

CHAPTER XVII

POLITICAL PARTIES IN NEW YORK

DEWITT CLINTON ORGANIZES THE REPUBLICANS
FEDERALISTS PLAN A WAR WITH FRANCE
THE PARTY SYSTEM IN NEW YORK
REPUBLICANISM *vs.* MONARCHY
POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF NEW YORK
BURR AND TAMMANY
CLINTON IS NO PHILOSOPHER

DURING the Clintonian interregnum of 1795 to 1801, when John Jay and the Federalists ruled the state, George Clinton paid less attention to politics than to grandchildren and real estate. DeWitt Clinton, was no longer his secretary. From 1798 to 1800 that post was occupied by James Tallmadge Jr., just out of Brown College, later to practice in Poughkeepsie, to become lieutenant governor and to serve as president of New York University. DeWitt was during the period of the interregnum more active politically than his uncle and he became generally recognized as his uncle's confidant and representative in matters political.

A year after his uncle's retirement DeWitt offered himself as a New York County Republican candidate for the assembly. The county had long been notoriously Federalist and young Clinton's ticket was defeated. The next year, 1797, the New York Republicans offered a more distinguished ticket that contained among others the names of DeWitt Clinton, Aaron Burr, and Samuel Latham Mitchill, that faithful democrat and "walking encyclopaedia" from Columbia College. This ticket carried the county. The triumph of 1797 in the most populous county of the state was significant in that it marked the revolt of New York

City's voters against Federalist domination and inaugurated a period of Republican ascendancy that has been perpetuated with but few lapses to the present time.¹ Consequently New York County, which had always been particularly hostile to George Clinton, was to give him majorities in 1800 and 1801.

It was in 1797 that the little Dutch city of Albany became the permanent capital of the state. For twenty years the legislature and the executive had migrated, meeting in Kingston, or Poughkeepsie, or New York, or Albany. The decision to settle finally at Albany is significant in view of a conversation that Rufus King had had with George Clinton eight years earlier, in June 1789. The legislature had recently selected Albany for one of its sessions in preference to New York. This, Clinton observed, was due to the indiscretion of the city members. The country members had sound judgment but little or no ability to speak, and their attempts at oratory were improperly reported and ridiculed in the Federalist press of New York City. On one recent occasion an address by Taylor of Albany had been printed to make it appear ridiculous and Taylor had consequently forced the removal to Albany. Clinton declared that if the city members had occasionally gratified the rustics with meetings at Esopus or Poughkeepsie, they never would have considered removal to Albany.² It was probably the country members' dislike of the sophisticated metropolis that dictated the selection of Albany in 1797.

In 1798 DeWitt went to Albany to take his seat in the state Senate. He worked steadily and effectively to build up a Republican organization in the state. He discussed plans for bringing Freneau, that fanatically Republican printer who had baited Hamilton at Philadelphia, to New York.³ He probably helped to convert the Tammany Society, of which he had been "scribe" as early as 1791, to militant Republicanism. In 1798 he worked to concentrate Republican support to make Robert R. Livingston governor.⁴ But the fortunate Jay profited

¹ The Federalists carried the city in 1799, but the Republicans won it in 1798, 1800, and 1801.

² C. R. King, *Rufus King*, I, 357. The legislature met at Albany in December, 1788. In 1797 Albany had a population of 5000.

³ Philip Freneau to DeWitt Clinton, November 8, 1796, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

⁴ [W. P. Van Ness], *Examination of the Various Charges against Burr* (1803), 30.

by the X.Y.Z. affair; the odds were overwhelmingly in his favor, and he was triumphantly reelected over the Francophile Livingston with a majority of nearly 2500 votes in a total of less than 30,000.

Jay had let it be known that he would stand for a second term only because of the imminent danger of war with France. "Nothing can be more gloomy than the present prospect of our affairs with France," candidate Livingston wrote DeWitt Clinton on March 7, 1798, and he added that the "English party" would probably see to it that there was war.⁵ Governor Jay called a special session of the legislature to prepare for the anticipated hostilities and his message was a call to arms. The legislature approved the vigorous policy of the federal administration toward France and voted money for fortifying New York harbor. The militia was busy with its preparations and Hamilton, who had always longed for a military command, saw active service ahead. If it should come, it would be a Federalist war.

