

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE HEYDAY OF REPUBLICANISM

JEFFERSON NEEDS NEW YORK VOTES

BURR USES CLINTON TO CARRY THE STATE

WIDOWERHOOD

CLINTON, BURR, AND THE VICE PRESIDENCY

CLINTON ACCEPTS JEFFERSON

"THE FRIEND OF THE POOR" REELECTED GOVERNOR

JEFFERSON FINDS CLINTON WORTH CULTIVATING

THE RISE OF DEWITT CLINTON

IT has been said that in the elections of 1800 New York carried the nation; New York City carried New York; and George Clinton carried New York City.<sup>1</sup> It was, therefore, George Clinton who made Jefferson president. Jefferson himself saw the importance of New York City and State when on March 4, 1800, he told Madison that "In New York all depends on the success of the city election, . . . Upon the whole, I consider it as rather more doubtful than the last election [1796], . . . In any event, we may say, that if the city election of New York is in favour of the republican ticket, the issue will be republican . . . it would require a republican vote both from New Jersey and Pennsylvania to preponderate against New York, on which we could count with any confidence."<sup>2</sup> In New York, leaders on both sides realized that the party which should elect its ticket in New York County would in all probability control the legislature that was to choose presidential electors in the fall of 1800.

In the Republican victory of 1800 George Clinton was only a passive

<sup>1</sup> Channing, *United States*, IV, 237.

<sup>2</sup> Davis, *Aaron Burr*, II, 55.

agent. It was Aaron Burr who turned up his political shirt sleeves, gathered together the party workers, and labored ceaselessly until the returns were in. He set Tammany to work; he organized his "Tenth Legion"; he guided the finance committee that filled the Republican campaign chest; he harangued and argued in the taverns; he worked at the polls while the election was on; and he consulted constantly with the more active of the Republican leaders. Burr knew that if he could engineer a Republican victory in New York, he would become indispensable to his party and might well receive his reward when the electors of president and vice president met early in 1801. Perhaps the fact that Hamilton himself was equally active in working for a Federalist victory in New York was an additional incentive to Burr.

His strategy was masterly. To secure the veteran vote he had General Horatio Gates nominated for the Assembly. On the same ticket he placed Brockholst Livingston as the representative of one important branch of the party and John Swartwout, his close friend, to represent another. And to represent the Clintonian interest Burr decided that none other than George Clinton should stand for election to the Assembly. Brockholst Livingston and Horatio Gates were reluctant enough to run, but Clinton was even more determined not to emerge from retirement. He refused the nomination. The party leaders interviewed the old governor on three different occasions, and it was not until a few evenings before the election at a meeting among Clinton, Burr, Swartwout, and several others that they arrived at a decision. Clinton's name was to be placed on the ticket and he agreed to make no public remonstrance—surely a back-handed way of accepting a nomination!

It is not difficult to understand Clinton's objection to offering himself as a candidate. There was serious illness in his family. A term in the legislature would have little attraction for a man who had served as governor for six terms. Then again, Clinton, who had appointed Burr attorney general and nominated him to the state supreme court, felt under no obligation to him; and he had, furthermore, no particular desire to see Jefferson president. Van Ness undoubtedly exaggerated for political reasons Clinton's coolness toward Jeffer-

son, when, writing as "Aristides" three years later, he paraphrased Clinton as having said at the conference with Burr in 1800,

that he had long entertained an unfavorable opinion of Mr. Jefferson's talents as a statesman and his firmness as a republican. That he conceived him as an accommodating trimmer, who would change with times and bend to circumstances for the purposes of personal promotion. Impressed with these sentiments, he could not, with propriety he said, acquiesce in the elevation of a man destitute of the qualifications essential to the good administration of the government.

"Aristides" added that, "it is so notorious that these were Governor Clinton's sentiments, that it is scarcely necessary to produce authority to prove it." Clinton was so emphatic on the subject, "Aristides" added, that Burr insisted he pledge himself not to use during the campaign any expressions like those he had used during the conference. The governor consented, but his son, George W. Clinton, spoke frequently "with the most vulgar severity" of Jefferson, and his nephew DeWitt took no part in the campaign. Making all due allowance for "Aristides'" partisanship, we must admit that Clinton and Jefferson were never close politically or personally.<sup>3</sup>

