

THE LONG JOURNEY OF NOAH WEBSTER

A Dissertation
for the Degree of Ph. D.
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
Richard Meryl Rollins
1976



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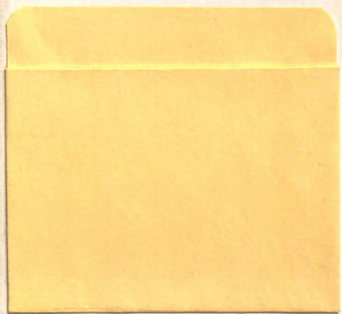
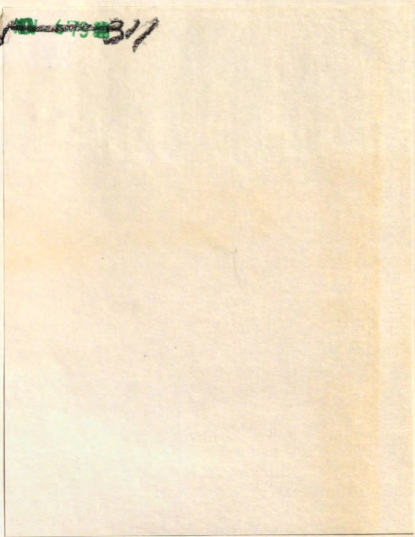
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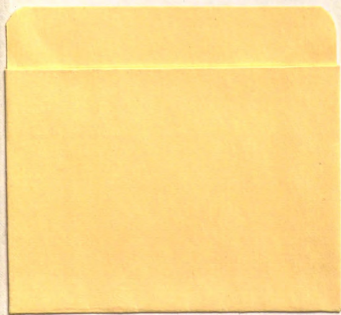
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ABSTRACT

THE LONG JOURNEY OF NOAH WEBSTER

By

Richard M. Ballins

Noah Webster's life was a psychological, intellectual and emotional journey encompassing a wide range of beliefs and activities. It covered a span of more than eight decades and touched an enormous number of individuals, both real and ideal. This study is an attempt to reconstruct the development of his view of himself and the world in which he lived.

Webster's family, education, and general milieu failed to provide him with a sense of direction and belonging. By 1791-1792 he felt abandoned by his father, his first love, and by American society as a whole. This led to an identity crisis of the kind described by Erik Erikson.

Erikson points out that identity crises are often resolved by embracing a strong, systematic ideology. Webster spent the early 1780's agitating for universal white male suffrage, equal distribution of property, complete religious toleration and abolition of slavery. His Grammatical Institute of the English Language (1783-1788) embodied these principles. Webster viewed the schools as tools of social change.

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As a result of the civil unrest and economic trouble symbolized by Shays' Rebellion, Webster began to advocate a balance between his revolutionary ideals and a stronger form of government. He established the first national magazine in New York in 1787 and wrote an important essay in favor of the new government.

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Erlich Fromm notes that those who begin by fighting for freedom often end up on the side of the oppressors.

Noah Webster's life was a psychological, intellectual and emotional journey encompassing a wide range of beliefs and transformation in the life of Noah Webster. In 1793, with the backing of Jay, King, and others, he became the leading Federalist editor in the country. His work with the expansion of human freedom was a major concern in the years of the development of his views of himself and the world in which he lived.

Webster's family, education, religion and general milieu failed to provide him with a sense of direction and belonging. By 1781-1782 he felt rejected by his father, his first love, and by American society as a whole. This led to an identity crisis of the kind described by Erik Erikson.

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As a result of the civil unrest and economic trouble symbolized by Shays' Rebellion, Webster began to advocate a balance between his revolutionary ideals and a stronger form of government. He established the first national magazine in New York in 1787 and wrote an important essay in favor of the new government.

Erich Fromm notes that those who begin by fighting for freedom often end up on the side of the oppressors. Chapter five is a detailed analysis of the beginning of that transformation in the life of Noah Webster. In 1793, with the backing of Jay, King, Hamilton and others, he became the leading Federalist editor in New York. His concern with the expansion of human freedom and its manifestations in the general trend of events is evident throughout his work. As a culmination of anxieties and fears that had been building up since the mid-1780's, Webster carefully rethought all his values and beliefs. He concluded that man was not basically good, but savage in nature. From this point on, the control of human passions and the restriction of human freedom were his major concerns. By 1798 he reached the state of mind that Fromm calls "moral aloneness:" alienation, helplessness and despair. In April he fled to Connecticut, as he himself indicated, to save his own sanity. In a frenzied Fourth of July speech he called for the imposition of authority and repudiated the very principles he had espoused in the 1780's.

He wrote several major and minor essays, all sharply critical of American society and advocating reforms.

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In 1808 he experienced a conversion to evangelical Protestantism. It was the result of deep anxiety over national events, his relationships with his family, and religious introspection. Evangelical Protestantism dictated his political, social, historical and religious views. He believed that personal and public tranquillity could only be achieved if all Americans were completely submissive to their civil and religious authorities. A member of the "second great awakening," his main concern was social control.

The American Dictionary was originally conceived as a patriotic attempt to enhance American independence from England. Yet after 1808 it became something quite different. Webster believed that language could influence the behavior and opinions of individuals. As early as 1790, he consciously attempted to influence the thinking of his readers by defining words in certain ways. In his later work he used the definitions of key terms, such as "free," "equal," "liberty," "education," and "authority" to influence the development of specific personality traits. If all Americans believed that the United States was not a democracy but a republic, that all men were not equal and that no man was really free, that education should be used to convince individuals to submit to religious and political authority, then social control could be established.

The last decade of Webster's life was among his most productive. He wrote several major and minor essays, all bitterly critical of American society and advocating strong

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measures of social control. Finally, the "log-cabin campaign" convinced him of the futility of his efforts. The long journey of Noah Webster ended in bitterness and despair in 1843.

THE LONG JOURNEY OF NOAH WEBSTER

By

Richard Meryl Rollins

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Department of History

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many individuals and organizations deserve my thanks for the roll they played in the course of the last few years. Professors Douglas T. Elliott, Donald E. Bye and Peter D. Levine gave their generous advice and guidance in the writing and research of this manuscript. Richard Moss first suggested Webster as an interesting topic. The staffs of the Amherst College Library, Bieneck Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Connecticut Historical Society, the State Public Library, Historical Society of For Ann and Rebecca, the State Library, New York Historical Society, the University of Toronto and Sterling Memorial Library of Yale University gave their time and cooperation. I am indebted to Mr. Robert Williams, Mr. Walter J. Elliott, Mr. John G. Gataw and Ms. Peg Smith of the Michigan State University Library. Mrs. E. F. Uphaus typed hundreds of pages accurately and with great care. I benefited greatly from the reading given to an early draft of chapter seven by Richard J. Shiels of Boston University.

My personal debts are numerous and important. My parents, Donald and Barbara Rollins, have always provided love and strength. Richard, Jane, Tom, Ann W. and Chris Featherstone, as well as Walter and Mabel Scott and Lee and Ethyl Featherstone, have added joy to the writing of this

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Michael Jones and Ric Timmons all added important suggestions.

Many individuals and organizations deserve my thanks. My debt to Ann and Rebecca is a heavy one, for it was they for the roll they played in the course of the last few years, expressed here.

Professors Douglas T. Miller, Russel B. Nye and Peter D.

Levine gave their generous advice and guidance in the writing and research of this manuscript. Richard Moss first suggested Webster as an interesting topic. The staffs of the Amherst College Library, Bienecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Connecticut Historical Society, Detroit Public Library, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, New York Public Library, New York Historical Society, Pierpont Morgan Library and Sterling Memorial Library of Yale University all gave their time and cooperation. Especially helpful were Mr. Robert Williams, Mr. Walter J. Burinski, Ms. Jane Sagataw and Ms. Peg Smith of the Michigan State University Library. Mrs. B. F. Uphaus typed hundreds of pages accurately and with great care. I benefited greatly from the reading given to an early draft of chapter seven by Richard J. Shiels of Boston University.

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INTRODUCTION

The good and the brave of all nations are welcome to the last resort of liberty and religion; to behold and take part in the closing scene of the vast drama, which has been exhibited on this terrestrial theater, where vice and despotism will be shrouded in despair, and virtue and freedom triumph in the rewards of peace, security and happiness.

N. W., 1783

We deserve all our public evils. We are a degenerate and wicked people.

N. W., 1836

¹"To the Editor of the Palladium," February 7, 1835, Harry R. Warfel, The Letters of Noah Webster (New York: Library Publishers, 1950), p. 448.

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religious conversion. For the rest of his life he expressed the conviction that man was innately depraved and that democracy was "I have in the course of my life been often obliged to change my opinions."¹ With these cryptic words seventy-six year-old Noah Webster acknowledged that his life had encompassed an extraordinary sweep of events and ideas, that they had affected him in profound ways. For nearly six decades he had walked among the men who even in the early years of the republic assumed mythic dimensions. In 1775 he heard the news of Lexington and Concord and marched off to fight the British. In the 1780's Webster traveled the length and breadth of the Confederation strenuously advocating the optimistic doctrine he believed the Revolution had been fought for: liberty, equality and a utopian future. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison and many others paid tribute to these endeavors. As the leading Federalist editor in New York in the 1790's, Noah Webster became deeply involved in national affairs and joined John Jay, Alexander Hamilton, Rufus King, Oliver Wolcott, Jr., and others in their attempts to control and contain the flow of events. With these men he voiced strong criticism of many aspects of American life and of the very nature of man. After 1800 he expressed deep hostility toward most of the developments he observed. In 1808 Noah Webster experienced a profound

¹"To the Editor of the Palladium," February 7, 1835, Harry R. Warfel, The Letters of Noah Webster (New York: Library Publishers, 1950), p. 446.

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religious conversion. For the rest of his life he expressed the conviction that man was innately depraved and that democracy was unworkable. America seemed to the elder Webster an erring nation, one that could only function smoothly if all citizens submitted their hearts and minds to the commandments of divine and civil authority.

The life of Noah Webster was a long journey through a myriad of psychological, intellectual, emotional, religious and political changes. It was tightly interwoven with and directly connected to a half-century of tumultuous changes on the national level. The structure and vicissitudes of his world-view may be traced in everything he wrote; newspaper articles, letters to friends and enemies, his diary, books, essays and intimate letters to his family. They even appear in his essays on economics, science and linguistics. His most famous work, the American Dictionary, was a summary of his life experiences as well as a monumental scholarly achievement. Writing to Thomas Jefferson in 1790, Webster indicated he was aware that his public writing carried the burden of his views of the world at large. One of his reading books, he said, might never be as widely used as his spelling book. Yet both were vehicles with which he hoped "to diffuse some useful truths; which is my primary object in all my publications."²

² Noah Webster to Thomas Jefferson, quoted in Edwin A. Carpenter, Jr., A Bibliography of the Writings of Noah Webster (New York: New York Public Library, 1958), p. 268.

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Webster This study is an inquiry into the relationships of the thought and feelings of a specific individual and the world in which he lived. As such it is not a standard biographical narrative of the events in the life of a "great man."³ Nor is it a full analysis of everything he said or did. Scholarly monographs could be written concentrating on his scientific treatises alone. His educational achievements have already been the subject of much discussion.⁴

"The Long Journey of Noah Webster" seeks to suggest how and why a man who started out as a celebrator of man and American society ended his life as one of their most bitter critics.

Webster Noah Webster contributed significantly to the development of American society and is a unique figure in American cultural history. One of the earliest apostles of educational reform, he was the first American to attempt to reformulate curriculum along nationalistic lines. His American Magazine was the first truly national literary and political publication, and his newspapers had the widest circulation in New York during the 1790's. His famous dictionary, a monumental achievement unduplicated by a single individual in the century and a half since its publication, was the product of twenty-five years of daily labor. Wherever English is spoken

³Harry R. Warfel, Noah Webster: Schoolmaster to America (New York: Octagon Books, 1936) and John S. Morgan, Noah Webster (New York: Mason/Charter Publishers, 1975).

⁴Ibid., and Ervin C. Shoemaker, Noah Webster, Pioneer of Learning (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936).

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"Webster" is synonymous with correct spelling and authoritative definitions. In addition to all this, he wrote scientific treatises still highly regarded as turning points in their field, numerous essays on economics, mythology, two histories of the United States, schoolbooks of all kinds, and commentaries on religion, politics, foreign affairs, law, and many other subjects. Certainly no other individual has accomplished all of these feats.

Webster's life offers an unusual opportunity for the student of American civilization, for he was representative of a significant pattern of development. Many of the revolutionary generation began as supporters of the Revolution, risking their lives for a cause with no assurance of success. They believed in the ideas of equality and freedom as set forth in the Declaration of Independence. Yet the social and political events of the 1780's and 1790's shocked and profoundly disturbed Webster and a number of his contemporaries. In his case, they demolished an optimistic belief in the perfectability of man and led to drastic changes in his view of the world he lived in. Like Webster, many of the revolutionary generation living in the late 1790's, and especially after 1800, became severe critics of the emerging pattern of national events. Concerned with what they perceived as the growth of chaos and anarchy, they turned to Federalism and then to an authoritarian form of Christianity as a means of stopping or controlling history itself. The

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only way for America to become stable, they believed, was for all her citizens to live passive lives in submission to both civil and religious authority.

"A social movement, and the democratic revolution above all, must be understood in terms of the men who made it," writes historian Adrienne Koch of one of the most significant events in the life of Noah Webster and the republic: "the root is man."⁵ Human events and ideas like the Revolution, the Enlightenment, Federalism or the second Great Awakening, as Koch indicates, are the result of many complex human acts and individual choices that are sometimes widespread and sometimes localized. While many of the revolutionary generation shared similar experiences and ended, like Webster, highly critical of American society, the route they took varied widely and was highly individualized. Social and moral assumptions underlying political views must be studied. It is especially important that they be understood in the context of individual or shared experiences.

And if the individual must be studied in order to comprehend the nature of the larger social movement, that individual must be studied as a whole, complete entity. A person's views on religion, politics, history, law or society are inextricably bound to his or her personal and family relationships, education and roles in society. Thoughts and

⁵ Adrienne Koch, ed., The American Enlightenment: The Shaping of the American Experiment and Free Society (New York: George Braziller, 1965), p. 22.

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values as a whole include all manner of hopes and anxieties. As Erich Fromm has said, professed opinions in the main result from the "total existence" of an individual.⁶ This study is an attempt to understand the total existence and the long journey of Noah Webster.

In this situation of things, his spirits failed, and for some months he suffered extreme depression and gloomy forebodings....

W. W. on himself
in 1781-1782

By any standards, Noah Webster's life experiences were extraordinarily diverse and contradictory. Friend and associate of Franklin, Washington, John Adams, Hamilton, Rush and many other well known men, Webster achieved monumental success in education, writing, publishing and so on. Yet in his youth he was an orphan, and his family and religious background did not provide a strong intellectual or social framework for meaningful attainment. In addition, he was ineffective at virtually everything he attempted before 1781. The period between 1778 and 1781 were years of role experimentation. Failure to find his own niche in society led to a psychological crisis and his attempt to begin another life.