The break with France proved, however, to be the undoing of the Federalist party in New York as in the nation. Although there was fighting at sea, war was never actually declared; and when in 1799 Talleyrand offered to negotiate, conscientious John Adams forgot politics, named a commission to proceed to Paris, and so irremediably alienated the belligerent Hamiltonian wing of his party. The Federalist cause never recovered from the injury done it by this Adams-Hamilton break. In New York the Federalist Assembly indignantly rejected a motion commending Adams for making peace with France.⁶

Much more than the war issue itself, the ill-fated Alien and Sedition Acts contributed to the unpopularity of Federalism in New York. Hamilton and Jay approved heartily of the measures passed by the triumphant Federalists and designed to protect the national administration from criticism by aliens or natives. Jay wished to go even farther and amend the federal Constitution to increase the disabilities on the suspected classes.⁷ The Clintons, on the other hand, were known to be friendly toward dissenters and recent comers and to be opposed to the Alien and Sedition Acts. When the irascible Judge Cooper obtained the

⁵ DeWitt Clinton Papers.

⁶ Hammond, *New York*, I, 125.

⁷ Jay, *Correspondence*, IV, 241; Alexander, *New York*, I, 183.

prosecution of Judge Jedediah Peck, a sturdy Otsego Republican, for circulating a satirical petition aimed at the Alien and Sedition Laws, and Peck was collared by a federal marshal and brought from remote Cooperstown to New York for trial, it became evident that the Federalists were overplaying their hand. The Republicans, on their part, were helping to raise a fund to pay the fine of at least one victim of the Sedition Act, that fierce Irish-American from Vermont, Matthew Lyon. It is entirely possible that DeWitt Clinton contributed to the fund.⁸

To add to its increasing burden of unpopularity, the Jay administration in 1799 introduced the first general property tax in the state's history.⁹ The Federalists were riding for a fall. Yet during these years George Clinton showed no inclination to return to public life.

By the end of the Federalist period when Clinton was to reappear upon the political scene, the party system had become firmly established in America and especially in New York. "Aristides" could write in 1803 with entire accuracy that "Since the establishment of the federal government, no state in the union has been more agitated by the efforts of contending parties, than the one in which we live."¹⁰ And he added that "It was at that period [of the establishment of the federal government] that the line was drawn between the two parties that have alternately prevailed . . ." Yet certain distinguished historians have asserted that it was not until Hamilton's financial program got under way that public opinion began to crystallize and parties evolved. Channing, for instance, believed there was no definite party alignment until 1796 and that it was then on new lines which bore no relation to the issues of 1787 and 1788.¹¹ As a matter of fact the divisions of opinion in New York over a federal impost grant in 1783 and 1786 were almost the same as the divisions over the Alien and Sedition Laws in 1798. Certainly in New York the forces that fought for the federal Constitution in 1787 were almost identical geographically with the Federalist interests that supported Jay for governor in 1792. Individuals like

⁸ Gallatin's letter of January 30, 1799, to James Nicholson appealing for funds is now among the DeWitt Clinton Papers, Columbia University.

⁹ D. C. Sowers, *Financial History of the State of New York*, 114. The tax was to be continued three years.

¹⁰ [W. P. Van Ness], *Examination of Charges against Burr*, 4.

¹¹ Edward Channing, *A History of the United States* (6 vols., New York, 1905-25), IV, 151.

Robert R. Livingston or Samuel Jones might cross party lines, but basically party divisions remained the same—democratic-republicans against consolidationists; Clintonism versus Hamiltonianism.

Contemporaries realized that party lines and fundamental issues did not change materially after 1788. The Federalists clung to their designation for a generation to come. On the other hand, the term "Antifederalist" continued in use for some years and was long used interchangeably with the new party name "Republican," thus showing the virtual identity of the two. During the campaign of 1792, for instance, both Jefferson and Hamilton spoke of Clinton's supporters as "Antifederalists,"¹² but the term "republican interest" was commonly used at the same time in the newspapers. Jay wrote in 1795 and 1796 that the "Antifederalists" were opposing his treaty.¹³ Hamilton made frequent use of the term "Antifederalist" even in 1800 when "Republican" was generally accepted.¹⁴ Party consciousness and organization may have grown stronger in the middle and late nineties, but the "fundamental party division which has been at the basis of American politics ever since,"¹⁵ did not originate during Washington's administrations. The Federalist Schuyler recognized its existence in 1786 when he tried to persuade Jay to stand for governor against the Antifederalist Clinton.