Clinton himself explained three years later that he had had, indeed, no enthusiasm for Jefferson's candidacy. He had felt that Jefferson's eulogy of Adams in his first speech to the senate in 1797 was disloyal to his friends and he, Clinton, did not therefore believe himself to be under an obligation to support him at a great personal sacrifice.<sup>4</sup>

With Clinton's name included the Republican ticket carried New York County by nearly 500 votes and a Republican legislature was assured. Once more Clinton and Burr had given Hamilton's political schemes a serious setback. "In a word," wrote DeWitt Clinton on May 17, "the failure of the aristocracy which has been erecting with so much care and whose architects have been exhausting their powers upon it for nearly twelve years must tumble into ruin."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the

<sup>3</sup> [W. P. Van Ness], *Examination of the Various Charges against Aaron Burr*, 22. For the state election of 1800 see also Hammond, *New York*, I, 135-37; M. L. Davis, *Burr*, I, 433-35, II, 55-58.

<sup>4</sup> George Clinton to DeWitt Clinton, December 13 and December 17, 1803, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to S. Southwick, quoted in Howard Lee McBain, *DeWitt Clinton and the Origins of the Spoils System in New York* (New York, 1907), 74.

victory of 1800 in New York marked the collapse of Federalism.

Some of the high Federalists, realizing that the New York elections would make Jefferson president, decided that it would be preferable to put aside "the scruples of delicacy and propriety . . . to prevent an *atheist* in Religion and a fanatic in politics from getting possession of the helm of the State." They urged Governor Jay to steal the election. Hamilton, who was one of the conspirators, asked Jay to convene the old Federalist legislature before the end of its term on July first. The legislature would then provide for the choice of presidential electors by district; the Federalists would carry a few of the districts, and Jefferson would not become president. Apparently not only Hamilton but also Schuyler, Marshall, and some other Federalists were involved in this plan for an election steal. Fortunately for the party's good name, John Jay ignored the scheme.<sup>6</sup>

George Clinton at Greenwich was more concerned with Mrs. Clinton's health than with state or federal politics. She was critically ill in the late fall of 1799 and his daughter, Cornelia, had left the farm at Jamaica to be with her. By February her condition was even more critical, and while Dr. Young gave "flattering hopes of her recovery," George Clinton realized that the end was near. The devoted Cornelia Genêt wrote constantly to the Citizen giving him the most recent bulletins but refusing to abandon hope. It was on Saturday, March 15, that Cornelia Tappen Clinton died at the age of fifty-six. On Monday she was buried from Mr. Benson's at Number 21 Pine Street. While there is little evidence that any close intellectual comradeship had existed between Clinton and his wife during the thirty years of their marriage, Cornelia Tappen had been a devoted wife and mother and it is probable that her husband felt her loss keenly. In his years of widowerhood he aged rapidly, becoming "the venerable Clinton," "the aged governor," to his friends and associates. During the last twelve years of his life he was a solitary, almost pathetic figure.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Letter of May 7, 1800 from Hamilton and Schuyler to Jay, printed in Jay, *Correspondence*, IV, 270-73. Monaghan, *John Jay*, 419-21. In the winter session of 1800 the Federalist legislature rejected a Republican proposal to choose electors by district. Hammond, *New York*, I, 133.

<sup>7</sup> Genêt Papers, Box 1793-1801; DeWitt Clinton Papers; *American Citizen*, Monday, March 17, 1800.

Except for the political maneuverings of Aaron Burr, Clinton might have become vice president in 1801. As soon as the news of the Republican victory reached Philadelphia in May 1800, a group of Republican congressmen met, decided to give the vice presidential nomination to a New Yorker and determined on Clinton, Burr, or Robert R. Livingston. Gallatin was asked to communicate with the New York Republicans to find which of the candidates might best be named. Gallatin entrusted the matter to his father-in-law, Commodore James Nicholson, who proceeded to canvass the situation.