Noah Webster was born into an old New England family in 1758. The founder of the American branch of the family,

⁶Erich Fromm, The Sane Society (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1955), p. 22. and. Like many other

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Puritans, he fled the wrath of Archbishop William Laud and settled near Boston. There he joined the congregation of Thomas Hooker, followed to Connecticut in 1633. Settling near what is now Hartford, John Webster became a member of the Court of Magistrates and Governor of the colony.¹

CHAPTER I

FAILURE

In this situation of things, his spirits failed, and for some months, he suffered extreme depression and gloomy forebodings....

N. W. on himself
in 1781-1782

By any standards, Noah Webster's life experiences were extraordinarily diverse and contradictory. Friend and associate of Franklin, Washington, Adams, Madison, Hamilton, Rush and many other well known men, Webster achieved monumental success in education, medicine, and lexicography. Yet in his youth he was an abysmal failure. His family and religious background did not provide a solid intellectual or social framework for meaningful self-definition. In addition, he was ineffective at virtually everything he attempted before 1781. The period between 1778 and 1781 were years of role experimentation. Failure to find his own niche in society led to a psychological crisis and his attempt to begin another life.

The material on Webster's family background and the information on his early youth is drawn from secondary sources, since no primary documents are known before 1758. Noah Webster was born into an old New England family in 1758. The founder of the American branch of the family, John Webster, had come to Massachusetts Bay Colony in the early 1630's from Warwickshire, England. Like many other

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Puritans, he fled the wrath of Archbishop William Laud and settled near Boston. There he joined the congregation of Thomas Hooker, following him into Connecticut in 1635. Settling near what is now Hartford, John Webster became a member of the Court of Magistrates and Governor of the colony.¹

Yet John Webster's odyssey was not over. The death of Thomas Hooker precipitated a crisis lasting ten years, climaxing in 1656 when Webster led a small group of about fifty settlers out of Connecticut and into western Massachusetts.²

Obscurity surrounded John Webster in his final years as it did six generations of his descendants. The Websters were small farmers and petty merchants, and Noah Webster, Senior, the father of the lexicographer was no different. The owner of a small ninety acre farm near Hartford, he left few written documents and only one semi-literate letter addressed to his son. The younger Noah recorded the words of only one conversation with his father, who was the Deacon of the fourth parish in Hartford, and Justice of the Peace from 1761 to 1796. Noah, Sr., married Mercy Steele, of whom

¹The material on Webster's family background and most of the information on his early youth is drawn from secondary sources, since no primary documents from the years before he went to Yale survive. The earliest full-length study, Horace E. Scudder, Noah Webster (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1888), is virtually useless. A few items of information appear in Emily E. F. Ford, Notes on the Life of Noah Webster 2 Volumes (New York: Private Printing, 1912). Most helpful for the Webster family is Noah Webster, Genealogy (Brooklyn: Private Printing, 1876).

²Webster, Genealogy.

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even less is known. Together they produced five children, all raised on farm work like rural children everywhere.³

Religion was a central part of life in eighteenth-century Connecticut, and the Websters attended church regularly. The God overlooking Connecticut in Noah Webster's youth was far different from the one who peered down over John Webster's world. He had been a fearful, omnipotent being, full of wrath and anger. But as new generations replaced the original Puritans, God had taken on a less oppressive character. Now most citizens of New England worried more over the relationship between men than between man and God. Over the years the religion of the first generation had mellowed, and now between God and man there appeared a book in which man could look for his direction: nature. God seemed less omnipotent and fearsome to Noah Webster's generation, and they marveled at the wonder of his work in fashioning their bountiful continent.⁴ In the only clear statement of his religious beliefs before 1808, Webster said the essence of religion was the universal brotherhood of man and that

³Ibid., and Warfel, Webster, Chapter 1.

⁴This generalized description of Connecticut in Webster's youth is based mainly on Richard L. Bushman, From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967). Also helpful were Christopher Collier, Roger Sherman's Connecticut: Yankee Politics and the American Revolution (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), and Forest Morgan, ed., Connecticut as a Colony and as a State, or one of the Original Thirteen (Hartford: The Publishing Society of Connecticut, 1904).

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Yet the old system of religion had left a strong residue of certain beliefs and accepted patterns of behavior. The theology of New England gradually softened, but the values and precepts it was based on and which it had fostered continued. Max Weber and a host of others have long debated the relationship of capitalism and the Protestant ethic.⁶ This system of values, primarily composed of an abhorrence of extravagance and idleness and an emphasis on thrift and frugality, was widespread in eighteenth-century America. Especially strong was a belief that all individuals should lead honest, moral lives devoted to hard work, not to materialistic enrichment and political manipulation for personal betterment. As Edmund S. Morgan has pointed out, congregationalists like Sam Adams of New England and Benjamin Rush of Pennsylvania shared this system of values with Anglicans from the South like Henry Laurens and Richard Henry Lee, as well as with deist Thomas Jefferson.⁷ Benjamin Franklin's autobiography is a clear example of these ideas at work in a specific individual.⁸ The Protestant ethic was the most important

⁵[New York] Daily Advertiser, September 5, 1788.

⁶Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (New York: Scribners, 1958).

⁷Edmund S. Morgan, "The Puritan Ethic and the American Revolution," William and Mary Quarterly, XXIV (1967), pp. 3-43.

⁸Benjamin Franklin, Autobiography and Other Writings Edited with an introduction by Russel B. Nye (Boston: The Riverside Press of Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1958).

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ingredient in Webster's early years. His belief in these values was so deeply ingrained that it affected everything he wrote or did for the remainder of his life.

There were other, more pessimistic elements of the Puritan residue. The brooding fear of an omnipotent God and the belief that man was helpless and inherently depraved were hard to erase, even after several generations. This underlying uneasiness, submerged beneath the general optimism of American thought in the late seventeenth and most of the eighteenth centuries, appears in all periods of New England history. The revolutionary generation's perfectionist view of the nature of man as expressed in political essays of the 1770's and 1780's⁹ deteriorated under the impact of civil disruption symbolized by Shays' Rebellion and the French Revolution. In the 1790's Webster succumbed to the cosmic pessimism of his Puritan forefathers as did many others who participated in the second Great Awakening.¹⁰

But religion was not the center of his youthful concerns. When the farm work slackened during the winter, Webster went to school. Connecticut law provided for eleven months of school, and children under the age of seven attended in the summer while the older ones went in the winter.

In his mature years, Webster made educational reform one of his many preoccupations, and his early school

⁹See Chapter 2.
Historical Society, Archives, Webster Papers.

¹⁰See Chapter 5.

Notes, 1, p. 14

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experiences undoubtedly were a stimulus. The schools of Connecticut in the 1760's were wretched at best. Often housed in dilapidated buildings, the children were in the hands of men and women who frequently could find no other means of making a livelihood. Webster himself later referred to school-teachers as the dregs of society, and his own education was meager. In school, he later remembered, there were no geography or history lessons, and the only books available were a speller, a Bible, and a collection of psalms.¹¹ He never spent more than an hour actually engaged in reading and writing, "while five hours of the school time was spent in idleness--in cutting the tables and benches to pieces--in carrying on pin lotteries, or perhaps in some more roguish tricks."¹²

The society outside the schools was in the midst of important changes. Seventeenth-century Connecticut had been a conservative and deferential colony. Social rank often dictated church-pew assignments. Men of family, wealth, and education usually rose through local offices to positions in the colonial government, often without even making a political speech. Levellers were abhorred because they jeopardized authority. Each institution melted into and reinforced the others; theology emphasized the wickedness of rebellion against community standards and preachers savored and planned election day sermons the year around. The highest civil offices were

¹¹Letter to Henry Barnard, March 10, 1840, New York Historical Society, Archives, Webster Papers.

¹²Ford, Notes, I, p. 14

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often occupied by those stationed at the head of the social ladder, and most felt they were there because of the wisdom of God. The total impact was immense. The inhabitants of Connecticut knew exactly where they stood, both in politics and in society.¹³

Much had changed by the third quarter of the eighteenth century. New people emigrated to the banks of the Connecticut river, people who had not fled England because of religious or economic oppression. Others, less concerned with ideals than with living space, wandered west and north to new farms and towns. More importantly, the religious revival of the 1740's pitted friends and neighbors against one another in debates over social and political questions as well as theological points. The Old Lights, relying on traditional concepts of social order as well as a less enthusiastic religion gradually lost ground in Connecticut to the new emphasis on internal authority and law. Over the years, the new group coalesced and became accustomed to thinking in anti-authoritarian terms. Civil authority had opposed their movement as well as the religious establishment. Respect for all forms of authority was weakened not only by social mobility, but by the very actions of civil and religious authority.¹⁴

By the time of Noah Webster's youth, a new social

¹³Bushman, Yankee, passim.

¹⁴Ibid., Connecticut, p. 41.

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order, fragmented and potentially explosive, was emerging in Connecticut. Divine authority had been undercut by the controversies over the Awakening and men could now oppose the civil officers without fear of eternal damnation. The urge for liberty had been an incentive for submission to authority at the beginning of the century. It was a platform for opposition to any intrusion upon individual or community rights. A significant shift in the perception of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled had taken place. God was still the final source of authority. Yet now the emphasis was placed not on the duty of the ruled to obey the rulers, but on the obligations of the rulers to serve the people.¹⁵

The Connecticut of Webster's youth was then a traditionally based yet changing society. In the early 1760's Parliament passed an act requiring that all paper goods sold in the colonies be taxed. The Governor, Thomas Fitch, took an oath to enforce it over the objections of most of his council. A mob captured the man who shouldered the direct responsibility of collecting the tax in September of 1765, forcing him to resign his commission on the threat of death. The same mob, calling itself the Sons of Liberty, then met with the Governor and informed him that unless he refused to honor the act his house would be "levelled with the dust in five minutes."¹⁶ Connecticut was thoroughly aroused and for the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Morgan, Connecticut, p. 41.

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next year town after town met and condemned the Stamp Act until it was repealed. From then until the outbreak of the war, Connecticut stood beside Massachusetts in opposition to England. When the Port Bill was enacted, Boston was fed with supplies from Connecticut. In 1766, Thomas Fitch was voted out of office, an act virtually unheard of in previous years. He was replaced by an anti-tax man.¹⁷

Amidst the growing tension of pre-revolutionary events, Noah Webster began to express an interest in matters less routine than daily farm chores. In 1772 he informed his father that college interested him. This greatly disturbed the elder Webster, who had four other children to provide for and precious little to work with. The father had a hard decision to make for it would be an expensive venture. Furthermore, he was not at all sure that it would be worth the cost or effort, not to mention the loss of a strong body around the farm. He hesitated for a while but finally agreed to do as much as he could. In the autumn he took his son to the Reverend Nathan Perkins of Hartford, who began to tutor him in the subjects necessary to prepare for college. A year later Webster entered the grammar school run by Mr. Wales, also in Hartford. The following year he applied for admission to Yale, and was

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 44. ...based it on his collection of his own writings, for as is quite accurate when checked against other sources. In fact, he included within the body of the report himself. The New York Public Library collection, and two others altogether, was his private collection and several of the letters quoted in part or in full in the memoir and he noted there. The memoir is unsigned and in the third person. But it is in Webster's hand.

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accepted for the 1774-1775 school year.¹⁸

The tiny campus in New Haven housed a small but dynamic institution. Just eight years before Webster arrived the system of seating students in class according to their social standing had been abolished. A system of alphabetical seating was substituted, giving the school a more democratic air. Former students had spent two days each week studying theology, a subject on which Webster spent less than one day a week. During his years at Yale an anti-clerical faction called for specific reforms toward a more practical curriculum, and some of their plans were successfully implemented. In Webster's years a few literary societies appeared, open even to freshmen. Yale substituted English for Latin in classroom exercises, and formal debates over the morality of slavery and the legality of opposition to England kept the students astir. A new concern for mathematics, astronomy, physics and anatomy slowly forced more changes. Overall it was a dynamic period, one in which a young man from the country was exposed to many different ideas, and especially to the belief that

18 [Noah Webster], "Memoir of Noah Webster," Yale University Archives, Webster Family Papers, Box 1. The memoir is autobiographical in nature, and was probably an attempt to organize the beginning of a full-scale work. Webster evidently based it on his collection of his own writings, for it is quite accurate when checked against other sources. In fact, he includes several letters within the body of the memoir itself. The New York Public Library collection, now ten boxes altogether, was his private collection and several of the letters quoted in part or in full in the memoir can be found there. The memoir is unsigned and in the third person, but it is in Webster's hand.

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progressive change was possible and even necessary.¹⁹

Yale introduced Noah Webster to the Enlightenment. Not a coherent system of philosophy put forth in one great treatise, it was instead a way of thinking, a diverse group of assumptions and beliefs clustered around reliance on human reason. Sometimes all of the modes of Enlightenment thought could be found in the writings of one person, but usually only a few were exhibited by a single individual. Yet they all saturated the culture as a whole. The emphasis on reason, or man's ability to use his own mind to understand the universe without recourse to supernatural explanations, was widespread.²⁰

The scientific methods discovered during the previous century by a host of Europeans reigned supreme. God was the architect of the universe, and through the study of his creation one could learn all the important secrets. All phenomena, from the stars to the smallest insect, were believed to function according to logical and rational principles. They could be understood and reduced to the certainty of natural laws as specific and ironclad as mathematical formulas.

Webster indicated his interest in science in a paper delivered in 1778 as the culmination of his formal education.

¹⁹ The most recent and by far the most scholarly treatment of Yale is Brooks Mather Kelley, Yale: A History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

²⁰ On the Enlightenment in America, see Koch, Enlightenment; Charles A. Barker, American Convictions: Cycles of Public Thought, 1600-1850 (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1973); Merle Curti, The Growth of American Thought (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), and Gordon S. Wood, ed., The Rising Glory of America (New York: George Braziller, 1971).

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"A Short View of the Origin and Progress of the Science of Natural Philosophy" celebrated the accomplishments of Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes and others. His hero, however, was clearly that "great genius," the "immortal Newton." No other subject, said Webster, could furnish as much pleasure for a speculative mind like his own "than that of Natural Philosophy."²¹

The enlightened students of Yale conceived of human nature in optimistic terms. Man's fate was no longer predetermined by an arbitrary being. It was the natural result of the environment and could thus be encouraged and advanced by man himself simply by bringing it into line with natural law. Evil and depravity were religious fictions invented by priests and their cohorts to control the populace; any evil that did appear was the result of natural causes. More importantly, men had the power to improve their environment through science and education by using reason, and many Americans during the Revolution believed that there was no better place for this to happen than in America.²² Noah Webster's essays on America as an "empire of reason" reflected all these ideas.²³ A great many Europeans shared this optimistic

²¹This paper was published in the New York Magazine and Literary Repository Volume 1 (1790), pp. 338-340, 383-384.

²²Gordon S. Wood, The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969) and Bernard Bailyn, Ideological Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) both stress the utopian thrust of revolutionary ideology.

²³See Chapter 2.

