

CHAPTER XXI

THE ELIMINATION OF AARON BURR

A SCURRILOUS ATTACK

BURR IS FAIR GAME

THE CLINTONS ATTACK AND ARE ATTACKED

JEFFERSON ACCEPTS CLINTON'S EXPLANATIONS

THE TRIUMPH OF SOUND REPUBLICANISM

GEORGE WASHINGTON CLINTON

THE united forces of the Clintons and Livingstons had captured the state from the Federalists in 1801. Now that Hamilton had been returned to his law practice and Jay to his estate, the victorious allies, to entrench themselves still further, determined upon the purification of their own party by the elimination of that troublesome and altogether too clever political manipulator, Aaron Burr. Ink was the weapon used.

In that era of sensational political journalists like Fenno and Freneau, Bache and Duane, New York had a coterie of editors that yielded the palm to none for ability, partisanship, and scurrility. There was William Coleman, the Bostonian, whom Hamilton had appointed to a federal clerkship. When Hamilton founded the *Evening Post* late in 1801 he made Coleman its editor, and Coleman, "skilled in the low arts of a petty-fogger," soon made himself master of all the black arts of journalism—invective, thinly veiled misrepresentations, gross and unashamed partisanship. Hamilton himself met often with Coleman, supplied anonymous pieces for his paper, and inspired his wily editorial policies.¹ Dr. Peter Irving, editor of the *Morning Chronicle* that was

¹ *Dictionary of American Biography*, IV, 294; *American Citizen*, April 1, 1802.

established in 1802 to defend the maligned Burr, was less rigorous in his assaults on the Clintons and Livingstons than Coleman in his assaults on the Republican mobocracy. This elder brother of Washington Irving was referred to by James Cheetham as "Doctor Squintum."²

By far the most capable, effective, and malignant of the group of New York journalists was Cheetham. He had already served his apprenticeship as an agitator in England before coming to America at the age of twenty-six. Three years later he became the partner of the Clintons' cousin, David Denniston, who a few months earlier had converted Thomas Greenleaf's *Argus* into the bitterly partisan *American Citizen*.³ Unprincipled and quarrelsome, Cheetham broke with Burr, challenged Coleman to a duel that was only narrowly averted, met and thoroughly disliked Tom Paine, provoked Burr's friend Matthew L. Davis to the point of violence, and a few years later severed relations with the Clintons over the embargo. It was said of him that he "forced the press to become the disturber of domestic quiet—the assassin of private reputation . . . the degraded vehicle of foul defamation."⁴ Although the *American Citizen* may not have been so vitriolic and defamatory as these words suggest, it did mark a new low point in New York journalism. For that debasement DeWitt Clinton, as the patron of Cheetham, must accept considerable responsibility.

Burr was fair game. He had illicitly coveted the presidency in 1800. His flirtation with the Federalists, as seen in his vote on the repeal of the Judiciary Act and his famous toast to the "union of all honest men," had won him the enmity of the Jefferson administration. That he had never been a reliable party man, that without him there would be more offices for the friends of DeWitt Clinton and the Livingstons, and that his fall would leave the vice presidency vacant in 1805, must have been weighty considerations. His shrewdness in snatching the vice presidential nomination in 1800 had not been forgotten and, in spite of his

² S. H. Wandell and Meade Minnigerode, *Aaron Burr* (2 vols., New York, 1925), I, 240; Levermore, "Rise of Metropolitan Journalism," *American Historical Review*, VI, 448.

³ *American Citizen and General Advertiser*, March 11, 1800; *Dictionary of American Biography*, IV, 47. The *American Citizen* was a daily.