Nicholson first eliminated Livingston because of his deafness and because there was some doubt about his democratic principles. He then turned to Clinton who had reason to believe that he was the first choice of the Congressional caucus at Philadelphia. Clinton was probably ready to accept the nomination but he made certain objections such as his age, the recent death of his wife, and his election to the state legislature. Nicholson urged that refusal might create divisions in the party and might even endanger Jefferson's election. Clinton finally consented to Nicholson's writing Gallatin that his name might be used if a refusal would seriously injure the party's chances of victory and if Clinton might be free to resign if elected. Nicholson prepared to send Gallatin a letter to that effect.<sup>8</sup>

For some unexplained reason Nicholson showed his letter to Burr. Burr was agitated and muttered something about being certain of the governorship and uncertain of the vice presidency, and left the room. Whereupon some of his friends entered, convinced Nicholson that Burr should be urged to accept, saw Burr, "persuaded" him to yield, and had Nicholson change the whole tenor of his letter before mailing it. Nicholson again consulted Clinton who, he afterwards declared, was happy to be released. It is probable, however, that Clinton was not a little irked at being replaced by Burr. His apologist, Cheetham, wrote two years later that Burr would not have been nominated had the New York Republicans been consulted and that the

<sup>8</sup> Clinton's account of the entire incident appears in his letters of December 13, 1803 and January 2, 1804 to DeWitt Clinton in DeWitt Clinton Papers. Hammond, *New York*, I, 137-39; Hatch, *History of the Vice Presidency*, 129-30; [W. P. Van Ness], *Examination of the Charges exhibited against Aaron Burr*, 24-26. Nicholson's statement dated December 26, 1803, is in the DeWitt Clinton Papers.

Congressional caucus named Burr only because it was assured that Clinton would not run.<sup>9</sup> It was on May 11 that the caucus agreed unanimously to support Burr for vice president.

In all this there was no mention of Burr's candidacy for the presidency itself. Commodore Nicholson's mission was to determine upon a candidate for the vice presidency, not the presidency. DeWitt Clinton, in predicting a Republican victory at the polls in April and May, 1800, stated that such a victory would give Jefferson the state's vote for president. Burr himself wrote as late as December 16 to General Samuel Smith, the Republican leader in the House of Representatives, that he would not contest the presidency with Jefferson. Yet when it was found that Jefferson and Burr would have an equal number of votes in the electoral college, the politicians, instead of devising a way to give Jefferson the presidency and Burr the vice presidency as the great majority of men had intended, tried to take political advantage of the unfortunate situation. "The Equality of Votes for Jefferson & Burr is indeed much to be regretted as every improper use will be made of the Circumstance," George Clinton wrote to DeWitt on January 13.<sup>10</sup> "Indeed I have reason to believe from Burr's explicit Declaration to me that he will not countenance a Competition for the Presidency with Mr. Jefferson." There was nevertheless a competition for the presidency; but Hamilton, who feared that Burr was "not very far from being a visionary" and a believer in "perfect Godwinism," came to the aid of the Jeffersonians and Burr became only vice president. The New York delegation in Congress with the approval of the Clintons gave their ballots to Jefferson.

If Clinton was as decidedly anti-Jeffersonian as "Aristides" was later to make out, he was reassured even before the inaugural. He wrote DeWitt that the day Jefferson took office was a festive one for New York Republicans and that he himself was in high spirits.<sup>11</sup> While attending the sessions of the legislature at Albany, he declared to Genêt that "Jefferson's inaugural Speech cannot fail of the Approbation of true republican[s]. That the Sentiments contained in it proceed from

<sup>9</sup> Cheetham, *View of the Political Conduct of Aaron Burr* (New York, 1802), 40-41.

<sup>10</sup> Clinton's letter of January 13 is in the DeWitt Clinton Papers.

<sup>11</sup> Letter of March 5, 1801, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

the Heart I cannot Doubt . . . Kiss Cornelia, Maria & the Children for me."<sup>12</sup>

Clinton was again a candidate for governor. On the night of the adjournment of the legislature, November 8, 1800, the Republican members met in caucus and nominated him for a seventh term. The nomination was confirmed at a meeting on February 26 at Adams' Hotel in New York City; and Jeremiah Van Rensselaer, the only Republican in a Federalist family, was nominated for the lieutenant governorship.<sup>13</sup> As Governor Jay felt that his health would not permit him to run for a third term and as he wished to retire to private life, the Federalists at the Tontine Hotel on January 13 nominated the young patron, Stephen Van Rensselaer, to oppose Clinton.<sup>14</sup> The latter does not seem to have been eager for a seventh term. Possibly, however, he thought it might serve as a stepping-stone to higher honors. Of the candidacy of 1801 he wrote to DeWitt Clinton in 1803:

You are sensible that it was with great reluctance I consented to be held up as a candidate for the office I now hold or to enter again into public life in any station whatever. . . . The reasons which then influenced me no longer exist. The object is happily accomplished and whether my services have contributed to its success or not is immaterial. The cause of Republicanism is now so well established as not to require any new sacrifice on my part.<sup>15</sup>

