit.⁹

The Federalists held a very different perspective on the potential war; for the Federalists, the United States was considering entering into war for reasons that should properly be addressed via diplomacy. They feared war with Great Britain for several reasons, particularly the havoc that interrupting trade with Britain would bring down upon the young industrialization process of the Northeast,¹⁰ the region in which Federalist support was most concentrated. Additionally, the Federalists understood the danger of entering into a continental war in Europe, a war whose outcome was still undecided; Napoleon was still in the process of conquering mainland Europe and would not be defeated for several more years. For Federalists, the anger over US trade with France being blocked by Great Britain (largely supported by the plantation class in the American South,¹¹ far away from the northeastern power center of the Federalists) and impressment of US

⁸ Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 4.

⁹ James H. Broussard, *The Southern Federalists, 1800-1816* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 129-130.

¹⁰ Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 77-78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

soldiers was not a problem to be solved by war. In fact, in many cases, Federalists charged the French military and government with committing the same trespasses as the British upon the sovereignty of the United States.¹² When Napoleon decided to loosen his own trade restrictions and ship-seizing policies, the Federalists did not see it as an honest and conciliatory decision by the French. Rather, the Federalists believed that the French were, at best, attempting to influence public opinion against the British, and possibly might be attempting to lure the United States merchant ships into a trap.¹³ Issues of patriotism did not play a key role for the Federalists and their supporters, who saw the potential for war in Europe as a political and economic decision, not a patriotic one. There was no need to insert the United States into a war that it had no obvious stake in. Instead, the Federalists wanted to maintain ties and cooperation with Great Britain; for them the cost to trade was simply unbearable and could not be allowed when there was potential for diplomatic redress of American concerns that would allow the United States to avoid a potentially costly war.¹⁴

The Federalists suffered from the circumstances of the War of 1812 in a number of ways. The fact that the war was against England, a power that the United States had already defeated in the American Revolution, made the Federalists seem cowardly, as if they were backing down from a second war for independence.¹⁵ The final blow to the Federalist position was dealt once the British invaded the mainland United States in 1814. In his work *The Republic Reborn*, author Steven Watts declares that by invading the land of the United States, “the English

¹² Broussard, *The Southern Federalists*, 129.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁴ Samuel Taggart 12th Cong., 1st sess., *Annals of Congress* (December 1811), 1649-1650, 1652, 1662-1663, 1666-1667.

¹⁵ Henry Clay, 12th Cong., 1st sess., *Annals of Congress* (December 1811), 599-602.

succeeded in making the war a justifiable defensive struggle and in kindling a new sense of domestic unity.”¹⁶ The war was no longer occurring far removed from Washington, with American involvement a subject to be debated; the British raided and occupied American cities, burning the White House, a symbol of the American political system, to the ground. The war was no longer about impressment and trade restrictions; there were enemy forces on the ground in the United States. Although the Federalists were able to understand the direction that public opinion was shifting and began to support the war as a necessary campaign, the public never forgot the Federalists’ initial distaste for the war.¹⁷ The Federalist position looked afraid and unwilling to unite with the people in the face of the enemy. This perception of the party ultimately led to public opinion turning strongly against the Federalists, and following the end of the war (and a triumphant victory for war-supporting Democratic-Republicans) the Federalist party began to crack. America’s first political party had reached the end of its lifespan, brought to its knees by a hard-learned political lesson: it is better to support an unsuccessful war, than to oppose a successful one. By the end of the post-war period, author David Hackett Fischer states, “[Federalist] was an epithet, a smear word.”¹⁸ By 1816 the Federalists were done as a major player, never to again hold the amount of power they once wielded.¹⁹

The structure and organization of the Federalist Party also proved a weakness and a major contributing factor to the collapse of the party in the wake of the War of 1812. The Federalist Party had been shunted aside by the rise of Jeffersonian Republicanism, forced into a role as the

¹⁶ Watts, *The Republic Reborn*, 282.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁹ David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1965), 128.

minority party for three consecutive presidential terms from 1800-1808. Much of this fall from power can be attributed to a lack of party structure and organization, two areas in which the Republicans were gaining major traction. Shaw Livermore, Jr., in his work *The Twilight of Federalism: The Disintegration of the Federalist Party, 1815-1830*, decries the lack of proper political machines in the structure of the Federalist Party. Livermore explains, “archaic was the internal organization of the party”, and “compared to the relatively sophisticated Republican machines which existed in most states by 1816, Federalists lagged well behind.”²⁰ This lack of political organization was exposed by the inability of the Federalists to field a presidential candidate in the election of 1812 and later exacerbated fractures in the party that led to the infamous Hartford Convention, at which the more radical wing of the Federalist Party went so far as to suggest disunion for the New England states. Initially intended to help unify the flailing Federalist Party by deciding upon a common course of action and the establishment of a platform for the national party, the Hartford Convention instead displayed the weakness of the Federalists,²¹ exposed the radical elements of the party to public criticism,²² and openly flaunted the sectional bias the Federalists had to the New England region.²³ Though the main body of politicians that made up the delegation at the Hartford Convention never seriously entertained the idea of disunion (or secession, as it would later be termed), the Federalist Party’s reputation

²⁰ Shaw Livermore, Jr., *The Twilight of Federalism: the Disintegration of the Federalist Party, 1815-1830*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1962), 29.