⁴ *New-York Herald*, December 19, 1807.

support of George Clinton's ticket in 1801, it was decided to have his scalp.⁵

The inky battle was fought in New York City which was the chief and almost the only citadel of Burrism in the entire state.⁶ The assault began in 1802 when Cheetham in his "Narrative of the Suppression by Colonel Burr of the History of the Administration of John Adams" accused Burr of persuading too vehemently Republican John Wood to moderate his history of the Adams administration in order not to offend the Federalists. To Wood's defense of Burr, Cheetham replied with "An Antidote to John Wood's Poison." The Manhattan Company, created by Burr, now ousted Burr and his friend Swartwout from their directorships, an incident that led to a duel between Swartwout and DeWitt Clinton. The administration's organ, the *Albany Register*, turned against Burr. And in July Denniston and Cheetham published Cheetham's full statement of the case against Burr, a pamphlet that he called, "A View of the Political Conduct of Aaron Burr, Esquire."⁷ The principal accusations against Burr were that he had not always supported the orthodox candidates for office and that he had sometimes sought office for himself.⁸

The friends of Burr struck back. John Wood wrote "A Full Exposition of the Clintonian Faction" in which he pointed out that although George Clinton's Revolutionary services had given him certain claims upon the gratitude of the state, DeWitt Clinton, now the party leader, had no such claims. DeWitt's attempt to succeed Governor Clinton was "one of those instances, where vice is descended from virtue, and vicious inconsistency from prudent resolution"—a politic tribute to the governor. Wood suggested that it was perhaps the great temperamental gulf between George Clinton and Aaron Burr that had produced a mutual dislike. Certainly, he declared, the Clintons tried to have Langdon of New Hampshire made vice president in 1800 instead of Burr; and George Clinton had even remarked to his friends

⁵ R. R. Livingston, Minister to France since October, 1801, took little or no part in the assault on Burr, but he nevertheless incurred Burr's hostility. R. R. Livingston to DeWitt Clinton, Paris, February 5, 1803, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

⁶ John Armstrong to DeWitt Clinton, Clermont, June 24, 1802; DeWitt Clinton Papers.

⁷ For sale on July 19. *Watch Tower*, July 17, 1802.

⁸ Davis, *Burr*, II, 205-09; Fox, *Aristocracy*, 59-61; Hammond, *New York*, I, 185-90.

that he himself would have run to keep Burr out of the vice presidency. The Clintons were accused of trying to foment trouble between Jefferson and Burr and of employing that "jacobin infidel," Cheetham, to attack the innocent Burr.

The crowning efforts of the Burrrites to discredit the Clintons was "Aristides" famous pamphlet that was entitled, "An Examination of the Various Charges exhibited against Aaron Burr."⁹ It was some months before it was discovered that "Aristides" was William P. Van Ness, an intimate of Burr's. Van Ness's outspoken malignity and convincing plausibility made "Aristides" perhaps the most effective tract of its generation. Certainly its awkward truths and its equally embarrassing misrepresentations made the political fur fly. Although in the earlier Burrrite pamphlets Governor Clinton had been generally spared at his nephew's expense, "Aristides" launched a ferocious attack at the governor himself. George Clinton's popularity, he wrote, had declined steadily since 1788; "he has never been the idol of the party, which his unblushing eulogists wish the world to believe"; and he has now "dwindled into the mere instrument of an ambitious relative, and his mercenary adherents; that a paltry and contemptible faction, alike destitute of talents and of worth, are sheltering themselves under his name, availing themselves of the imbecility of his age, and converting him into a convenient tool, through whom they may dispose of the honors and offices of the state for their own profit and aggrandizement." His adherents, who had always "deemed his right to the chief magistracy so divine and indefeasible, that every man who had the audacity to refuse him his suffrage . . . was branded with every odious epithet," had never forgiven Burr for his opposition to Clinton's reelection in 1789. In 1800 Burr was the first choice of his party and Clinton was given an opportunity of refusing the nomination only out of respect for the feelings of an old man. And "Aristides" added the startling observation that George Clinton had called Jefferson "an accommodating trimmer, who would change with times and bend to circumstances for the purposes of personal promotion."

Cheetham sent a copy of "Aristides" to George Clinton who declared it "worse than Billingsgate."¹⁰ The attack was too telling to be borne

⁹ Published in December, 1803.