The campaign that followed was on the low level that had come to characterize New York politics. The Federalists maintained that if George Clinton was old enough to retire to private life in 1795, he was too old to be governor in 1801. They raked up the Maccomb land scandal of 1791 to use it against Clinton, and they asserted that he had made a great fortune in public lands. His French son-in-law was an object of attack. The Federalists, one of them declared, are still "the trunk of the body politic," and to their party "belong all the riches, dignity, virtue and physical power."<sup>16</sup> Prosperity was a Federalist issue. Hamilton, who had "been harranguing the citizens

<sup>12</sup> Letter of March 15, 1801, Genêt Papers, Box 1793-1801.

<sup>13</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, March 2, 1801; Hammond, *op. cit.*, I, 154.

<sup>14</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, February 5, 1801.

<sup>15</sup> Letter of November 16, 1803, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

<sup>16</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, March 6, 1801.

of New York, in different Wards, in his usual style of imprecation and abuse against the character of the venerable Mr. Clinton,"<sup>17</sup> showed a Federalist meeting "that it was to the Federal party exclusively that we owe the unexampled prosperity which we have hitherto enjoyed."<sup>18</sup> The cartmen of New York resolved to support the Federalists because under them "the Country at large has rapidly increased in prosperity," and Jay stressed the same issue. The Federalists denied that Van Rensselaer would advocate taxes that would be oppressive to the landed interest. For the Republicans seem to have emphasized the tax issue, pointing out the increase in taxation under Governor Jay. In some parts of the state people were even led to believe that Clinton would reimburse the taxes they had paid to the Federalist administration.<sup>19</sup> A Federalist gentleman in Montgomery County, in predicting a Clinton victory, wrote that the Republican campaigners went from house to house, convincing

each voter that this election is a contest between the Rich and the Poor—that Governor Clinton is the friend of the poor, and will be supported by every poor man in the state—that Mr. Van Rensselaer is a rich man, and a friend to the rich men . . . —that Mr. Clinton is also an enemy to taxation—that during the eighteen years that he was at the head of the government we had no taxes, but as soon as he was out of office taxes began.<sup>20</sup>

There was much of populism in the campaign. Clinton, said one of his supporters, was "bred in the school of Liberty." And Hamilton pointed out that Burr, in taking an active part in the campaign in favor of Mr. Clinton, had again "shown the cloven foot of *rank* Jacobinism."<sup>21</sup>

Although the Federalist government of New York City managed to disfranchise a number of prominent Republicans, including James Cheetham, Daniel D. Tompkins, W. P. Van Ness and George Washington Clinton,<sup>22</sup> and appointed only Federalist partisans as watchers at the

<sup>17</sup> [Newark] *Centinel of Freedom*, April 28, quoted in Stokes, *Iconography*, V, 1384.

<sup>18</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, April 13.

<sup>19</sup> Bleecker to Lewis Atterbury, June 18, 1801, Harmanus Bleecker Papers, Albany.

<sup>20</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, May 13, 1801.

<sup>21</sup> *Works*, Lodge ed., VIII, 589.

<sup>22</sup> *Republican Watch-Tower*, December 15, 1801.

polls,<sup>23</sup> Clinton carried the city with 1266 votes to 1090 for Stephen Van Rensselaer.<sup>24</sup> The Federalists had lost their hold on the metropolis. Clinton and Burr had scored once more against Hamilton. Clinton carried the state as a whole by a majority of nearly 4000 votes in a total of 45,651. Stephen Van Rensselaer received substantial majorities only in his home territory, Albany and Rensselaer Counties, and in the western counties of Oneida, Ontario, and Chenango where Federalist landed interests were strong and where New England immigrants with Federalist politics were settling in considerable numbers. Clinton swept Long Island. He carried Columbia where the Livingstons ruled, as well as Dutchess and Westchester on the east shore of the Hudson. On the opposite shore loyal Orange and Ulster gave him their customary majorities, and in the north and west he carried, among others, Saratoga, Washington which was normally Federalist, Schoharie, Montgomery, Otsego, Herkimer, Cayuga, and Onondaga. The yeomanry was still faithful to Clinton but there were signs of growing Federalist strength in such small cities of the north and west as Troy and Utica. What the Democratic Republican interest was to lose in the north and west, however, it was to gain in the south. A political revolution, by which the two great schools of politics were to change positions geographically, was under way.