There was a remarkable similarity between the issues of 1788 and those of 1800 when Clinton returned to politics. The Republicans of 1800 like the Antifederalists of 1788 feared America might turn monarchical. As late as 1795 Clinton felt called upon to declare that "It has been my invariable object to promote and cherish the republican system of government."¹⁶ During Washington's administrations men criticized the president's fondness for riding in semi-monarchical state behind four white horses and the celebration of the president's birthday exactly as the King's was celebrated in London. Indeed, the British party in New York "celebrated with great festivity" the birthday of

¹² Jefferson, *Writings*, P. L. Ford, ed., VI, 74; Jay, *Correspondence*, III, 452.

¹³ Jay, *Correspondence*, IV, 192, 214. John Quincy Adams used "Antifederal" in the same connection; *Writings*, I, 418.

¹⁴ *Works*, Lodge, ed., VIII, 560-61.

¹⁵ S. F. Bemis, *American Secretaries of State*, II, 27.

¹⁶ *Albany Gazette*, January 30, 1795.

George III as late as 1789!¹⁷ Three years later the lieutenant governor of Upper Canada was told that New York's British party was so strong that if West Point, Fort Montgomery and Stony Point could be seized, the whole state would go over to the King.¹⁸ It was frequently pointed out in the press and private correspondence that the Federalists had always had a yearning for monarchy and its trimmings. In 1804, for instance, an elaborate tale was circulated regarding a conspiracy of Hamilton, Adams, and other Federalists before the adoption of the federal Constitution, to place an English prince on the American throne and to join Canada with the United States. "Monarchy was the object of the Federalists," James Kane declared in his affidavit on the conspiracy. John Adams himself was said to have discussed the selection of a proper prince with the King of England. This story Clinton was supposed to have heard, probably from Judge Purdy; but, pressed by Hamilton, Clinton admitted that he could not vouch for it. Hamilton remained, however, to the day of his death, the consistent foe of "our real disease, which is democracy."¹⁹ The cry of "monarchy!" may occasionally have been a crying of "wolf! wolf!" to bring out the voters. But in those days, when the little American republic felt very much adrift in a hostile monarchical world, most republicans were entirely sincere. They knew that many men agreed with John Adams that monarchy was inevitable. And had not Gouverneur Morris declared that "there never was, and never will be a civilized Society without an Aristocracy?"²⁰

The Republicans were the advocates of civil liberty. A toast of 1800, now among DeWitt Clinton's papers, illustrates this: "The American people—may they never be awed by power or cajoled by flattery into an abandonment of their rights!"²¹ They denounced the tyrannies of the Alien and Sedition Laws, and they feared standing armies. "The militia of the United States—may they always supersede the necessity of standing armies!"²² They rejoiced in the great reforms and in the

¹⁷ Maclay, *Journal*, 68.

¹⁸ J. G. Simcoe, *Correspondence*, I, 156.

¹⁹ Box 28 of the Clinton Papers contains several letters on the subject. Cf. Hamilton, *Works*, VIII, 610, 612; and *American Citizen*, April 1, 1802.

²⁰ Max Farrand, *Records of the Federal Convention*, I, 545.

²¹ *Miscellaneous Volume*, p. 38.

²² *Ibid.*

republicanism of the French Revolution, and they aped the French revolutionaries by forming democratic clubs and societies. But while Federalists like Hamilton hoped for the introduction of British political institutions in America, the Republicans admired France, not because they wished to introduce French principles of government in America, but because they thought they saw France itself about to introduce American principles.