¹⁰ George Clinton to DeWitt Clinton, December 13, 1803, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

in silence. Governor Clinton wrote to DeWitt, explaining "Aristides" away in seven indignant pages. Other explanations followed and even the publishers of "Aristides" were hunted down and prosecuted. By July 1804, both the author and the publishers promised DeWitt Clinton a "complete denial of the calumnies which have been published against you; provided you withdraw the suits."¹¹ The governor's suggestion that Commodore James Nicholson, Gallatin's emissary of 1800 who had offered him the vice presidential nomination, be asked to tell the truth about his mission of 1800 was at once adopted by DeWitt Clinton. Nicholson responded promptly, and although the governor approved of his nephew's plan to print the Nicholson narrative if it could be made more temperate than "Aristides," it seems never to have appeared in print.¹² The governor thought it placed too little emphasis upon the fact that in 1800 Burr was only a second choice for the vice presidency.¹³

Meanwhile the troublesome "accommodating trimmer" statement had to be explained away. About a week after he first saw "Aristides," Clinton wrote Jefferson, denying that he had made such statements and expressing a wish that Jefferson would not allow the misrepresentations of "Aristides" to come between them. Jefferson's reply was a most generous one. He wrote Clinton from Washington on the 31st of December:

I received last night your favor of the twenty-second, written on the occasion of the libellous pamphlet lately published with you. I began to read it, but the dulness of the first page made me give up the reading for a dip into here and there a passage, till I came to what respected myself. The falsehood of that gave me a test for the rest of the work, and considering it always useless to read lies, I threw it by. As to yourself, be assured no contradiction was necessary. The uniform tenor of a man's life furnishes better evidence of what he has said or done on any particular occasion than the word of an enemy . . . Little squibs in certain papers had long ago apprized me of a design to sow tares between particular republican characters, but to divide those by lying tales whom truths cannot divide, is the hackneyed policy of the gossips of every society.¹⁴

¹¹ M. Ward and L. Gould to D. Clinton, New York, July 30, 1804; DeWitt Clinton Papers.

¹² A copy of the narrative dated December 26, 1803, is in DeWitt Clinton Papers. It was printed in *American Historical Review*, VIII, 512f.

¹³ George Clinton to DeWitt Clinton, January 2, 1804, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

¹⁴ Jefferson, *Writings*, H. A. Washington, ed. (Washington, 1854), IV, 520.

A year later in a letter to DeWitt Clinton the President referred to "so atrocious a libel as the pamphlet *Aristides*."¹⁵ If it was the intention of the Burrites, as it undoubtedly was, to alienate the Virginia dynasty from the Clintons so decisively and irremediably that George Clinton could not possibly become Burr's successor in the vice presidency, Jefferson's good temper or political sagacity frustrated Van Ness's attempt. "*Aristides*" did indeed create consternation in the Clintonian camp but it did not save Burr from political annihilation nor keep George Clinton from Washington. The inky battle of 1802 and 1803 resulted in a decisive victory for the Clinton faction. It eliminated Burr politically almost as effectively as Burr was eliminated by his tragic duel with Hamilton.

During the three years of George Clinton's last governorship the Republicans of New York were as secure in their ascendancy as were the Republicans at Washington. "I believe we may consider the mass of the States south and west of Connecticut and Massachusetts as now a consolidated body of Republicanism," Jefferson wrote to Governor McKean on February 19, 1803.¹⁶ The Federalist opposition was reduced to a pitiful minority. Such measures as the reduction of taxation and the simultaneous reduction of the national debt, strenuous action against the Barbary pirates, repeal of the Naturalization Act, and the acquisition of Louisiana, brought the Jefferson administration to the zenith of its popularity. Naturally enough the Republican regime in New York profited by the triumph of Republicanism at Washington. When Jefferson's foreign policy was put to a test vote in the New York Assembly on February 2, 1803, only 19 out of 89 assemblymen refused to give their approval. It was apparent that there was serious opposition in only a few counties in the entire state. Significantly three of these, Albany County, its neighbor Columbia, and Oneida County to the westward in the Mohawk Valley, were thoroughly saturated with Federalist immigrants from Massachusetts and Connecticut. Thanks to its commercial and landed interests Albany had long been Federalist in policy. On the other hand, the New York City area, which had been