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view of the future; noted English radical Richard Price believed that the Revolution was the dawn of a "new era in the history of mankind," while Goethe, Schiller, Lessing and Kant sang German praises of America.²⁴

Old ways took on new meaning when seen through the lens of the Enlightenment. The covenant system of the Puritan forefathers now looked very much like the compact system of government which many Englishmen seemed to believe had been discovered by John Locke. But now obligations of the state and the individual were not handed down by God. Instead they seemed more like natural devices by which men could put his world in order. The most important concept of all was natural rights, which were not granted by God but part of man because of his very humanness.

Eighteenth-century America was concerned with morals. England, many believed, was in its death throes, diseased beyond hope and engulfed by luxury, money, and vice. America must be kept virtuous; its leaders, therefore, must be unselfishly devoted to the good of the whole and moral beyond a shadow of a doubt. The public good could only be served by men who were free of private temptations, full of industry and simple in ambition as well as in lifestyle. Thus the yeomen farmers, whom Jefferson called the chosen people of God,

²⁴A good article on the European image of America is Michael Kraus, "America and the Utopian Ideal in the Eighteenth Century," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, Volume 22 (1936), pp. 487-504.

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were the heroes of the second half of the century. They were the people on whom the republic would be founded; the ultimate hero in an age of heroes, of course, was that stoic, plain farmer from Virginia, George Washington.²⁵

The need for heroes also led down another path, one that pointed back to the past. Numerous examples were dredged up out of the ancient world and used as models for the new one. The newspapers, political pamphlets, theater, poetry, and in fact virtually every area of American culture in the late eighteenth century was saturated with references to the ancient republics. People wrote letters to newspapers and articles, signing themselves "Camillus," "Phocian," "Cicero," or "Publius." Plutarch, Polybius, Solon and Lycurgus were quoted on every important occasion as if the spirits of the past republics could ensure success for the new one. When Webster finally began to write, long after he left Yale, all of the characteristics of Enlightenment thought appeared in his work. His essays stressing America's utopian nature, man's capacity for reason, morality and heroic endeavor would often be signed with classical pennames, including "Honorius," "Orpheus," "Curtius," and his favorite, "Cato."²⁶

Young Noah Webster's first year away from his father's farm was a momentous one, full of events and people as well as

²⁵Wood, Creation; Robert Hay, "George Washington: American Moses," American Quarterly, (1969), pp. 780-791.

²⁶Koch, Enlightenment, and Wood, Glory, passim.

books, ideas and heroes. His classmates formed, in the opinion of the most recent historian of the college, "one of the greatest classes to graduate from Yale."²⁷ Webster struck up friendships with Josiah Meigs and Oliver Wolcott, Jr., future Secretary of the Treasury. His closest friendship was with Joel Barlow, who was, like Webster, the product of a small, poor Connecticut farm and who became one of revolutionary America's foremost poets.

In February, 1775, while political tensions with England increased, the students of Yale began preparing for combat. They formed a militia company and drilled enthusiastically under the eyes of two regular soldiers. Breastworks were being constructed when on April 21st a courier arrived with the long awaited news that colonists had exchanged fire with British troops. Captain Benedict Arnold quickly assembled the company on the college green and marched up to the powder-house, seizing the stores of arms and ammunition. The whole company then marched off towards Boston, dressed in scarlet coats, white breeches, black leggings and fur head pieces.²⁸

The 16 year old farmboy was quickly swept up in the war. Classes were dismissed and did not meet again for about six weeks. Yale became a center of rebellion, and one alumnus

²⁷Kelley, Yale, p. 85.

²⁸Ibid., p. 84.

³⁰Ford, Notes, I, p. 18.

³¹Kelley, Yale, p. 85.

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regarded it as "a nursery of sedition, of faction, and republicanism." Those suspected of loyalism were drummed off the campus.²⁹ In June, two distinguished looking men on their way to join the troops around Boston stopped for the night at the home of Isaac Beers, a local tavern owner. The students discovered that one of the men, George Washington, would take over command of all the militia then encamped near Boston. The Yale company turned out to drill in front of the Beers' residence, an event that Webster remembered for the rest of his life. Sixty years later he recalled that he was among the musicians who led Washington and Charles Lee out of town.³⁰ The next month the usual commencement ceremonies were canceled and not resumed until after the war.³¹

The rest of Webster's college days were even more chaotic. Classes were suspended twice in 1776; once because of disease and once because of a lack of food. His entire third year was spent not in New Haven but in Glastonbury, after the corporation decided that the town was too susceptible to invasion. Each class and its tutor was sent to a different town, and in April, 1777, the library was broken up and disbursed to prevent it from being ransacked or burned by the British. In January 1778 the school told the students that

²⁹ Ibid. See also David Potter, "Nathan Hale and the Ideal of the American Union," Connecticut Antiquarian, VI (1954), p. 23.

³⁰ Ford, Notes, I, p. 18.

³¹ Kelley, Yale, p. 85.

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those who could keep up their studies at home or elsewhere need not return. Webster came back only to pick up his degree.³²

Webster joined the army twice during his student days. In 1776 he marched into Canada where one of his brothers was fighting³³ and in the fall of 1777 he joined his father's militia company to fight against Burgoyne. As they were making their way up the Hudson valley amidst what Webster described as "terror and devastation," a courier informed them that Burgoyne had surrendered. Frustrated yet relieved, they turned around and went home.³⁴

The spirit of rebellion affected Yale and Noah Webster. In April, 1776, the students petitioned the corporation to renounce Naphtali Daggett, the President of the school, an act quite unusual in early American education.³⁵ Later that year, after returning from the battle of Long Island, Webster's friend Barlow wrote a parody of the Book of Chronicles satirizing life at Yale and Daggett.³⁶ In 1777 two of Webster's classmates were about to be punished for some now unknown crime when Noah and twenty-five others, in a "premeditated and preconceived combination," walked out of chapel. This was

³² Ibid., p. 87 and [Webster], "Memoir," p. 4.

³³ Ford, Notes, I, pp. 20-21.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 27-28.

³⁵ Kelley, Yale, p. 85.

³⁶ James Woodress, A Yankee's Odyssey: The Life of Joel Barlow (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1958), pp. 44-45.

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a serious offense which shocked the school officials, and the entire group was given the option of signing a confession of their "audacious contempt" or taking the consequences. They chose to admit, in writing, that their conduct had been "utterly inexcusable, entirely Criminal, and highly affrontive, an Example tending to the Subversion of all good Order...." They publicly condemned themselves and promised to "Avoid all such like disorderly Behavior" in the future.³⁷ And that was not all. In August of the same year Noah and the rest of his class were drafted to serve in the continental army. They were not opposed to the war or to fighting, and most of them served at least once during the war. Yet they all refused to be drafted on the grounds that it was an infringement by the government on their rights. Claiming what may have been the first student deferment in American history, the class of 1778 hired a lawyer and took their case to court.³⁸

Despite the excitement of Yale and the Revolution, failure was the most important aspect of Webster's youth. The years between 1774 and 1781 formed a crucial period in his maturation process, including a quest for identity common in late adolescence in our own time. Neither his religious heritage nor social or familial traditions provided him with a

³⁷"Confessions of Causing a Disturbance in Chapel, Signed by 25 Students," Bienecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, Connecticut, Manuscript Vault, Section 17. This was signed by members of the class of 1778, including Webster, Wolcott and Meigs.

³⁸Ford, Notes, I, pp. 26-27.

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strong sense of continuity or self. He did not become a minister, as did others from the same milieu, like Joel Barlow. In fact he was significantly uninterested in religion until 1808. The three years after Yale were years of consistent failure in all fields.

Webster's college education, even though it probably entailed no more than two years of actual on-campus study, significantly altered his values and his life. By 1778 he was no longer a farm boy, but was in fact a nascent intellectual, deeply interested in science, literature, philosophy and politics, not in business or agriculture. His major concern in college was intellectual growth not preparation for a vocation. His senior thesis, "Whether the Destruction of the Alexandrine Library, and the Ignorance of the Middle Ages caused by the Inund^a of the Goths and Vandels were events unfortunate to Literature," emphasized his orientation. Moreover, the abbreviated and chaotic nature of his Yale experience left him dissatisfied. "The advantages enjoyed by the students," he once said, "during the four years of College life were much inferior to those enjoyed before and since the revolution."³⁹

Thus when Webster graduated he was in somewhat of a dilemma. Interested in a subject matter by which he could not earn a living, he could only return to his father's farm. Yet Greek, poetry and revolution made the farm chores seem an excruciating bore; it was quite evident that he did not belong

³⁹[Webster], "Memoir," p. 4.

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there either. His lack of interest was obvious, and within a few weeks his father decided that he was now more of a liability than a benefit.

Noah, Sr., gave his son eight dollars in continental currency, worth much less in actual trade, and said to him "take this, you must now seek your living; I can do no more for you." It was a shock, and Webster remembered the words for the rest of his life. The stern command threw him into what he himself called a "state of anxiety." He promptly closeted himself in his room for three days, where he contemplated his future, read Samuel Johnson, and felt "cast upon the world."⁴⁰

After leaving the farm, Webster turned to schoolteaching to earn a living. Virtually penniless and without a family now to fall back on, he took a position in Glastonbury. Schoolteaching in revolutionary America was generally an unpleasant means of employment, yet he remained until the summer of 1779. He then decided to become a lawyer and secured a position as an aide to Oliver Ellsworth, later Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. However, his father had mortgaged the farm to send Noah to Yale, and he could not repay the debt on his small salary. In the fall of 1779 he took a second teaching position in Hartford.⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

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While he was teaching that winter, Webster began to think about the role of education in society. He believed that schools had been neglected by Americans both in terms of their physical situations and their possible use as a tool of socialization. Ignorance could only bring tyranny, he felt, and thus the school was an important institution. They must be improved so that the new republic could fulfill her mission of establishing "civil and religious liberty."⁴²

As Webster became increasingly critical of and alienated from the schools in which he found himself, he took time to put his thoughts down on paper. The buildings themselves were generally run down and poorly heated, an obvious source of difficulty. In addition, the tables were too low for the children to write on and there were no locks on the drawers in which the books were stored. Classrooms were often crowded and it was impossible for one teacher to instruct seventy or eighty children in one room as many were forced to do. Twenty or twenty-five would be a better number. Individualized instruction, said Webster, could then take place.⁴³

Most appalling to the young schoolteacher were the methods used by American teachers in general. He observed

⁴² Gazette of the United States, January 9, 1790. Webster's own copy of this article is marked "Written in the winter of 1779-1780." See Carpenter, Bibliography, p. 443.

⁴³ Gazette of the United States, January 19, 1790.

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that most teachers either tried to frighten children into paying attention, or tried to force them to learn. Webster warned that children would never enjoy learning as long as they were dragged "along under the lash of a master's rod, without any delight in books...."⁴⁴ Instead the teacher should offer incentives, some "alluring object" for students to reach for. Schools must change, in physical as well as mental ways, and Noah Webster urged all Americans to support their local schools no matter how much it cost. A good education, he believed, was the best legacy they could give their children.⁴⁵

In the spring of 1780 he moved to Litchfield as an assistant to the registrar of deeds and once again began to study law. After a year he took the law examinations with twenty other prospective lawyers, and much to the surprise of all, no one was admitted. Local lawyers had been alarmed at the thought of that many new people competing in an already overstocked, depressed business, believed Webster. Instead of trying again in Litchfield, he rode back to Hartford and soon passed the same examination there.⁴⁶

But passing the examination did not guarantee a good business, and Webster's hopes were soon disappointed. The war had decimated the practice of law in Connecticut, and as

⁴⁴ Ibid., January 13, 1790.

⁴⁵ Ibid., January 16, 1790.

⁴⁶ Warfel, Webster, and [Webster], "Memoir."

Connecticut Current, June 1, 1781.

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Webster himself said, "no good prospect of professional business presented itself...."⁴⁷ He tried to set up an office in Hartford, but could not make enough to live on and pay his debts to his father. The few cases he did manage to attract brought only meager fees, and the profession turned out to be as overcrowded in Hartford as it was in Litchfield.⁴⁸

By summer it was apparent that he was not going to succeed in the legal field. Once again in desperation he turned to school teaching. This time he decided to open his own school. Sharon, Connecticut, near the New York line seemed like a promising town, and there he offered a school of the highest quality. Education, his advertisement said, was "essential to the interest of a free people." Webster attracted the children of Whig refugees from New York City and taught grammar, Latin, Greek, French, Geography, Composition, Mathematics and Vocal Music.⁴⁹

Webster enjoyed life in Sharon, and for a while it looked as if he had found his niche. The school was in a house owned by John Cotton Smith, later elected Governor of the state. Smith's nineteen-year old sister, Juliana, had organized a small literary circle, not unlike the one to which Noah had belonged in college. The society reawakened his literary interests and further stimulated his political thinking.

⁴⁷ [Webster], "Memoir," p. 6.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Connecticut Courant, June 1, 1781.

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It even published a small magazine, The Clío: A Literary Miscellany, to which he submitted a few small poems.

One Sharon resident fascinated the young schoolmaster: The Rev. John Peter Tetard, a learned European and a Huguenot. With Tetard he studied French, German, Spanish and Latin, as well as history. In Sharon he found a means of survival amidst intellectual stimulation, and he thrived. Reading Tom Paine's The Crisis sharpened his democratic and nationalistic tendencies. In September he dashed back to New Haven to pick up an M. A. Degree awarded almost automatically by Yale in the eighteenth-century, and returned to discuss Rousseau's Social Contract with Tetard. Their conversations revolved around the rights and responsibilities of governments and the basic structure of society, as well as the problem of human slavery. During his college years Webster had been convinced that universal white male suffrage was necessary in America in addition to complete religious toleration, and Tetard strengthened his convictions.⁵⁰

His stay in Sharon was exciting for another reason. He had always been fond of female company, and in Sharon he met several intelligent and beautiful women. Webster and Barlow had been known as socialites in New Haven, but this was the first time he had ever been involved in a serious relationship. Juliana Smith was the first to draw his attention, but when she rejected the poetry (which he called "doggerel") that

⁵⁰ [Webster], "Memoir," p. 6.

he had submitted to The Clio, he fell in love with another.

Rebecca Pardee represented the final failure of Noah Webster's adolescence. He fell strongly in love with her, and for a time the feeling was mutual. The summer and early fall of 1781 was the happiest time since college for Webster, but it did not last for long. Unfortunately for him, she had previously had another relationship with a man who was then an officer in the continental army. When he returned, a triangular affair developed and Webster was soon excluded from her company. Her rejection precipitated a drastic move: in October he abruptly and without warning closed his school and left Sharon.⁵¹

Webster's youthful failures culminated during the winter of 1781-1782 in an identity crisis. After leaving Sharon he wandered through Connecticut, looking for "mercantile employment" for which he was unprepared. He was "without success." New England as a whole seemed hostile, so he decided to travel to the South or West in search of something to do.⁵² He crossed the Hudson River and wound up in Goshen, New York, about twenty miles west of the river. Half a century later he could still vividly recall his mental state during this period. With but seventy-five cents in his pocket, he was alone,

⁵¹ Joel Benton, "An Unwritten Chapter in Noah Webster's Life...." Magazine of American History, X (July, 1883), pp. [52]-56.