The Republicans championed the humble and the underprivileged. Hamilton admitted in a letter of May 4, 1796, that the elections in New York had, unfortunately, become "a question between the rich and the poor."²³ Their press supported the lower classes in city as well as country when, like the "carmen" of New York in 1799, they refused to follow the dictates of Federalist employers.²⁴ They demanded economy in government and objected to increases in the public debt. They advocated such democratic measures as the election of presidential electors by the electorate itself instead of by the legislature, a proposal that the Federalist legislature of 1800 is said to have rejected on the ground that "the Swinish Multitude" was incapable of such a responsibility.²⁵

Geographically the position of the two parties had changed between 1788 and 1800 in only one important respect. The Clintonians still controlled the democratic west bank of the Hudson and their opponents the east bank with its great estates and Federalist towns. Albany County, with its recent accretion of population from New England, was more Federalist than ever. The conversion of New York City to Republicanism, however, threw the balance of power to the democrats and marked the doom of Federalism in the state.

Greenleaf's democratic *New-York Journal*, which was succeeded in 1800 by Cheetham's notorious *American Citizen*, may have played an important part in the conversion of New York. But the political astuteness and organizing ability of Aaron Burr has been properly given much of the credit for the city's espousal of Republicanism. Burr, who was a good deal of a humanitarian and a professed democrat, was prob-

²³ *Correspondence*, Lodge ed., VIII, 395.

²⁴ *Albany Gazette*, May 10, 1799; *Watch-Tower*, April 26, 1802.

²⁵ *American Citizen*, March 19, 1800.

ably the most influential figure in the metropolis—so influential that he was able again and again to cross Hamilton's path, thus incurring the enmity of that determined gentleman. Indeed, the youthful Burr was at that time probably a far more vigorous, if less sincere, democrat than the aging Clinton, and as such was much more cordially disliked by the Federalist leader.

Another important factor in winning New York City to Republicanism was the Society of Tammany. Founded about 1786²⁶ as a non-partisan organization, it soon became involved in politics. It worked to counteract the revolutionary Cincinnati, which Senator Maclay called "another of [Hamilton's] machines."²⁷ It included in its membership such Republicans as Melancton Smith, printer Greenleaf, Burr's faithful friends William P. Van Ness and Matthew L. Davis, DeWitt Clinton and George Clinton Jr.²⁸ It met in Barden's Tavern on lower Broadway, later in the Long Room of Martling's tavern, which the fastidious Federalists labeled the "pig-pen"; and in its more solemn moments it met, significantly enough, in Presbyterian churches near by.²⁹ Its badge was the bucktail:

There's a barrel of porter at Tammany Hall,
And the Bucktails are swigging it all the night long.
In the time of my boyhood 'twas pleasant to call
For a seat and a cigar 'mid the jovial throng.

Halleck's Song.³⁰

By 1800 Tammany was frankly partisan and Burr, although he was not a member, used it to carry the city for his ticket. It remained Burrite in its sympathies and when the Clintons broke with Burr, Tammany broke with the Clintons. George Clinton was never a member.

The New York Republicans had by 1800 a somewhat more definite, but still a vague and poorly systematized ideology. They had found in the state no prophet who could shape their philosophy of govern-

²⁶ Article on William Mooney, its founder, in *Dictionary of American Biography*.

²⁷ Maclay, *Journal*, p. 194.

²⁸ W. R. Werner, *Tammany Hall* (Garden City, 1928), 37; F. B. Hough, *Washingtonia* (2 vols. Roxbury, 1865), I, 131.

²⁹ *Valentine's Manual of . . . City of New York* (1865), 861.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 863.

ment and present it in a form that would win converts. They had no Republican Bible as their opponents had Hamilton's *Federalist*. They were too Anglo-Saxon in their thinking and their background to turn readily to the French revolutionary thinkers, however enthusiastic they might be over the triumphs of French republicanism. Their greatest figure, George Clinton, was not a philosopher or a glib orator who could formulate a republican system of politics. Indeed it was Clinton's greatest weakness that he was not more a man of theory who could systematize the political democracy that he instinctively believed in. Had Clinton been more of a philosopher, he might have realized that his own party's land system and his own private speculations, for instance, were the kind of things that build bourgeois oligarchies of the Hamiltonian variety. Disappointed in Clinton, the Republicans of the nation were turning instead to Jefferson who, they realized, did have a definite ideology; and by 1800 the Virginian had far out-distanced his early rival. Much to the disgust of the Clintons, who were always jealous of Virginia leadership, Virginia seemed likely to recapture the presidency.