¹⁵ Letter of October 6, 1804, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

¹⁶ Henry Adams, *United States*, II, 811.

so predominantly Tory and Federalist in the decade and a half after the Revolution, was by 1802 staunchly Jeffersonian.¹⁷

Governor Clinton occasionally consulted on questions of patronage with such administration leaders as Gallatin and Robert Smith as well as with the President.¹⁸ On several occasions in his messages to the legislature he expressed his hearty approval of the administration at Washington. In his first message on January 26, 1802, the governor congratulated the legislature on the flourishing condition of the United States "under an administration extensively possessing and highly meriting the public confidence."¹⁹ This was, it may be noted, before "*Aristides*" accused Clinton of disloyalty to Jefferson. A year later Clinton came to the support of the administration in its protests to Spain against the termination of the right of deposit at New Orleans. According to DeWitt Clinton this virtual closing of the Mississippi would be a severe blow to New York which had in the past enjoyed the greatest part of the Mississippi trade. The governor thereupon came to the defense of the right of deposit in his annual message although he had, he declared, "always avoided interfering with affairs appertaining exclusively to the General Government."²⁰

The Republican administrations at Albany and at Washington, if the vice president may be excepted, seem to have been almost completely in harmony.

Very naturally the sections of the state that were Jeffersonian were also Clintonian. About half of the meager band of Federalist survivors in the state legislature came from Albany County and neighboring Columbia, and the western counties of Chenango, Oneida and Ontario and Genesee supplied most of the others. The Federalists might control a vote or two in the Richmond, Queens, and Ulster delegations; but the great majority of the delegates from such well-represented

¹⁷ *New York Assembly Journal*, February 2, 1803. Other divisions on both state and federal issues (February 2, 3, and 18) show a striking correlation. Richmond County was still Federalist.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Gallatin to Clinton, August 11, 1802, George Clinton Papers, vol. XXVII.

¹⁹ Lincoln, *Messages*, II, 506.

²⁰ George to DeWitt Clinton, January 26, George Clinton Papers; DeWitt to George Clinton, January 11, DeWitt Clinton Papers.

counties as New York, Westchester, Dutchess, Washington, Montgomery and, even, Rensselaer Counties were politically loyal to the Clintons.²¹ There was now and again evidence that tenants were renouncing the political apron strings of their Federalist landlords and voting the Republican ticket.²² When they did not quarrel among themselves the Republicans had a tremendous—a steam roller—majority.

Consequently the Republicans did about as they wished. They chartered a New York State Bank that was to be Republican in its control. They redistricted the state in 1802 in the hope of increasing their representation, and a year later they "equalized" the senatorial districts by transferring Montgomery County from the Western to the Eastern District—a piece of gerrymandering the efficacy of which Governor Clinton seriously doubted.²³ They very properly turned out Robert M'Clallen, the state treasurer appointed during Jay's administration, who was found to have defaulted to the extent of some \$3,000. When General John Armstrong resigned from the United States Senate in February 1802, DeWitt Clinton was named to succeed him. But as the young senator did not relish the isolation of Washington nor the expense of maintaining two households, he persuaded his uncle in the fall of 1803 to make him mayor of New York. "Clinton is appointed mayor of the city of New York," wrote Senator Plumer of New Hampshire, "an office worth from eight to ten thousand dollars pr. annum, which he has accepted, & resigned his seat in the Senate. His absence will not be the subject of regret to a single member of the Senate. He is a man of violent passions, of a bitter vindictive spirit,—unfeeling—insolent—haughty—& rough in his manners."²⁴ The New York Republicans were able to make and replace United States senators at will; five men, all Republicans, represented New York at various times in the Senate of the eighth Congress.

No doubt the governor was glad to have DeWitt back in New York. That he was occasionally leaning heavily upon his capable nephew for

²¹ *New York Assembly Journal*, January 25, February 2, 18, 1803; February 7, 1804.

²² See a "Letter from Lansingburgh" in *American Citizen*, May 4, 1803.

²³ H. W. Tillotson to DeWitt Clinton, April 14, 1802 and George Clinton to DeWitt Clinton, February 25, 1803; DeWitt Clinton Papers.