⁵² [Webster], "Memoir," p. 6.

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"without money and without friends...." He had no ambition, no skills, no direction or future. In Goshen his spirits failed and for several months "he suffered extreme depression and gloomy forebodings...."⁵³

One of the most significant stages of any human life, according to psychologist Erik Erikson, is late adolescence.⁵⁴ The essential characteristic of this period between childhood

⁵³ Ibid., p. 7

⁵⁴ A word must be said about the use of psychology in this study. Attempts to wed psychology and history have proliferated in this century, especially since Erik Erikson published his landmark Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958). During the past twenty years numerous scholars have discussed "psychohistory" at length in all its various forms. The most extensive bibliography is Faye Sinofsky, John J. Fitzpatrick, Louis W. Potts and Lloyd de Mause, "A Bibliography of Psychohistory," History of Childhood Quarterly, Spring, 1975, pp. 517-562. The most widely held and often repeated criticism of the use of psychology in historical studies is that scholars often seem more concerned with psychological theory than with the figures to whom it is applied, as Norman Kiell, ed. Psychological Studies of Famous Americans: The Civil War Era (New York: Twayne Publications, 1964), has indicated. Indeed, as Anthony Storr has said in The Dynamics of Creation (New York: Atheneum, 1972), p. xii, attempts to explain human actions in the light of specific theories or schemes often turn out to be "procrustean" efforts to "fit obstinate facts into a bed of psychoanalytic theory which is both too short and too narrow to accommodate them." This study seeks to avert these pitfalls by utilizing diverse psychological theories as insights to illuminate certain developments, to clarify their meaning and impact. Instead of forcing Noah Webster into a strict systematic interpretation, it will benefit from the ideas developed by scholars in a flexible manner, always with the greater understanding of the life of one individual in mind. For example, the concept of an identity crisis formulated by Erik Erikson helps make the events of 1781-1782 and after more understandable. Yet Erikson believes that the identity crisis is only one stage in an epigenetic life cycle shared by virtually all human beings. He has sketched out additional stages of development, none of which add useful perspectives for this particular study.

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and adulthood is role experimentation and a quest for a positive sense of inner identity, a search for acceptance and a niche in society which is both firmly defined yet seemingly unique. It is a time when it is important to the individual that the society in which he exists somehow communicate to him a sense of meaningfulness, that he develop a sense of achievement and function within the greater society. Webster clearly failed to achieve any of these goals. Erikson tells us that in most instances, it is the inability to settle on an occupational identity that is most disturbing.⁵⁵ Webster floated from job to job, all of which were low in pay and status. Always financially insecure and in debt to his father, he clearly did not enjoy teaching, the occupation into which he had fallen by default. He moved seven times in three years. When he tried to break away from teaching and practice law, he was again unsuccessful.

Karen Horney has written much that helps us understand the development of Webster's crisis.⁵⁶ She believes, as does Erikson, that economic and social insecurities can lead to extensive anxiety and personal insecurity. She adds that problems

⁵⁵Erik Erikson, Childhood and Society (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), p. 262. The first and still the most lucid discussion of Erikson's concept of identity crisis is in his article, "The Problem of Ego Identity," reprinted in Maurice Stein, Arthur J. Vidich and David Manning White, Identity and Anxiety: Survival of the Person in Mass Society (New York: The Free Press, 1960). He also discusses it in Identity, Youth and Crisis (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968).

⁵⁶Karen Horney, New Ways in Psychoanalysis (New York: W. W. Norton, 1939); The Neurotic Personality of our Time (New York: W. W. Norton, 1937).

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are often compounded when neither tradition nor religion is strong enough in the individual to give him a sense of being an integral part of a larger whole. Webster possessed neither in large quantities; if anything, his education had made him hostile to both. Finally, Horney believes that disturbances in interpersonal relations can lead to inner anxiety and self-doubt, thus in Erikson's terms increasing his identity anxiety. During the years after Yale Webster felt progressively rejected by all the psychologically significant figures in his life: his father, the community as a whole, and finally his first love.

To Erik Erikson a sense of identity is one of the crucial building-blocks in the construction of an individual's self-image. He defines it as "the accrued confidence that the inner sameness and continuity prepared in the past are matched by the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others, as evidenced in the tangible promises of a 'career.'"⁵⁷ The sum total of Webster's adolescent years was the failure to achieve this positive sense of identity.

⁵⁷Erikson, Childhood, p. 260.

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CHAPTER II

REVOLUTION

All power is vested in the people.
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inalienable right, is a position:
that will not be disputed.

N. W., 1785

Noah Webster's crisis of 1781-1782 was not an end but a beginning. Erik Erikson has pointed out that a mind in a state such as Webster's is essentially an "ideological mind."¹ An individual in this situation eagerly seeks confirmation of the self in the form of rituals, creeds and programs. He realizes a clear comprehension of his own life within the context of an intelligible theory of existence. Much like a religion, the ideology is usually grouped around a utopian simplification of history and the individual's own newly developing identity potentials. Erikson sums up this type of ideology as a "new synthesis of the past and the future."² This is an apt description of the belief system which Webster sincerely and strongly advocated between 1781 and 1785.

For amidst the loneliness of his self-imposed exile in Goshen he found a way to achieve a sense of meaning and

¹Erikson, Childhood, p. 263.

²Erikson, "Problem," pp. 69-70.

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self-definition in his own life by fusing it with a cause. American historians have long argued over the nature of the Revolution. For Webster, it was neither a simple rebellion against colonial rule nor a revolution from the bottom up.³ It was all that and much more, containing elements both personal and national in scope. The ideology he espoused was rarely systematic, often consisting of vague optimistic slogans appropriated from others. Some of the essays he wrote were well thought out, others were superficial. In essence, his beliefs were a fusion of past and future: they combined the intense moralism of his Protestant ethic, elements of Enlightenment thought and the hopeful vision of America's future that was so widespread during the late eighteenth-century.

To the cause of the Revolution Webster brought much talent and energy, and in fact one historian has called him the most effective propagandist of the 1780's.⁴ His books, pamphlets, articles and even personal letters written during this period were devoted to spreading the principles for which

³Historians writing since 1945 have been largely divided into these two interpretive views of the Revolution. For a full analysis of the historiography of this period, see George Athan Billias, "The Revolutionary Era: Reinterpretations and Revisions." Billias and G. N. Grob, American History: Retrospect and Prospect (New York: The Free Press, 1971).

⁴Merrill Jensen, The New Nation: A History of the United States During the Confederation, 1781-1788 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965).

he believed the Revolution had been fought. In many ways Webster summed up much of what a host of others were saying and had said over the previous two decades. But he was also unique in that he was perhaps the first⁵ and certainly the most vocal advocate of cultural independence from England. He also constructed the first American system of education as a conscious means of extending and solidifying revolutionary principles. During that winter in Goshen Noah Webster discovered a cause, and for the next few years he perceived himself essentially as a propagandist for the Revolution.

Webster undoubtably knew that his work fit easily into a long tradition of English and American Whig thought. Like Sam Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Tom Paine, James Otis and innumerable others, Noah Webster drew on a rich heritage of opposition to authority and agitation for social change going back to the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Men like John Trenchard, Algernon Sidney, Thomas Gordon, John Locke and James Harrington wrote political propaganda which became and remained central to American thinking right up to Lexington and after. The English radicals, including the revolutionary generations' own contemporaries, John Wilkes, Richard Price and Joseph Priestley, stood for a solid belief that government,

⁵Benjamin T. Spencer, the most thorough analyst of early American nationalism, does not address himself to the question of who was the most effective, most vocal, or first advocate of cultural nationalism. Yet Webster appears to be all of those in Spencer's work, The Quest for Nationality (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1957).

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by its very nature, was a necessary evil, hostile to human happiness, which must be scrupulously watched and battled at every turn. They fought for adult manhood suffrage, freedom of the press, elimination of rotten boroughs, complete religious toleration, and binding instructions as well as residential requirements for representatives.⁶

Webster's Sketches of American Policy (1785) clearly indicates his specific debts to the European radicals. He had reexamined Rousseau's Social Contract and read a new essay by Richard Price during January of that year. Rousseau's influence had always been strong on Webster, and he admitted that he had "imbibed many visionary ideas" from the French philosophe.⁷ Price's influence was new, but no less potent. "Many of my observations, particularly on religious tests and establishments, and on the liberty of discussion," Webster explained, "have been anticipated by that respectable writer, so distinguished by the justice and liberality of his sentiments and by his attachments to America."⁸

⁶The role of the English radicals in American Revolutionary thought has drawn increasing attention from historians in recent years. See Bailyn, Origins; Wood, Creation; Pauline Maier, From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776 (New York: Vintage Press, 1972); Caroline Robbins, Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959) and Staughton Lynd, Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).

⁷[Webster], "Memoir," p. 12.

⁸Noah Webster, Sketches of American Policy (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1785, p. (2).

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Webster drew on other sources as well. His long Connecticut heritage had left him with the assumption that contract relationships formed the bases of all social and political systems. Both rulers and ruled had obligations, and if one side ignored them, as he believed England had, the contract should be considered broken. His study of classical republicanism had reinforced this notion, and in addition his studies at Yale and with Tetard had provided him with a firm understanding of English common law. The principles and precedents set down by the British barristers along with the covenant tradition in New England gave him a sensitivity to the law which he applied to his own political thought.

One of the central points in the Whig ideology was the question of the British constitution.⁹ Before the Revolution the Whig concept of constitution did not center on a specific written document like the one produced later in Philadelphia, instead the word itself was a symbol for an entire system of values and governmental operations. It meant the fundamental laws, institutions and traditions, and most importantly, the moral principles which they thought the commonwealth had been founded upon. Englishmen in the eighteenth century generally believed that this marvelous system preserved the rights under which they prospered. Those rights were the foundation of British liberty. In America, Sam Adams believed that these principles were based in nature and protected by God,

⁹At least one recent historian believes that the entire Whig system of thought may have rested on this point. See Bailyn, Origins, p. 47.

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to be applied universally to all mankind. His cousin John Adams said that they were "the most perfect combination of human powers in society which infinite wisdom has yet contrived and reduced to practice for the preservation of liberty and the production of happiness." On the continent, Montesquieu himself, perhaps the most influential of all the French philosophes, declared that it was indeed a beautiful system.¹⁰

Over and over again throughout the years of turmoil, American whigs reiterated that one of the central ideas for which they fought was the preservation of the British Constitution. They believed that it was being undermined by the King, his court, and Parliament. Beginning in the 1760's with James Otis, virtually all Whigs cried out over the loss of liberties and the subversion of the Constitution, indicating that what they sought was a return to the old ways. Some believed that there was a conspiracy of those surrounding the King, while others insisted that it was Parliament which was trying to destroy the bases of society. By 1775 most agreed that the English system of government was rotten to the core.¹¹

The idea of contract was central to Webster's conception of the essence of the Constitution. Under the old system, the King had been obliged to provide protection for the colonists, who in turn owed him their loyalty. King George,

¹⁰Ibid., p. 67.

¹¹See especially Maier, Resistance.

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he believed, had, before the Declaration of Independence, attempted to impose some "unconstitutional and oppressive laws" on the colonists. He had withdrawn his protection, confiscated property, and thus had forfeited all right to their allegiance. The King's claim that the colonists owed him unconditional submission was in itself an "infraction of the compact between the King and his subjects, which dissolves every tie of allegiance, and [was] an insult to the rights of humanity, which the free sons of America cannot fail to resent with unabating indignation." But the corruption, he believed, went deeper than just the attitudes of the King. Parliament also sought to limit traditional liberties, and they acknowledged their own guilt, he felt, when they repealed their own acts in the 1760's.¹²

Webster was a good enlightenment figure, and his belief in reason and the common man appeared in everything he wrote. "What a piece of work is man," said his 1784 reader, "how noble is reason! How infinite in faculty and in form and moving, how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a God." Man could indeed perfect himself, and America would be the place where he would do it, especially if all her children would learn to read with one of Noah Webster's essays or books. Reason, he felt, was the key to progressive change. "Let reason go before every enterprize," and if children followed this classic rule,

¹²New York Packet, January 31, 1782.

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America would indeed become a utopia.¹³

The young men of the Revolution who used their powers of reason and looked around them to see the birth of a new nation also looked into the past and found that history justified their cause. History was, they discovered, cyclical in nature; as one nation declined in power and eminence, another inevitably took its place, as Rome had replaced Greece. "The birthday of a new world is at hand," said Tom Paine, and most Americans believed that the Revolution was the beginning of a new cycle.¹⁴ Noah Webster echoed this idea:

Nations, like animals, have their birth, grow to maturity, and decay. Constitutions which began with freedom, end in tyranny, and those which are founded on the wisest maxims of justice and virtue, always crumble to pieces by the imperceptible influence of their own Corruptions.

Not to go ahead would be unthinkable. America must take up the torch of civilization. To subject the colonists "to the corrupted tyrannical system of British politics," he added, "would be to stamp the wrinkles of age on the bloom of youth, and to plant death in the vitals of the infant Empire."¹⁵

¹³Noah Webster, A Grammatical Institute of the English Language: comprising An easy, concise systematic method of EDUCATION: Designed for the use of Schools in AMERICA. In three parts. Part III. (Hartford: Barlow and Babcock, 1785), p. 1.

¹⁴Quoted in R. N. Stromberg, "History in the 18th Century," Journal of the History of Ideas, XII (1951), pp. 295-304.

¹⁵New York Packet, February 7, 1782.

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The green fields and hills of Connecticut made America, when compared to the rest of the world, look obviously superior. Descriptions of not only England but Denmark, South America, Asia, Africa, Arabia and even Rome flowed from Webster's pen. They were beastly places, unfit for good republicans to inhabit. On the other hand, America and her future glittered and shone under present and future suns. It was the only country on earth where all governments were calculated to promote the "happiness of mankind."¹⁶ America had been chosen by nature as though it specifically intended to baffle the last efforts of tyranny. It was almost as if some mysterious hand had "reserved one part of the world from the yawning gulf of bondage," out of the reach of all evil.¹⁷ Time and time again Webster portrayed America as a veritable paradise to which others could find haven from the degeneracy of Europe:

The good and the brave of all nations are welcome to the last resort of liberty and religion; to behold and take part in the closing scene of the vast drama, which has been exhibited on this terrestrial theater, where vice and despotism will be shrouded in despair, and virtue and freedom triumph in the rewards of peace, security and happiness.¹⁸

Webster was convinced that one of the keys to the strengthening of this past and future utopia was the equal distribution of property. He expressed gratitude that America was being settled by peasants who came to live on their own

¹⁶Freeman's Chronicle, October 27, 1783.

¹⁷Ibid., November 10, 1783.