The victory of 1801 produced a rapprochement between the Clintons and the Virginia dynasty. Monroe, always a friend of George Clinton's, wrote to congratulate him on his triumph.<sup>25</sup> Jefferson added his congratulations in a letter of May 17.<sup>26</sup> In the same significant letter he wrote of the irksomeness of making appointments to office and of his disposition to make as few changes as possible. He believed, however, that circumstances in New York required a less conservative policy. It had been represented to him that the collector, naval officer, and supervisor were violent partisans who should be removed; and Colonel Burr

<sup>23</sup> Davis, *Burr*, II, 149.

<sup>24</sup> *The Daily Advertiser*, June 8, 1801, Supplement, contains complete election returns for all counties. Stephen Van Rensselaer during the campaign denied that his tenants would be coerced into voting for him. Albany County went Federalist by 1400 votes in a total of 2900.

<sup>25</sup> Letter of July 12, 1801, Monroe Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>26</sup> Jefferson, *Writings*, P. L. Ford, ed., VIII, 52.

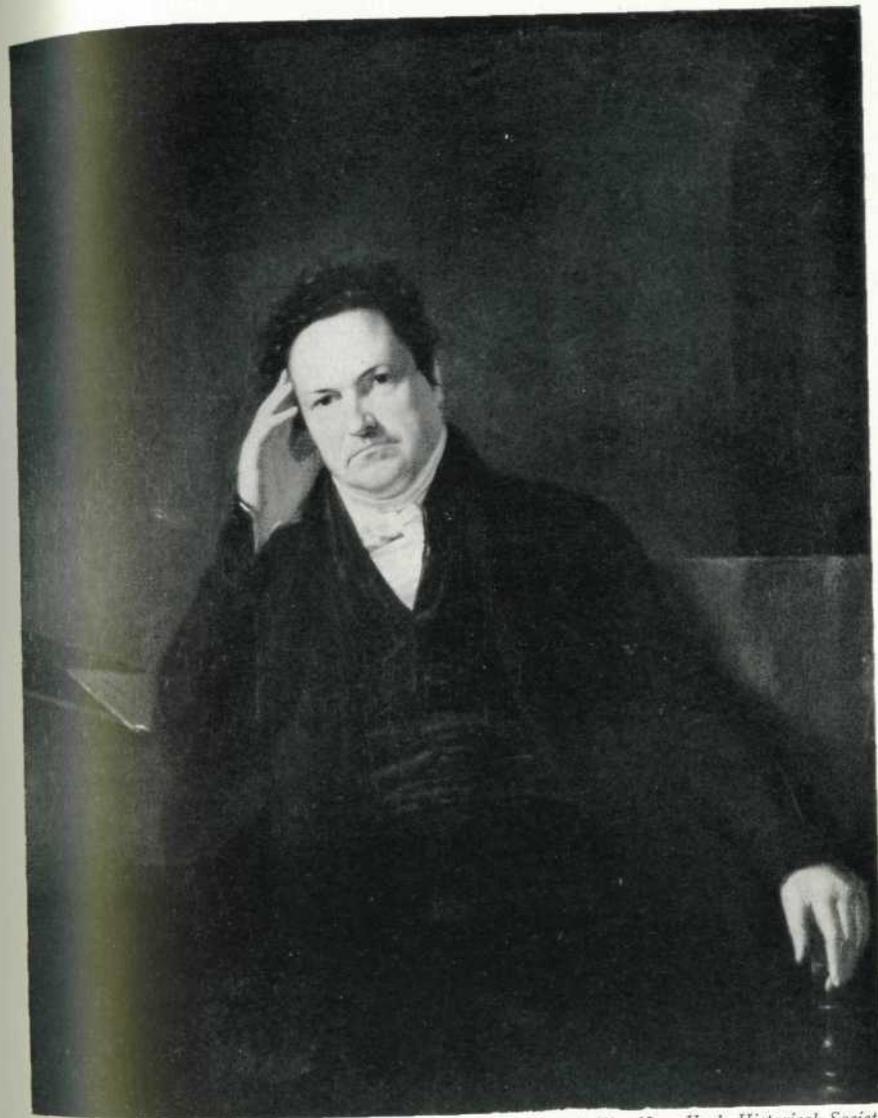
and certain of the New York members of Congress had made suggestions, including the naming of Matthew L. Davis for the supervisorship. Some disagreement, however, existed. "There is no one whose opinion would command with me greater respect than yours, if you would be so good as to advise me, . . . We also want a marshall for the Albany district . . . Will you be so good as to propose one?" As Matthew L. Davis was an intimate and a close political friend of Burr's, Jefferson's consulting Clinton on the appointment to the supervisorship was an incident of great significance. Burr's good friend Swartwout had already received a federal marshalcy, but Jefferson was being made to believe that Burr would have stolen the presidency had he been able.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, Jefferson was turning his back on Burr and offering friendship and alliance to Governor Clinton.