²⁴ E. S. Brown, *William Plumer's Memorandum of Proceedings in the United States Senate* (New York, 1923), 26.

advice and guidance is evidenced by a letter that he wrote to DeWitt on the third of September, 1803:²⁵

You will have some Leisure before your departure for Congress. Will you employ a part of it in drafting a communication to the Legislature for the next session. Your knowledge of the present Situation of our Affairs will furnish you with Materials and from my former Communications you will be able to collect my sentiments on the different Subjects. I have been so long dealing in Speeches that I found it extremely difficult to draft one for the last session without committing Plagiarism. This I shall be able to avoid by getting outlines from you. It will be easy for me to make such Additions & Alterations as Circumstances may require.

The aging governor must have regretted that he had no son of his own with DeWitt's abilities and fondness for politics. His only son, George Washington Clinton, was the black sheep of the family—an ailing, bad-tempered ne'er-do-well. Discontented in Albany where his father had perforce moved after his election to the governorship, young Washington returned to New York City, visited at Philadelphia, returned to New York, and there planned a voyage to the East Indies. To the despair of his entire family he neglected his profession and his books, and made associations of the worst kind. After Washington's return from Philadelphia in 1802 John McKesson wrote of him to Genêt that, "Least some of his father's friends should attempt to impede his disgraceful career he has purchased a pair of Pistols which he threatens to use in defense of that Independence . . ." of which he is so tenacious. In referring to DeWitt's brother George Clinton Jr., John Wood paid his respects to both cousins by writing that "perhaps a greater simpleton is not to be found in the whole city of New York, if his cousin, the Governor's son, be excepted . . ." Dysentery and consumption notwithstanding he outlived his father and quarreled with the other heirs of the governor's estate.²⁶

In spite of the factional quarrels of the last Clinton administration a few measures of a decided Republican character were carried out. In

²⁵ DeWitt Clinton Papers.

²⁶ John McKesson to E. C. Genêt, July 17, 1802, and Pierre Van Cortlandt, Jr. to Genêt, October 15, 1802, Genêt Papers; George to DeWitt Clinton, December 14, 1801, DeWitt Clinton Papers; John Wood, *Full Exposition of the Clintonian Faction*, 15; Genêt to M. B. Tallmadge, August 20, 1812, George Clinton Papers.

1804, for instance, the legislature passed over the veto of the council of revision a bill extending the elective franchise, a bill which the governor approved of in the main and which DeWitt Clinton favored wholeheartedly.²⁷ State finance became more conservative. The governor complained in his first message that the Federalists' resort to general taxation was unfortunate and unnecessary. By 1804 the so-called "state tax," introduced by the Federalists, had been virtually abandoned; expenditures had been sharply reduced; the state debt had been reduced by two or three hundred thousand dollars; and a few thousand dollars had been invested to the state's credit.²⁸ This rigorous financial policy was strikingly similar to that of Clinton's own administration of fifteen years earlier and also to the more recent measures of Secretary of the Treasury Gallatin at Washington. By and large, however, the New York Republicans showed but few evidences of constructive statesmanship. The democratic idealism of George Clinton's earlier years had somehow been engulfed and lost in the muddy sea of political bickering and bartering.

By 1804 the state Republicans were even more firmly entrenched than they had been in 1801 when Clinton took office. Albany, Oneida, and Ontario and Genesee Counties were still represented by anti-Clinton delegations in the Assembly, but virtually all of the other counties, now including Columbia, were Republican. If the Assembly vote of February 1804 on the new council of revision is any indication, the administration forces outnumbered their opponents by more than five to one!²⁹ As far as New York was concerned the governor had every reason to be content. But there were other worlds to conquer. Clinton could not quite forget Washington.

²⁷ John Broome to DeWitt Clinton, Mar. 12, 1804; DeWitt Clinton Papers.

²⁸ Lincoln, *Messages*, II, 506; D. C. Sowers, *Financial History of New York*, 302-06, 324.

²⁹ Vote of February 7, 1804.