¹⁸Ibid.

private land, and that there were no Barons, Dukes, Princes or other forms of nobility invested with European-style grants of property and power. Future happiness could be secured by allowing every person to purchase and possess as much as he could in fee simple. This was, he believed, "the only method to preserve the liberties of America, for that virtue and public spirit which are the essential springs of a republic depend solely on an equal distribution of property."¹⁹ His own historical enquiries led him to believe that unequal property caused almost all the civil wars which had torn nations to pieces, from ancient Rome to seventeenth-century England. "The great fundamental principle upon which alone a free government can be rendered permanent," he repeated, "is an equal distribution of property."²⁰

From his Hartford room, the eyes of Noah Webster gazed westward toward the golden future of the republic. Millions of acres stretched farther than he could possibly see; his hopes soared. The west assured, as Thomas Jefferson would point out in his first inaugural address, enough land to supply the good yeomen farmers on whose shoulders the republic would stand for thousands of generations. The west produced a new kind of individual, believed Webster, a man stronger and more opposed to aristocracy than any European peasant.²¹

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Webster, Sketches, p. 18.

²¹Ibid., p. 25.

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Intoxicated by dreams of a future utopia, Webster contemplated the confiscation of landed estates. Without clarifying his thoughts, he noted that even as he wrote, there were some large estates being confiscated and distributed more equally in every part of the new nation. That move helped equalize the distribution of property, and destroyed any ill-founded respect for aristocracy which might be still in existence.²²

In fact, he now believed that a thorough annihilation of all distinctions of rank was necessary to build a truly republican world. Distinction was inconsistent with the nature of popular government because it always led to quarrels over power and privilege. The only distinctions of rank that should be allowed in America were those arising from natural differences in merit. "Whenever a man or body of men establish to themselves a share in government independent of the people, and when they are no longer responsible for their conduct," he warned, "a state may bid adieu to its freedom."²³

The evils of unequal property were obvious to him, as were those of established religion. "Next to the feudal system," he said, "the establishment of religions had done the most mischief of any event or institution on earth." Perhaps the worst period in the history of man, as far as he was concerned, had been the middle ages in Europe when both systems were united and "the terrors of superstition were added to the

²²Ibid., pp. 25-26.

²³Ibid., p. 20.

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sword of the civil magistrate, to depress the mind and bind the human race in extreme servitude."²⁴

Separation of church and state was necessary in the new utopia. Webster saw the two as different forms of government; one dealt with the temporal happiness of man, the other with his spiritual redemption. The messengers of salvation should not be allowed to sit in judgment of commercial and political affairs, nor should those involved in politics have any voice in church matters, let alone actively support one specific sect. The two different types of government could not be reconciled, and to attempt to do so, he believed, was to attempt "to mix oil with water, or to make the most discordant sounds in nature...harmonize." He feared their cooperation, for each made its subjects in its own field "sufficiently slavish." But of the two, the clergy were by far the most dangerous. They hid their lust for domination behind the guise of saintliness and had consistently deceived people in the past. The "ambassadors of Christ" had too often "joined the terrors of eternal damnation to the iron rod of civil magistrates in order to extend an unlimited authority over the persons, the purses, and the consciences of their devoted vassals."²⁵

Along with strict separation of church and state, Webster advocated complete religious toleration. He looked

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Freeman's Chronicle, November 3, 1783.

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back at Europe and saw happiness, commerce and population restricted by unnecessary disputes between obscure sects. The progress of mankind was cramped and the human mind chained by religious superstition. In contrast, America had been founded on the idea of universal toleration. All religions were welcome here, and all sects lived together peacefully. Toleration was the capstone of freedom and would raise America "to a pitch of greatness and lustre, before which the glory of ancient Greece and Rome shall dwindle...and the splendor of modern Europe shall fade into obscurity."²⁶

The establishment of religious qualifications on suffrage, office holding, or in any other area were clearly repugnant to him, and he saved his strongest attacks for them. They were "glaring absurdities" and had "introduced more disorders into society, than all the political motives that have activated tyrants" throughout history. They were another form of slavery, "an insult to humanity, a solemn mockery of all justice and common sense...." Some areas were better off than others, and Webster examined each state, discovering that toleration was most prevalent in Pennsylvania and the middle Atlantic states. New England was the worst offender and caught the brunt of his attack. Every citizen of that area, and of course he was one, should be indignant at the persecution of Quakers and others which had taken place there.²⁷

²⁶ Ibid., November 10, 1783.

²⁷ Ibid., November 3, 1783.

Webster clearly believed that man was naturally moral and thus freedom must be extended as far as possible in all areas of life. Political rights were no exception. "The people will never make laws oppressive to themselves," he wrote, and if the values that he held were widespread all would be well:

When...the sovereign power resides in the whole body of the people, it cannot be tyrannical not because it is barred by physical necessity, but because the same power which frames a law, suffers all the consequences, and no individual or collection of individuals will knowingly frame a law injurious to itself.²⁸

"All power," he stated, should be "vested in the people." That was their "natural and unalienable right." Equalization of justice was quite important; no individual or class should be subject to a law which they had no voice in framing or which all were not required to obey. All laws must be general in application. Specifically, all male citizens, regardless of wealth, should be made to pay taxes and serve in the militia. Under the Websterian system, all laws could be nothing else but fair; they would be made by the people themselves, since "the essence of sovereignty consists in the general voice of the people."²⁹

Frequency of elections was also important. Webster was a firm believer in the widely held Whig maxim: "where annual elections end, tyranny begins."³⁰ Americans, he

²⁸ Webster, Sketches, p. 6.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Quoted in Wood, Creation, p. 166.

believed, picked men of merit on election day, not men of wealth or hereditary titles. His own observations of elections gave him confidence that those with abounding desire to gain office for their own self-benefit would be the choice of no one. Free elections, held regularly, would act as a safeguard of the rights of the people. The more often they were held, the better.³¹

Yet despite the superabundance of land, despite the basic goodness and reasonableness of her citizens, America suffered one major flaw. The presence of human slavery sent a shudder up and down his spine. On this point Webster stood in advance of most of his contemporaries.³² Few would agree with his statement that "the abolition of slavery is a matter intimately connected with the policy of these states." To Noah Webster slavery was repugnant to human nature on every conceivable level. It was an evil, pernicious system, the bane of industry as well as morals, and in addition to its human horrors it supported luxury and indolence. Those who owned other human beings were marked by a "haughty, unsocial, aristocratic temper, inconsistent with that equality which is the basis of our government and the happiness of human society."³³

Webster was quite sure that slavery must be abolished and soon. The northern states would hardly feel the effects

³¹Freeman's Chronicle, November 10, 1783.

³²See Wood, Creation, Bailyn, Origins, Jensen, Nation.

³³Webster, Sketches, p. 45.

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of immediate emancipation, but the South was another story. He knew that they would suffer; their social and economic structures would be devastated. But that was a small price, he felt, when compared to the utopia which America could and should become. The future of all must be counted as more important than the present of a few, and so the move must be made now.³⁴

All of the principles which he advocated, believed Webster, could be brought together in a specific form of government. Like John Adams, principle author of the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, and Thomas Jefferson, who wrote one draft of the Virginia Constitution of 1776, he believed that a basically republican system, divided into balancing centers of power, was necessary. No other form "would be reconcilable with the genius, of the people of America; with the fundamental principles of the revolution; or with that honourable determination which animated every votary of freedom to rest all our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government." The chief magistrate should be solely executive in power, with no legislative voice, as it was in Pennsylvania. He had a clear idea of what he thought would be the most practical system of government. It would be a "government, where the right of making laws, is vested in the greatest number of individuals, and the power of

³⁴Ibid., p. 46.

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executing them, in the smallest number...." He seemed to be trumpeting the feelings of many who would later ratify a new federal constitution when he said that "a representative democracy seems...to be the most perfect system of government that is practicable on earth."³⁵

The key to internal social change and construction of an ideal form of government, thought Webster, was education. In this belief he was alone; no other figure consciously advocated the use of education as a tool of change as strongly as Webster during the 1780's.³⁶

In 1784 he tried to establish a school with a tuition scale based on the relative economic status of the individual pupil. Those with enough money would help pay for the education of orphans and poor. He was quite bitter when it failed. The rich citizens of Hartford had enough money to support education for all, he believed, but they preferred to waste it on luxuries instead. One remedy would be to tax the rich to pay for not only education, but for the costs of government and other social services as well. The poor, who then paid the heaviest tax burden, should not be taxed at all, since they could least afford it. "Let the honest, the poor, and the laborious be exonerated from the burden," he said.³⁷

Thus when Noah Webster began to construct the first system of American education while he was living in Goshen in

³⁵Ibid., p. 11.

³⁶Spencer, Quest, passim.

³⁷Connecticut Courant, January 22, 1784.

1782, he clearly had much more than reading, writing and arithmetic on his mind. Teaching in revolutionary America had led him to believe that the only way of ensuring the type of broad social change he wanted was through a general diffusion of knowledge. The main books used in schools throughout the colonies, and especially the grammar and spelling books, were woefully inadequate. He would write new textbooks that would emphasize not only changes in education, but internal social change as well. Furthermore, cultural independence from England, necessary for the establishment of a truly utopian form of society in America, would also be emphasized. His new American form of education would then be an end in itself and also a means to greater ends as well.

The first part of his plan for an American system of education called for a new spelling book to be used on the elementary level. He had developed and practiced his ideas while teaching in Connecticut and New York, so the book was not difficult to put together. The work was finished by the summer of 1783, but finding someone willing to publish it was another matter. The spelling book market had been dominated by an Englishman, Thomas Dilworth, and no one seemed willing to challenge his hegemony. To make matters worse, Webster was unable to bear the expense incurred while traveling from printer to printer in search of a publisher.³⁸ Indeed, most of the people he talked to discouraged him and only his two

³⁸ [Webster], "Memoir," p. 9.

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friends, John Trumbull and Joel Barlow, consistently said they believed he had any real prospect of success.³⁹ Finally, after a year of planning and preparation and six months of carrying the manuscript across New England in search of a publisher, he made an agreement with the printers of the Connecticut Courant. Hudson and Goodwin would put out the little book, if Webster would pay for the paper, ink and labor and grant them exclusive rights to publish any new editions. It was not a good deal, but no one offered a better one, and on October 7, 1783, the first run of 5,000 copies rolled off the press.⁴⁰

Webster's speller, soon commonly known as the "blue-backed speller," was one of the most popular books in early America. It was a small book, simply bound in blue cloth, and was phenomenally successful. Webster had originally intended to call it "The American Instructor," but Ezra Stiles, who examined an early manuscript version, suggested a more classical title: The Grammatical Institute of the English Language.⁴¹ Eventually this little speller found its way across the Mississippi river and into virtually every hollow in the southern mountains, as well as every community in the

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Bob Eddy, "The Courant Took a Chance," The Quill, LII (May, 1964), p. 12.

⁴¹ Noah Webster, A Grammatical Institute of the English Language: Comprising an easy, concise, and systematic Method of Education Designed for the use of Schools in AMERICA. In three parts. Part I. (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1783), pp. [3], 5.

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northern states. The first edition was sold out in nine months. Two more appeared in 1784, and then came an avalanche. At least 404 editions had appeared by Webster's death in 1843. Indeed, the blue-backed speller may very well have been the most widely read secular book in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America. One and one-half million copies were sold by 1801, twenty million by 1829, and at least seventy-five million by 1875. Probably no less than 100 million have been sold altogether. Webster would have been incredulous had he been told that as far into the future as 1936, 153 years after the original publication, editions of his speller would still be used in American schools, and that in 1975 two editions would still be in print.⁴²

As he told a friend, the book was a means of gaining the widest possible audience for certain ideas and beliefs. Webster pondered the problem of reaching a mass audience for quite a while. He had even considered writing an "obstruse philosophical" work, but had rejected the idea because it would only be read by "a few, and its utility seldom [would] reach further than the philosopher's head...." What he had to say deserved more than that. Perhaps, he thought, a little

⁴²See Warfel, Webster, for the sales figures and the 1936 incident. One of the two editions currently available was printed for the Noah Webster Foundation, West Hartford, Connecticut, by Connecticut Printers, Incorporated, and is only available through that organization. The other is Noah Webster, Noah Webster's Spelling Book, Introduction by Henry Steele Commager (New York: Bureau of Publications, Columbia University, 1958, 1962). Books in Print lists this edition as suitable for children over four years old, so it may still be in use.

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fourteen penny volume would "convey much useful knowledge to the remote, obscure recesses of honest poverty...." He had no idea how wildly successful he would be when he said that he hoped his speller would be "like a star" casting "its beams equally upon the peasant and the monarch."⁴³

The blue-backed speller was not just a speller, it was also a revolutionary broadside. This 119 page book advocated drastic reforms. In the previous eight years, Webster believed, greater changes had "been wrought, in the minds of men... than are commonly effected in a century...." The citizens of the new world had submitted to the authority of Great Britain, to laws which were "a ridiculous compound of freedom and tyranny" for far too long, he stated in the opening pages. They had been overpowered by wicked men, by a nation full of vice and error. Americans should now be "astonished at the former delusion" and should break free from the evil ways of England in politics, religion and literature. It was the duty of America "to attend to the arts of peace;" to correct errors and defects wherever they were found, but also to introduce improvements into "civil policy." They must act boldly and seize the time. "Europe," he railed, had "grown old in folly, corruption and tyranny--in that country laws are perverted, manners are licentious, literature is declining and human nature debased." The torch of liberty must

⁴³To John Canfield, January 6, 1783, in Warfel, Letters, p. 4.

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now be picked up by the new world; the whole future rested on her shoulders.⁴⁴

He repeated his belief over and over again that to continue in the old ways of Europe would defile and poison America. A reformation in all areas of life must be made. Above all, Americans must be a highly moralistic people:

It is the business of Americans to select the wisdom of all nations, as the basis of her constitutions,--to avoid their errors, to prevent the introduction of foreign vices and corruptions and to check the career of her own--to promote virtue and patriotism,--to embellish and improve the sciences,--to diffuse the uniformity and purity of language, --to add superior dignity to this infant Empire and to human nature.⁴⁵

In short, America must become a utopia.

One way to achieve that superior dignity would be to develop a language sufficiently different from that spoken and written in England. Through the use of Webster's speller, cultural as well as political independence from the old world would be increased. "America must be as independent in literature as she is in politics," he declared to a friend, "as famous for arts as for arms, and it is not impossible but a person of my youth may have some influence in exciting a spirit of literary industry."⁴⁶

Webster was unafraid of tinkering with the basic structure of the language. The English grammarians had taken

⁴⁴Webster, Institute, Part I, pp. 1-14.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 14-14.

⁴⁶To Canfield, p. 4.

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rules from Greek and Latin and applied them to their language. He would remake the language by drawing grammatical rules from common American usage and then make appropriate changes. Peculiarities which existed in each state or section would be wiped out, and a single accurate system of pronunciation and spelling would be instituted.⁴⁷

The exercises in his speller would "inspire youth with a contempt of the unmanly vices of mankind and a love of virtue, patriotism and religion."⁴⁸ He left no scheme unplotted, and even outlined specifically when the speller should be used in the schools for its greatest advantage. In order to further a sense of American nationalism, he introduced a "Chronological Account of remarkable Events in America" in the last pages of the book.⁴⁹

The second and third parts of his system were somewhat more difficult to politicize. His grammar book⁵⁰ concentrated on vowels, verbs and other technical subjects, while the capstone was a new kind of book with new and interesting types of material to help students learn to read. It included

⁴⁷"Memorial to the Legislature of New York," in Warfel, Letters, p. 5.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 6.