²¹ Livermore, *The Twilight of Federalism*, 29-30.

²² Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism*, 175-176.

²³ Ben-Atar and Oberg, *Federalists Reconsidered*, 212-213.

suffered publicly, and the Party's lack of a clear consistent platform and structure prevented the Federalists from regaining positive public opinion.²⁴

Although the Federalist Party was never again a major player in American national politics, their legacy lived on through the policies which they championed during their time as a political force. Having defeated their main rivals, the Democratic-Republicans deftly adopted the most popular and useful pieces of the Federalist platform and made them Democratic-Republican policy. Not only did this allow for the United States to move forward with industrialization (a necessity even the Jeffersonians couldn't deny following the War of 1812), it also consolidated what was left of the Federalists into the Democratic-Republican party. Following the disintegration of the Federalists, "wholesale adoption of the Federalist national program by Republicans...all but eliminated sharp policy divisions between the parties."²⁵ Most notable of these adopted policy positions were the creation of a strong United States Navy and the creation of a national banking system. The banking system, in particular, had been anathema to Republican values prior to the war.²⁶ The need for a central banking system was a distinctly Federalist position, one that lined up with the Federalist desire to increase industrialization, along with the desire in the South of large plantation owners for a banking system that would provide stable credit. The War of 1812 convinced the Democratic-Republicans that the need for a stable bank, particularly in times of war and fiscal instability, outweighed the danger of concentration power in a single financial institution.²⁷ The need to maintain a strong navy and the absolute

²⁴ Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism*, 177-178.

²⁵ Livermore, *Twilight of Federalism*, 265.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 265.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 265-266.

necessity of a central bank remain pillars of modern American policy in the military and financial sectors, respectively. These positions, along with the Federalists' understanding of the need for the United States to be an industrial power in order to remain strong internationally, are the legacy that the Federalist Party left behind.

Although the entire span of the history of the Federalist Party in the United States only stretched across a period of thirty years, their rise, fall, and ultimate legacy are of great importance to understanding the way political parties operate in the United States. In a span of two decades, the Federalists fell from controlling the White House to not being able to field a candidate for President. The Federalists would learn a hard lesson in those two decades, in which their opposition and reluctance to enter war would see them branded as fearful and unpatriotic. Federalist affinity for a strong relationship with Britain would cause them to be accused of putting business over American freedom. The lack of a strong nationwide political machine supporting the Federalist Party clearly exposed the risk of having political support too concentrated in a single area. Sound policy and political ideology, both of which the Federalists possessed, proved to be insufficient to overcome being in opposition to an increasingly popular war, and as the fortunes of the United States in the War of 1812 rose, the status of the Federalists as a political power fell. The fact that their rival party, the Democratic-Republicans, adopted their most well known platform issue (the establishment of a national bank), only served to add insult to injury; the broken and destroyed Federalist Party's members would have to watch their rivals enact legislation that they themselves had devised. The Federalist Party lost two painful battles in the War of 1812: they opposed a popular and ultimately successful war and lost the

battle of public opinion, and they lost the fight for control over the future of the United States to their main rivals, the Democratic-Republicans, who then went on to enact all the Federalist's signature policies. The Federalist Party would never again be a player in national American politics, but through the implementation of their platform by the Republicans, the legacy of Federalism casts a long shadow over American political ideology even today.

Bibliography

- Ben-Atar, Doron S., and Barbara Oberg. *Federalists Reconsidered*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998.
- Broussard, James H. *The Southern Federalists: 1800-1816*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978.
- Cress, Lawrence Delbert. "'Cool and Serious Reflection': Federalist Attitudes toward War in 1812." *Journal of the Early Republic* 7, no. 2 (1987): 123-45.
- Fischer, David Hackett. *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.
- Greenberg, Amy S. *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico*. New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, 2012.
- Hickey, Donald R. "Federalist Party Unity and the War of 1812." *Journal of American Studies*, 1978., 23, JSTOR Journals, EBSCOhost (accessed October 1, 2016).
- Hickey, Donald R. *The War of 1812: Writings from America's Second War of Independence*. New York, NY: Library of America, 2013.
- "The Kentucky Legislature Calls for Action" *Niles' Weekly Register*, I, January 11, 1812.
Accessed December 1, 2016. <http://webs.wofford.edu/byrnesms/1812.htm>
- Livermore, Shaw. *The Twilight of Federalism: the Disintegration of the Federalist Party, 1815-1830*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962.
- "They Call It a War for Commerce!" *New York Evening Post* (New York), January 24, 1812.
Accessed October 1, 2016. <http://webs.wofford.edu/byrnesms/1812.htm>.

U.S. Congress. *Annals of Congress*. 12th Cong., 1st sess., 599-602, 1649-1650, 1652, 1662-1663, 1666-1667.

Watts, Steven. *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.