Matthew Davis did not become supervisor, nor did Burr succeed in getting him named naval officer. Months later Osgood, a Clinton man and informer against Burr, received the latter post. Meanwhile the Livingstons were being carefully weaned away from Burr. The chancellor, who had refused to be secretary of the navy, was appointed minister to France, and Edward Livingston became mayor of New York, an appointive position. Thanks to the work at Washington of DeWitt Clinton, Osgood, Cheatham, and a number of others who disliked Burr, Burr's influence with the Jefferson administration approached the vanishing point. Burr was to be driven out of the party.

Albert Gallatin, who concurred with the Virginians in their belief that Burr was disloyal, had little love for the Clintons or the Livingstons. In a long letter written September 14, 1801,<sup>28</sup> he discussed with Jefferson the question of the succession to the presidency and the vice presidency. Madison he considered the proper successor to the presidency. He pointed out that if the Republicans nominated Burr for vice president in 1804, the Federalists would probably make him president by throwing some of their electoral votes to him. One remedy was an amendment to the Constitution making it possible to vote separately for president and vice president, but the Constitution was difficult to amend. Furthermore, Gallatin did not trust Burr and

<sup>27</sup> Henry Adams, *United States*, I, 230-31; Hatch, *Vice Presidency*, 137.

<sup>28</sup> Gallatin, *Writings*, H. Adams ed. (3 vols. Philadelphia, 1879), I, 49-52.



Courtesy of The New York Historical Society

DEWITT CLINTON, 1769-1828

From a painting by Charles Ingham

would never have supported him for vice president had he discovered earlier the "total want of confidence, which during the course of last winter [he] discovered in a large majority of the Republicans toward Burr." Yet he did not think the Clinton or Livingston factions in New York had sufficient influence.

Yet I do not believe that *we* can do much, for I dislike much the idea of supporting a section of Republicans in New York, and mistrusting the great majority, because that section is supposed to be hostile to Burr, and *he* is considered as the leader of that majority. A great reason against such policy is that the reputed leaders of that section, I mean the Livingstons generally, and some broken remnants of the Clintonian party who hate Burr (for Governor Clinton is out of the question and will not act) are so selfish and uninfluential that they can never obtain their great object, the State government, without the assistance of what is called Burr's party, and will not hesitate a moment to bargain for that object with him, . . .

The event was to prove that the Clintons and Livingstons were entirely capable of controlling the state without assistance from Burr. Politically Jefferson made no mistake in accepting the Clinton-Livingston, instead of the Burrite, wing of the party.

When the young United States senator, DeWitt Clinton, went to Washington early in 1802, his uncle provided him with a letter of introduction to President Jefferson.<sup>29</sup> There is no evidence, however, that the president made a confidant of the big New Yorker who, with all his scholarly interests, ability, and energy, had a brusqueness and imperiousness about him that repulsed men as often as won them. With Burr's exit from the New York scene, DeWitt Clinton had become the foremost of the younger generation in the state's politics and he was rapidly taking his uncle's place as the leader of the Republicans. Six feet in his socks, broad-shouldered and big boned, he was a powerful figure physically as well as politically. He was a hard-hitting politician, a master of invective, a dangerous enemy. "The meekness of Quakerism will do in religion, but not in politics," he is said to have remarked.<sup>30</sup> He was not so consistent in his democracy as was his uncle. Although his statesmanship was constructive and

<sup>29</sup> Clinton to Jefferson, February 9, 1802, Jefferson Papers.

<sup>30</sup> S. P. Orth, *Five American Politicians* (1906), 90.

of a high order, he was willing to employ the most selfish and shoddy of political methods to gain his ends. His manipulation of the council of appointment and his employment of the unprincipled Cheetham are cases in point. The passing of leadership from George Clinton to DeWitt signified a decided change in the tone of state politics, and the change was not for the better.