⁴⁹Webster, Institute, Part I, pp. 118-119.

⁵⁰Noah Webster, A grammatical institute of the English language, comprising an easy, concise, and systematic Method of education, designed for the use of English schools in America. In three parts. Part II. (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1784).

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literature, drama and oratory, and was a new concept in American education. For the first time, when they picked up Noah Webster's reader, the children of New England and America would be exposed to Shakespeare; excerpts from Hamlet and Merchant of Venice could be easily studied in one room schoolhouses from Boston to Charleston.⁵¹

Included were several essays written during the Revolution containing what he believed were the noble, just and independent sentiments of liberty. The emphasis was on America as a utopia, and the ability of man to perfect himself through his powers of reason. There were words which all American schoolchildren should learn by heart; he was excited at the prospect of gaining a wider readership for them. The "rising generation" could now soak themselves in the spirit of the Revolution and its rhetoric, and Webster was convinced that they would go on to live their lives by certain ideals. They would also be stimulated by the words of one "Thomas Payne," whose The Crisis, number 5, written in praise of American virtue in 1776, was included.⁵²

Webster had emerged from his state of depression in 1781-1782 as a propagandist for the Revolution. In the years during the end and shortly after the war, he strongly and sincerely advocated broad social change. His own life became bound up with the cause of what he believed were the principles

⁵¹Webster, Institute, Part III, p. [1].

⁵²Ibid., especially p. [iii].

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of the Revolution. The ideology he espoused included among other points equal distribution of property (including confiscation of some estates if necessary), complete religious toleration and especially cultural independence. America was and should become a utopia where all men could live in happiness. The culmination of his efforts was a new system of education which would indoctrinate those who had not passed through the experience of the Revolution itself, and thus ensure that these principles be embraced by an intelligent public.

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CHAPTER III

BALANCE

Too much health is a disease...
Too much liberty is the worst tyranny

1786

Even as Noah Webster composed his Sketches in 1785, he had begun to rethink some of his concepts and develop new ideas. He had come to identify his life with that of the Revolution; in it he believed totally, firmly, and unquestioningly. His ideology was characterized by an acceptance and emphasis on moral reform, and his utopian ideals and visions were founded on a belief in intelligence, virtue, honesty and frugality. Beginning in 1783 a series of events challenged some of his beliefs and changed the direction of his thinking. Most notable among these were the convention in Middletown, Connecticut, Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts and his own observations of the political and cultural atmosphere of Virginia and the South. He gradually came to hold two very different impulses at the same time. By 1785 he felt that the new nation needed a stronger centralized authority to regulate its economy, to avoid or suppress civil disturbances and to control human passions. In short, he sought to balance his revolutionary rhetoric and a desire to limit the freedoms it encompassed.

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Webster expected that the victory of the Revolution would bring happiness and joy to all men; instead it seemed only to bring problems and worries as serious as those faced before 1775. The Articles of Confederation appeared too weak to deal with the post-war situation. Far from a moral republic, the new nation seemed full of bitterness and dispute. Thirteen separate and sovereign units were held together by a unicameral legislature in which each state had one vote. That body was virtually helpless, without the coercive power to raise taxes and enforce what legislation it managed to pass. Each state proceeded to write laws and form commercial treaties with little or no regard for its neighbor. Thirteen different judicial and commercial systems began operating without any centralized direction, and Webster found that he personally suffered because of the situation. There was no national copyright law, and the Continental Congress consistently failed to pass one. Thus each state had separate regulations regarding the distribution of royalties from his books and it was nearly impossible to stop people from selling them or pirating them without paying him.¹

¹Historians of the 1780's have been divided into two groups. Noah Webster would undoubtedly agree with John Fiske, The Critical Period of American History, 1783-1789 (New York: Appleton, 1888), who viewed it as an era of chaos and collapse which led to stabilization under the new Constitution. Merrill Jensen, The Articles of Confederation (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), and in The New Nation sees the Confederation government as the embodiment of the Declaration of Independence spirit overthrown in a counterrevolution led by upper-class aristocrats.

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The confederation faced its first real crisis in 1783. The financial basis of the new government, always shaky at best, began to crumble, sending shock waves up and down the country. The Revolution had been supported by issuing nearly uncountable sums of paper currency; the Congress itself, between 1776 and 1780, had spewed forth at least \$200,0000,000 worth of paper script. The effect was disastrous. By 1779, the official rate of exchange between the new continental dollars and specie was 40:1, while the real market value was more like 100:1.² Since Congress had no means of raising money through taxation, it could only rely on loans and requisitions from the states, and they simply had their own problems to worry about.

The army was measurably effected by these problems. The same troops that had fought, often without sufficient food, clothing or arms, were now on the edge of revolt. Soldiers in the field, it seemed, had always been the last on the list of concerns, and experienced financial difficulty throughout the war. Indeed, in 1780 Congress had been forced to pass a special measure to head off wholesale desertion of its officers. A bonus of one-half of a regular officers current pay, to be paid for the rest of his life, had been offered to each officer who would agree to remain in the service for the rest of the war. The offer had been accepted and

²Jensen, Nation, p. 39.

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had been sufficient to retain their services. But in December, 1782, more rumblings were heard. The army itself threatened to lay down its arms when peace was achieved. A few officers had mumbled about replacing Washington with someone "less scrupulous," but he had managed to quash the movement without any real friction.³

"Commutation," which the agreement to pay the officers a lump sum equal to five years full pay came to be known, was not entirely popular. Non-commissioned officers presented petitions asking for similar bonuses while the "war men," those who had enlisted for the duration of the conflict, demanded immediate discharge. By the end of April, 1783, Washington reported to Congress that his men were rioting, insulting their officers and demanding discharge. In late May, Congress tried to raise enough money to pay the men for three months and instructed Washington to furlough as many as possible. More open threats were heard, and the officers demanded that the army be kept in camp until accounts were settled. Washington refused, and dismissed them all, saying that the government had done everything it could to provide for the men.

The problems of Congress and the army did not end with the latter's dissolution. Six days later several hundred men from Pennsylvania surrounded the state house in Philadelphia where both Congress and the Pennsylvania Executive Council

³Ibid., p. 70.

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were in session. They kept the politicians cooped up inside all day long, pelting them with insults and stones. Terrified, Congress emerged late in the afternoon amidst a jeering throng. Once out the door they kept on going and did not stop until they reached New Jersey, from which they never returned.⁴

The reaction to commutation touched off a series of protests up and down the coast. Crowds gathered to shout their disapproval and conventions of citizens met to draw up resolutions in Virginia, New Jersey and New York. James Madison believed that disaffection with Congress had grown by the late spring of 1783 to the point "as to produce almost a general anarchy...."⁵ In May some officers founded the Society of Cincinnati, a hereditary social order to foster relationships and care for the more unfortunate among themselves, as well as the families of deceased officers.

Discontent was especially strong in New England. In the summer of 1783, all the Massachusetts state congressmen who favored commutation were voted out of office and a new delegation, all of whom opposed it, was elected. The Rhode Island legislature refused to even consider honoring the measure and many people in that state thought that the principles which it stood for were quite similar to those which Great Britain had tried to impose on the colony in the previous decade.⁶

⁴Ibid., p.83.

⁵Quoted in Collier, Connecticut, p. 216. This is the best secondary account of the commutation crisis in New England.

⁶Ibid.

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The clamor seemed to reach its peak in Connecticut. The Assembly of that state formally opposed the bonus, and had specifically provided that no part of the revenues raised by impost could be used to pay the officers. By late summer, numerous town meetings had passed resolves condemning the payments as well as other grievances. Lebanon, for example, claimed that the pension was "contrary to the Genius of this State," and that it was "unconstitutional, injurious, impolite, oppressive and unjust."⁷

In September, a special, extra-legislative convention was called, and twenty-eight Connecticut towns sent representatives. "Commutation is the Jig," wrote one citizen, "and the whole country almost seemed to be joining it."⁸ Held at Middletown, the convention met three times between September and April, calling each time for investigation into the legality of the officer's bonus and asking the state Assembly to oppose it. They also drew up a list of nominees for the upper chamber of the state legislature and labeled the Society of Cincinnati an order of nobility.⁹

The Middletown Convention had a strong impact on Connecticut. Under pressure from this body and from rumors connecting his name with war profiteering, Jonathan Trumbull resigned the office of Governor. He had been in office for

⁷ Ibid., p. 212.

⁸ Quoted in Louie May Miner, Our Rude Forefathers; American Political Verse, 1785-1788 (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: The Torch Press, 1937).

⁹ Collier, Connecticut.

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fourteen years, the only Governor to serve through the entire Revolution. At about the same time the tenures of three national representatives (two of whom, Oliver Ellsworth and Oliver Wolcott, were personal friends of Webster), ended, and three new candidates, all convention sympathizers, were elected. They took their seats in January, 1784.

Noah Webster's immediate reaction to the convention was bewilderment and fear. He could not really comprehend why it happened, but struggled to order and explain these events, to make sense out of them for himself and for his neighbors as well. Anger filled his mind when he thought of the possible consequences of what he saw going on around him. He was fearful that America's utopian opportunity would be lost and that the morass of corruption that was Europe would be copied on this side of the Atlantic. Frustrated, confused and bitter, he responded as he did to all the important events of his life: he wrote. During the last half of 1783 he filled the Connecticut Courant, a local Hartford newspaper, with attempts to analyze the Middletown Convention and all it stood for.

Webster was clearly afraid that the aim of that "nest of vipers" was basically to undermine the principles of the Revolution. His anxiety and the harshness of his essays were increased by his identification with those ideals. The representatives were scoundrels, he said, "men of intrigue." They sought to replace those who had fought for the same cause he had fought. If they succeeded, every "man of ability, of

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liberal and independent sentiments," would be extricated from places of power, replaced by men who were "tyrants at heart." Any person who supported them had to be an "unprincipled demagogue," believed Webster.¹⁰

The delegates looked suspiciously like tories. They were the same men who only a short time before had opposed the Revolution. In travelling through Connecticut in the fall of 1783, Webster talked to many citizens, inquiring about the representatives they had sent to Middletown. He was told that in general the delegates had not attended the various meetings of freemen in most towns until after the war had ended, but that they now seemed to be trying to control the meetings. Many of them, by their own admission, he stated, were "avowed tories." They had now switched tactics, and openly attacked the very men who had been the leading patriots, accusing them of being tyrants.¹¹ In March of 1784 he wrote to Sam Adams, asking for his views on the problem which then plagued Massachusetts as well as Connecticut. The troubles, said Webster, were "headed by a few designing characters, principally tories" who had for a long time been trying to "throw the state into confusion." Adams agreed.¹²

¹⁰Connecticut Courant, September 23, 1783. See also September 9, 1783.

¹¹Ibid., September 30, 1783 and January 14, 1784. See also Diary, December 17, 1784.

¹²To Samuel Adams, March 24, 1784, Warfel, Letters, p. 7.



Webster was entirely opposed to the convention. Some delegates charged that the officers had extorted the promised bonus, but Webster pointed out that they had not known about it until it had been passed. In support of his point, he quoted Washington, who had said that the officers had known nothing of the bonus until after Congress had passed it. Another voice from Middletown wailed that the entire army should have been dismissed, a second one raised, and no bonus paid to keep them at the front. Webster dismissed this as "perfectly ridiculous." The convention proclaimed that the fledgling Society of Cincinnati was a threat to Liberty, and Webster laughed at this suggestion. "From such a society of men as little is to be feared as from the order of Masons, a convention of physicians, or a company of merchants."¹³

The logical conclusion to the events of 1783, including the convention, he believed, was quite obviously anarchy. If the current flow continued a few more months, he "would not give a farthing for the best interests of the state...." The word "anarchy" was to him the most dreadful of all; "despotism is far preferable to it." The consequences of anarchy were fatal, for it was "inevitably followed by tyranny."¹⁴

When the Middletown Convention adjourned in the spring of 1784, Noah Webster felt greatly relieved. In the April elections, convention nominees were soundly defeated. Trumbull's

¹³Connecticut Courant, October 14, and August 26, 1783; January 13, 1784.

¹⁴Ibid., September 23, 1783. See also September 9, 1783.

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former Deputy-Governor was elected to replace him, while an entire slate of anti-convention men gained seats in the Assembly. Six days later, a federal impost was approved to fund the bonus. Writing in the Connecticut Courant, Webster noted the death of the factious spirit:

Yesterday se'night about five o'clock p.m. departed this life in the eighth month of his age, MR. HOBBY CONVENTION, a person of great notoriety in this State. His death was attended with violent spasms and convulsions, produced no doubt by the rigour of a strong fiery constitution, struggling with that new and fatal disorder called Reason. His remains will be decently interred in May next, and his funeral eulogium will be pronounced by Mr. Government.¹⁵

The events of the early 1780's had severely shaken Webster's faith in the people. They had indicated to him that Americans were easily deceived by anyone who could speak well and make a show of being virtuous. "I pretend not to lay down rules for other people," he said, while recommending that no one vote for candidates who actively solicited support. He had listened to people during elections, hearing them say they would vote for a man because he was "next in course," or because they simply thought that he would "do enough." He had begun to suspect that people had forgotten that their right of self-government had been a principle issue in the Revolution. People no longer seemed to care enough about government to pay close attention to their leaders.¹⁶

¹⁵Ibid., April 20, 1784.

¹⁶Webster, Sketches, p. 34.



In his more reflective moments, Webster thought about the ways in which governments are constructed and stabilized, and one element in his revolutionary idealism disappeared. He had believed that Montesquieu was essentially correct when he said that governments, in order to rest on popular approval, must be based on public virtue. Now the events of the day had forced him to doubt the existence of public virtue. Webster concluded that he and Montesquieu had been wrong, that virtue could not form a stable basis for government.¹⁷

"Self-interest," he now declared, was "the ruling principle of all mankind." Adam Smith's economic theories were universally applicable, and if implemented would lead to widespread human happiness. When the self-interest of a majority of individuals merged to pursue the same object, it was mystically transformed into something quite different, such as patriotism or public spirit. Any particular interest that clashed with it could be labeled "selfishness." Thus, one impulse, self-interest, produced both negative and positive threats. In a time of danger, as the Revolution had been, the private interest of all individuals merged into a unified whole to resist a common enemy. When that common opponent disappeared, schisms in the pursuit of interests again appeared, and Webster theorized that this was what was happening in 1783. "This accounts for the capricious, fluctuating

¹⁷Connecticut Courant, September 26, 1783.

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conduct of the people at the present time," he declared.

While the British posed a threat, many were willing to sacrifice their personal fortunes for the common good, but now cooperation was not seen as an important value. The financial burden of taxes, inflation and military bonuses drove people further apart. "Their estates and their liberties are secured," or so they believed, and "not one penny extraordinary will they pay, unless it is extorted from them by law."¹⁸

As a direct reaction to this new sense of doubt, Webster began to contemplate a means of controlling political events. Like the rest of the revolutionary generation, he had opposed the centralized government of England, so this move did not come easily. The thought of rearranging and re-instituting a system which awarded power to a single man or a small body of men was an alarming one. Yet others had come to the same conclusion. In 1783 Washington sent a circular to all Governors. Fearing "anarchy and confusion," he called for a "Supreme Power to regulate and govern the general concerns of the Confederated Republic, without which the Union cannot be of long duration." Tom Paine, a man as different from Washington as revolutionary America could produce, had called in 1782 for unification of the thirteen states under one central government. In The Crisis, Paine said that it was the "movement upon one centre, that our existence as a nation, our happiness as a people, and our safety as individuals,

¹⁸Ibid.



depend." Writing in February, 1784, Webster saw centralization as one cure for the ills of the body politic. The current government "by committee" must end, for "the dignity, safety and happiness of America," were "inseparably connected with the union of all states." Cooperation must be achieved, and if a supreme authority had to be reconstructed, this time on this side of the Atlantic, so be it. "A Continental Union must feel, at all times," thundered Webster, "the necessity of unanimity and vigor in all our federal operations."¹⁹

By early 1785, Webster's concept of a new national government had emerged. His Sketches symbolized his dualism. It contained four essays, the first three of which indicated his identification with America as a land of freedom and promise. The fourth was a call for a stronger centralized form of government within which they could be successfully administered. To Webster and others of his generation, new government must institutionalize the principles of the Revolution within a framework of a more stable national government. "Too much health is a disease," he remarked, and "too much liberty is the worst tyranny."²⁰ The essence of the new government

¹⁹ Forest McDonald and Ellen Shapiro McDonald, eds., Confederation and Constitution, 1781-1783 (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 40; Quoted in Hesketh Pearson, Tom Paine: Friend of Mankind (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937), p. 64; Courant, February 24, 1784. For Webster's views, see also Sketches, pp. 30-31.

²⁰ Essex Journal, December 14, 1786. Reprinted in Noah Webster, A Collection of Essays and Fugitiv [sic] Writings on Moral, Historical, Political and Literary Subjects (Boston: J. Thomas and E. T. Andrews, 1790), pp. 119-124. Hereafter cited as Webster, Essays.

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was an emphasis on checks and balances, and his support of it was a reaction to the events of the 1780's. All states must be organically related, all must be equal in influence in national circles. If a single state could nullify or reject a measure passed by Congress, they would not be united for long.²¹ Webster urged all those who would read his Sketches to consider themselves as inhabitants not of a single state or town, "but as Americans." Provincial views must be subordinate to continental ones. Self-interest, the ruling principle of mankind, must not be allowed to become a provincial interest, but must be merged into a "national interest."²²

Webster was dismayed when he examined the confederation. Every positive measure toward reform and stability was defeated, enormous debts were unpaid, commerce was restricted. Those were the fruits of the Articles, and each state grabbed for what they could. "The whole body, linked together by cobwebs and shadows," was "the jest and the ridicule of the world." Something must be done, and a stronger government was his answer to the chaos of the confederation. "On an energetic continental government principally depend our tranquillity at home and our respectability among foreign nations."²³

Yet there was a distinctly provincial tone to Webster's nationalism. The most perfect government that he knew of and

²¹Webster, Sketches, pp. 45-46, 32.

²²Webster, Sketches, p. 48.

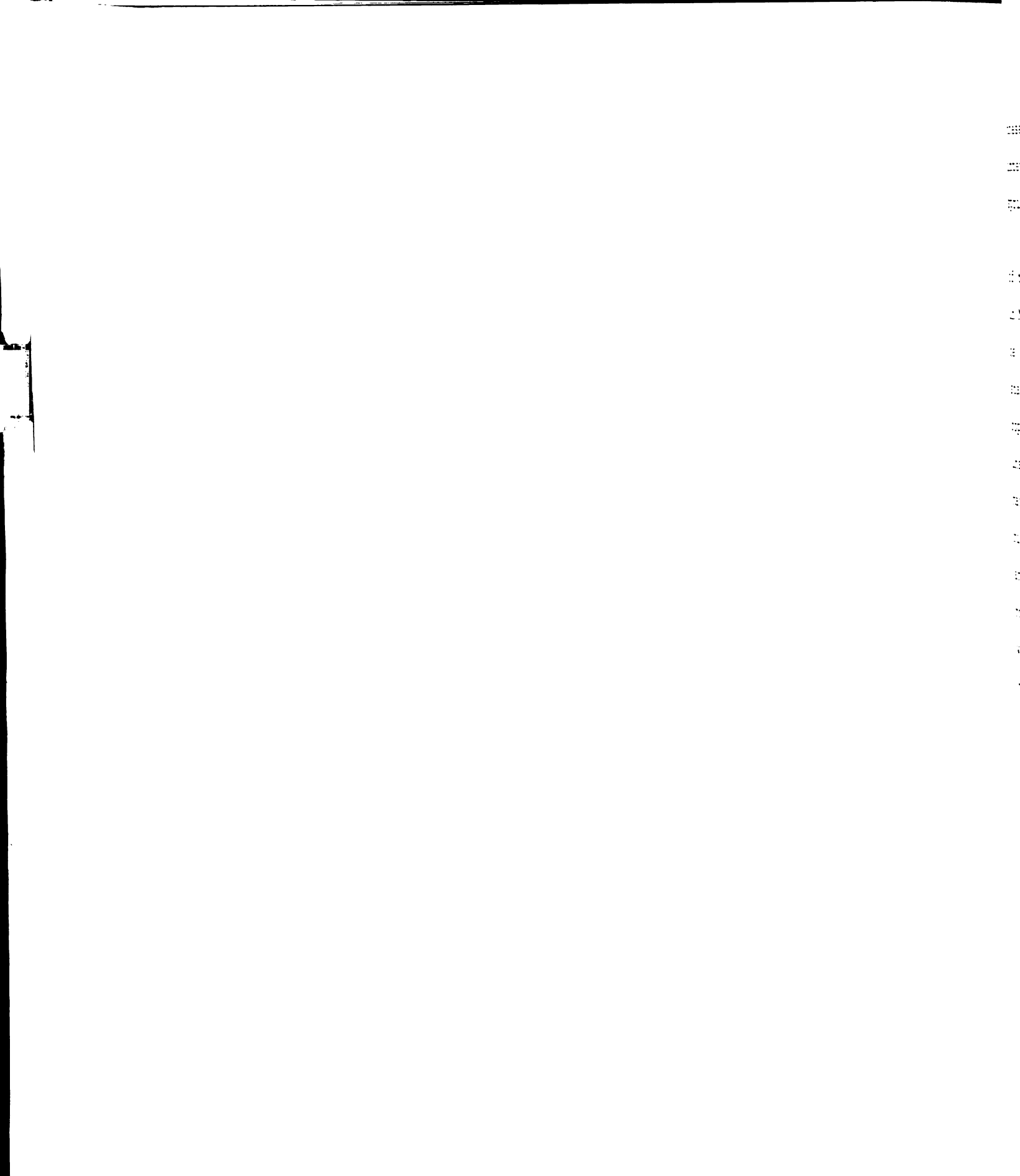
²³Ibid., pp. 41, 48. See also pp. 38-39.

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one that he felt would be the best pattern for the central government to reflect in its construction, was the government of Connecticut. Indeed, the new government that he envisioned for America was nothing more than Connecticut writ large. The whole body of freemen would be the supreme authority on which all power would rest, although it would be exercised through a system of representatives. These delegated authorities would make all laws applicable to the whole nation. The Governor would be elected by the freemen, with subordinates commissioned by him as judges, sheriffs and other civil officers. "If the representation of the freemen is equal, and the elections frequent, if the magistrates are constitutionally chosen and responsible for the administration," he declared, "such a government is of all others most free and safe."²⁴

Thus Noah Webster's Sketches of American Policy encompassed two very different impulses. On the one hand, Webster still advocated and believed in a basic revolutionary ideology. The extension of human freedom and self-control still drew his support, yet he also felt a definite need for order and stability. The stronger, centralized government that he envisioned would embody these two concerns in a balanced system. It would then resemble the harmony of nature's planetary systems, a machine which worked like a clock. He planned to travel through the middle and southern states and

²⁴Ibid., pp. 33-35. He made no mention of any qualifications for suffrage.



these were the basic ideas he wanted to discuss with others interested in the fate of the new nation. He spent the early spring of 1785 preparing for his journey.

Packing extra copies of his Sketches along with copies of the three volumes of his Institutes, Webster left Hartford in May. In addition to distributing and discussing his ideas, he intended to secure copyrights for his books in as many states as he could as well as to agitate for state and federal copyright laws. He was still an unemployed school teacher and unsuccessful lawyer. No doubt he also planned on meeting as many influential people as possible, for reputable contacts might make it easier to secure wide distribution and acceptance of his books. Knowing almost no one and with little money to secure the necessary lodging and meals, he was not without apprehension. Work would have to be found from place to place, and he thought he might be able to give a series of lectures in the towns he visited. If he could draw a large enough audience they might even pay for his transportation costs. Writing to a friend, Webster expressed fears that he would not be as welcome in the South as someone from Europe, for he had no reputation to precede him, and there was a natural dislike for Northerners.²⁵

The trip was a strenuous one. Over the next year and a half, he traveled up and down the Atlantic seaboard. During that time his Sketches appeared in print in New York,

²⁵To Timothy Pickering, January 20, 1785, in Warfel, Letters, p. 44.

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Philadelphia, Baltimore and Charleston, and he gave his lectures in virtually every center of population in between.

On May 18, 1785, he reached Alexandria, Virginia, and the next day he introduced himself to George Washington. Mount Vernon had, by then, become a stopping place on the tours of many American travelers,²⁶ so Washington was probably not surprised to see an unemployed schoolteacher of whom he had never heard mention. The General's reception was pleasant, he even indicated that he was impressed. Webster presented him with a copy of his Sketches, and the remainder of the day was spent in talking about the need for a strong central government, as well as agriculture, education and the necessity of abolishing slavery. They spent the evening in a laughter-filled game of whist, and before he left Webster asked Washington to endorse his Institutes. Replying that he had not read them, the General declined.²⁷

For the next four months Webster traveled in the South. A ride on a sloop between Baltimore and Charleston took twenty-seven days. He stayed in South Carolina for only two weeks, and returned to Baltimore almost bankrupt. He had incorrectly estimated how long he could live on what he had taken with him, so in Baltimore he decided to offer his services as a singing master in order to survive. Enough students were gathered and

²⁶Gerald W. Johnson, Mount Vernon (New York: Random House, 1953).

²⁷To Noah Webster, July 30, 1785 in John C. Fitzpatrick, The Writings of Washington: From the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799 38 vols. (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1931-1938) Vol. 28, p. 216.

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in September his school was successfully opened. At the same time he began to write the lectures which he planned to use as another source of income.²⁸

In October Webster was off again, with greater success. He roamed from New Hampshire to Richmond, stopping to lecture in any town with enough people to warm a room. His subject was the English language, and his talks were marked with an increasingly nationalistic tone. In Philadelphia, Dover, Boston, and Newburyport he called for a more drastic and complete separation from England. He proposed his new American language as a tool of separation, and was full of ideas about how it could be developed and implemented.²⁹

Along the way he dined with many dignitaries. James Madison, to whom Washington had sent a copy of the Sketches, lauded his work and said that Webster was a major factor in the passage of a copyright law in Virginia. Webster met the presidents of virtually every major American college, including Harvard, Princeton, Dartmouth, and Yale. All had favorable words for his work. With Benjamin Franklin he discussed the need for a total reform of the alphabet, one of the sage's fondest projects. With Washington, whom he visited a second time, he spoke of education and nationalism. He discussed

²⁸ [Webster], "Memoirs," and Warfel, Webster.

²⁹ A good example of Webster's advertisements for his lectures appeared in the Massachusetts Centinel, July 12, 1786. A set of notes taken at his lecture in Philadelphia are in the Archives of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

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many topics with Tom Paine. David Rittenhouse, Benjamin Rush, David Ramsey, Aaron Burr, Samuel Lathem Mitchill, Roger Sherman, Simeon Baldwin, Timothy Pickering and John Dickinson all offered him encouragement. By 1787 his books were being read, printed and sold in every major American city, and the precocious yankee peddler had indeed become, almost overnight, without family influence or financial backing, the "school-master of America."³⁰ At times his audiences swelled to 300, and when he spoke in Philadelphia, newspapers as far away as Boston reported the event.³¹

It was a rewarding nineteen months, but not all of his experiences were pleasant. For one thing, he did not like the South. His sense of ethical morality was offended by the lifestyle of the Virginia gentlemen whom he visited, especially by the gambling, horse racing and other forms of what he considered "dissipation." A ball he attended, given by one of Washington's nephews, had cost £18, and that shocked him. When one Maryland Senator confided to him that only about ten percent of the plantation class could read and write, Webster was astonished: "O New England! How superior are thy

³⁰ Those few who have written extensively on Webster have emphasized his educational contributions. In addition to Warfel's biography, see Henry Steele Commager, "Noah Webster, 1758-1958," Saturday Review, October 10, 1958 and Ervin C. Shoemaker, Noah Webster: Pioneer of Learning (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936).

³¹ Positive reactions and reviews of his lectures were numerous. See especially the Maryland Gazette, January 10, 1786 and Maryland Journal, January 3, 1786.

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inhabitants in morals, literature, civility and industry."³² He emphasized his emerging concern with morals when he sent to Washington a copy of Timothy Dwight's "The Conquest of Canaan," an epic poem celebrating the Revolution. Webster pointedly commented that he could recommend it to "every friend of America and of virtue."³³ He was most shocked by the elections he witnessed in the South. While Connecticut had a long history of peaceful elections, the South stood sharply in contrast. There men sought every advantage in an election and even begged the citizens to vote for them. He noted that election day south of Pennsylvania often degenerated into "mere riots," and almost always they were a source of disputes which ended in bloody noses "and sometimes with greater violence."³⁴

Yet even New England had not been peaceful during his journey. Indeed, western Massachusetts had been in virtual rebellion during most of the decade. Many parts of New England, by the fall of 1786, were plagued with economic difficulties. The burden of local and national debts combined with monetary chaos produced armed bands who attempted to stop various civil proceedings. In August a convention not unlike the one in Middletown three years before met in Hatfield, Massachusetts.

³²Ford, Notes, 1, pp. 142-144, 146.

³³Letter to George Washington, March 31, 1786, in The Papers of Noah Webster, Box 1, Manuscripts and Archives, New York Public Library.

³⁴Reprinted in Webster, Essays.

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The delegates demanded that the state government issue paper money in large amounts as a cure for the economy, and listed nine other grievances. In the course of their meeting they managed to denounce virtually every branch of the government as well as every person in it. Later that month a mob prevented the Court of Common Pleas in Hampshire County from meeting, while in September another crowd forced a court in Worcester County to adjourn. Similar events occurred across the state and in November an organized army of over 2,000 discontented citizens began regular drilling and other military preparations. Henry Knox, former commander of artillery under Washington, wrote a widely publicized letter claiming that the men under arms numbered between 12,000 and 15,000 and that they proposed to march on Boston to secure a common division of property. In January, 1787, the rebels, led by Daniel Shays, were easily suppressed by state troops, but the damage had been done. Many Americans were genuinely aroused, afraid that this rebellion was only a dark portent of worse events to come; those who sought a stronger government found wider acceptance of their ideas and a convention meeting in Annapolis recommended that another convention be held to consider major changes in the Articles of Confederation.³⁵

Webster personally felt the shock of social unrest. In June of 1786 he stopped momentarily in Hartford in the middle

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of his tour. He had been received warmly and delivered a lecture in his home town. As in other cities, he advertised that it would cost two shillings to attend, though he had presented a few free tickets to members of the state legislature. An angry mob gathered outside the church he was scheduled to speak in, interrupting his performance by loudly protesting the cost of admission and the free distribution of tickets to politicians.³⁶

After this incident he traveled on for eastern Massachusetts and found himself in the middle of Shays' Rebellion. Deeply troubled, Webster reacted strongly. "I would fight the insurgents," he wrote in an otherwise ordinary business letter, were they to attempt stopping the court in Salem, Ipswich or Newburyport where he was lecturing. After giving details of some of the actions, he wrote a friend that "the mob is headed by some desperate fellows, without property or principle." Yet not all the dissidents, he believed, were of such low character. Many well-meaning people were led into opposition merely by false information. The truth, diffused among the people at large, would soon restore tranquillity. He noted that the troubles seemed to be spreading and that Rhode Island was also in a state of confusion.³⁷

³⁶Ford, Notes, I, p. 157.

³⁷Letter to Hudson and Goodwin, September 10, 1786, The Papers of Noah Webster, Box 1, Manuscripts and Archives, New York Public Library; Letter to Timothy Pickering, September 15, 1786, in Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings, Vol. 43 p. 126; Letter to Hudson and Goodwin,

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This unrest, believed Webster, pointed out the need for strong government to curtail lawlessness. "The Devil is in you," he had heard clergymen say to the mobs over and over again, but he knew that the devil was not the problem. If anything, it was the jealousy of Congress among the states that was devilish, as well as the general weakness of the confederation. One state could stop the others from adopting measures to control financial ills. The obsession of some people with fancy clothes, baubles and trinkets added to the instability of the situation because it wasted precious funds on unnecessary items. Disrespect and loss of faith in the law only made things worse. Good men, and he still believed all men were essentially good, obeyed and respected the law. Without the law, feared Webster, people would cease to be "free or safe," and the ultimate implications of such lawlessness frightened him:

The same principle which leads a man to put a bayonet to the breast of a judge, will lead him to take property where he can find it; and when the judges dare not act, where is the loser's remedy? Alas, my friends, too much liberty is no liberty at all. Giv [sic] me anything but mobs;...I would shoot the leader of a mob, sooner than a midnight ruffian.³⁸

Webster still encouraged all men to "shake off every badge of tyranny," and he still firmly believed that "the best

September 28, 1786, The Papers of Noah Webster, Box 1, Manuscripts and Archives, New York Public Library.

³⁸Webster, Essays, p. 130.

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way to make men honest, is to let them enjoy equal rights and privileges." Citizens must not suspect the Shaysites of being rogues. Oppressive laws must be avoided. "Leave force to govern the wretched vassels of European nabobs," he wrote, for it had no place in America. Men must deal with problems through laws which would improve man's already "excellent nature." In short, he believed that "no man will commence enemy to a government which givs [sic] him as many privileges as his neighbors enjoy."³⁹ Yet mankind must not be given too much liberty. People who enjoy a great amount of freedom often carry it to the point of being licentious, he observed. It was this excessiveness that was dangerous. "Too much health is a disease," he believed, and "Too much liberty is the worst tyranny."⁴⁰

In November, 1786, Webster ended his trip in Hartford. It had been a huge success; his name was now known in every state. Yet he was not happy. Serious doubts about the ability of man to live by his own laws in a republican government plagued him. It was quite possible, he thought, that "people in general are too ignorant to manage affairs which require great reading," so his system of education took on greater importance. Consequently he now gave his publishers the right

³⁹ New Haven Gazette, December 14, 1786. Reprinted in Webster, Essays, p. 153.

⁴⁰ Essex Journal, September 13, 1786. Reprinted in Webster Essays.

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to sell all his works at even lower prices in order to increase their circulation. Webster was not making much in royalties as it was, and claimed that it did not matter to him. He wished only to "live an honest man. I wish to do justice to all men and I am frequently obliged to do it at a great loss."⁴¹ Even more serious were his doubts about the liberty for which he believed the Revolution had been fought. He was once as strong a republican as any man in America, he noted, but "Now a republican is among the last kinds of governments I should choose." Instead he would prefer a limited monarchy, for the capriciousness of one man could be opposed by the many and be corrected, The "ignorance and passions of a multitude," as recent events had shown, were more difficult to control.⁴²

Thus Webster found himself in the middle of an intellectual dilemma, the solution to which was not far away. His revolutionary optimism and fervor were shaken, but not entirely destroyed. The journey had been in some ways disturbing, but it had also had two significant results. He had found acceptance among a class of men symbolized by Washington and Franklin, and he had become completely convinced of the need for strong government. The new Constitution, created by Madison, Washington, Franklin and others, was the solution to the problem.

⁴¹Connecticut Courant, November 20, 1786.

⁴²Letter to Hudson and Goodwin, July 26, 1786. Pierpont Morgan Library.

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The winter of 1786-1787 found Noah Webster rather glum. No one in America was happy, he observed. All were surprised at the disappointment. Property was unsafe, taxes were unbearably heavy, and no changes appeared on the horizon. Things actually seemed to be getting worse, and even the Revolution now seemed incomplete since there were still signs of English influence in the speech, manners and opinion of many Americans. What had gone wrong?⁴³

Webster concluded that these troubles stemmed from the nature of the Revolution itself. It had occurred too fast, it had broken something quite fragile which held society together. There were habits and customs, and not necessarily British ones, which had been challenged along with foreign authority, and that was not good. Drastic change, said the former propagandist, must come slowly. Innovation of course was necessary, but the events had shown that it should be organic, the "natural progress of society," and should come only when people were prepared. "Nothing can be so fatal to morals and the peace of society," he said, "as a violent shock given to public opinion of fixed habits." The drive for freedom from tyranny in the 1770's had changed to a total opposition to authority in the 1780's. "The restraints imposed by respect and habits of obedience were broken...and the licentious passions of men set afloat." Only a long series of prudent and

⁴³His depression was quite clear in a series of Articles entitled "Remarks on the manners, Government and debt of the United States," In the Pennsylvania Packet, February 15, 17, 19 and 21, 1787. Reprinted in Webster, Essays.

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vigorous measures could correct the flow of passions which the Revolution had unleashed. Someone had to take a stand, and Noah Webster volunteered. "I reprobate everything that wears the least appearance of opposite to lawful authority."⁴⁴

In April he moved to Philadelphia. He had been offered a position teaching English, but there was an even more important reason for going to Philadelphia in the spring of 1787: the constitutional convention was about to convene. Although not a delegate, he was nevertheless quite interested in the proceedings. Since he had traveled up and down the continent stumping for a central government, perhaps he might now exercise some influence. In any event, many of the people he had met would be in the city, and he knew that Benjamin Franklin for one would welcome him warmly. Webster had made a special trip to Philadelphia to meet the aged genius during the previous winter, and the pair had talked over their mutual ideas on language reforms. Despite the difference in their ages, they had another interest in common; as Webster put it, both were fond of "visiting the ladies."⁴⁵

The influence of Franklin and his friends had been profound. In their company and recognition he had found something for which he had been looking. They all treated him cordially, respectfully, and had exhibited a keen interest in his work. Here were people who were gracious, intelligent and

⁴⁴Webster, Essays, pp. 99, 103, 100-101.

⁴⁵See Diary, Summer, 1787.

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thoughtful, and for the first time in his adult life he felt as if he were really doing something valuable and constructive. These were the kind of men with whom he felt comfortable, who appreciated his work, who should lead the new nation. He sought their companionship, advice, praise and hospitality. As he talked with this national class of men he found confidence, direction and meaning.

The convention itself excited him. They were all here, the best that America could summon. They had all been elected by the people, he believed, and thus this convention rejuvenated his belief in the masses. Here was living proof that it could work, Middletown and Daniel Shays notwithstanding. The fears and doubts of the previous years were assuaged, at least temporarily, by this remarkable gathering. All summer long he listened to the delegates discuss important issues. Important not just for Philadelphia and Noah Webster, but for the rest of the world, whose hopes and dreams rode on their shoulders.

It seems, too, that those who came to the convention had a certain respect for Webster. His name appeared frequently in the Philadelphia papers along with the news of deliberations. There were a few disparaging remarks. The President of the University of Pennsylvania called him a "retailer of nouns and pronouns" and "a fomenter of rebellion," while another man wrote ten lengthy articles criticizing his Institutes. But the overwhelming comment on Webster was

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favorable.⁴⁶ He was described as "this learned man," with extraordinary knowledge and abilities who had written a "masterpiece of instruction."⁴⁷ In addition, he had met and fallen in love with Rebecca Greenleaf, the sister of a wealthy merchant, James Greenleaf. Two days after the opening of the convention, George Washington, by now virtually a God in America who would soon be declared President by plebiscite, paid his respects to Webster by visiting him at home.⁴⁸ During the course of the summer he dined and held conversations with David Rittenhouse, Abraham Baldwin, Peletiah Webster, Timothy Pickering, Benjamin Rush, James Madison, John Fitch (on whose steamboat he rode during its maiden voyage), Edmund Randolph, Rufus King, Oliver Ellsworth, William Livingstone and many other "conventions gentlemen." He had done all he could to pave the way for the gathering, and the members evidently recognized his contribution.⁴⁹

On September 15th, two days before the close of the secret proceedings, Noah Webster's nationalistic endeavors were officially recognized. Thomas Fitzsimmons was the most inconspicuous member of the Pennsylvania delegation which included Franklin, George Clymer, Jared Ingersoll, Thomas Mifflin,

⁴⁶Pennsylvania Gazette, April 25, 1787.

⁴⁷Quoted in Warfel, Webster, p. 162.

⁴⁸Diary, May 22, 1787.

⁴⁹See Diary, Summer, 1787.

Gouverneur and Robert Morris, and James Wilson. He had spoken only twice during the entire summer, but now wrote to Webster asking for his help in the ratification process. "I consider the moment, as the crisis that will determine whether we are to benefit by the revolution we have obtained," said Fitzsimmons, "or whether we shall become a prey to foreign influence and domestic violence."⁵⁰ Like Franklin, who said he was astonished at the quality of the new system,⁵¹ Fitzsimmons believed that it was "the best which human wisdom could devise." He thought Webster's powers were "eminently useful," and urged him to exert himself on behalf of the new government.⁵²

Webster responded enthusiastically. Here was a chance to set in writing the fruits of his conversations with the delegates as well as his own observations and experiences. It was also a chance for him to feel as though he was a member of the national class. In fact, he spent three weeks thinking about all that had happened in the last twenty years and organizing his thoughts. His reaction to the new constitution was not haphazard scribblings, but displayed the effects of his entire life. His revolutionary idealism, the fears aroused by the Middletown Convention and Shays' Rebellion

⁵⁰ [Webster], "Memoirs," p. 18. Webster included the entire letter in this document.

⁵¹ Saul M. Padover, To Secure These Blessings (New York: Washington Square Press, 1962), p. 499.

⁵² [Webster], "Memoirs," p. 18.

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all shone through his essay in a complex maze of hopes and doubts, of ideals and realities and interactions of all of these. In early October he put it all down in a final version and on October 17th Pritchard and Hall published his An Examination into the Leading Principles of the Federal Constitution. It was dedicated to Benjamin Franklin, whom Webster was sure would agree with all that he said.⁵³

The new government institutionalized the kind of balance between freedom and stability he had advocated since 1785. It was an "empire of reason," the best man could devise. Its origins lay in the wisdom of all the ages, in freedom and enlightenment. The people were the source of power, he proclaimed, not military might or superstition foisted by clergy. Majority rule was the most basic law of the land while the idea that no man should be bound by a law to which he had not given his consent was also widely believed. But since each man could not possibly be present to give his specific consent to every piece of legislation, the concept of representation was employed in the new Constitution, and representation was "the perfection of human government." The House of Representatives was the guardian of the privileges of the people. Under this system there was no possibility of corruption or tyranny; he was still convinced of the basic goodness of all

⁵³ [Noah Webster], An Examination into the leading principles of the Federal Constitution proposed by the late Convention held at Philadelphia. With Answers to the Principal objections that have been raised against the system by a Citizen of America (Philadelphia: Pritchard and Hill, 1787).

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mankind. If a representative misbehaved, he could simply be voted out of office. The people, on the other hand, must act in conformity to the will of the majority. Each man must bind himself to "obey the public voice" and thus the liberty of each individual would be equally protected.⁵⁴

At the core of the new system were two factors which he felt had been at the center of the thrust of the Revolution as well: equal distribution of property and frequent elections. "In which does real power consist," he asked. His answer was short and plain: Property.⁵⁵ Laws should be made in every state barring entail, for "a general and tolerable equal distribution of landed property is the basis of natural freedom." This was the very soul of the republic. Freedom of press, trial by jury, the right of Habeas Corpus and all other secondary considerations, according to Noah Webster, were constructed and dependent upon a general distribution of real property among every class of people. When property was equally held, no great combinations or families could control the government, and America was the only place on earth where this was possible. "No lords strut here with supercilious haughtiness or swell with emptiness," he cried, "but virtue, good sense, and reputation, alone, enable the blood, and introduce the lowest citizen to the highest office of the state."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 6, 43, 7, 23, 40.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 43

⁵⁶ American Museum, October, 1787.

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The "right of election" was also a principle bulwark of freedom, and the new Constitution guaranteed that right. "Americans!" he shouted, "never resign that right."⁵⁷

All of these concerns would be balanced by a strong, centralized government. To combat economic chaos, this authority could organize and regulate, and the defense of all states would be made easier. Mutual concessions of the kind built into this system were necessary if America was to avoid anarchy ending in a Cromwell or a Caesar, he felt. It was a balanced government in all ways; large and small states had influence, and neither property nor numbers were overly powerful. The Senate made sure that passions, which could sweep through the lower house of Congress, would be checked by wisdom and experience, which he assumed would be lodged there. Indeed, the various checks and balances in the new system were wonderfully constructed to provide restraint on the passions of men from doing harm to themselves. "In turbulent times, such restraint is our greatest safety," while "in calm times, and in measures obviously calculated for the general good, both branches must always be unanimous."⁵⁸

Noah Webster was clearly a firm and dedicated supporter of the new Constitution of the United States. His support was neither accidental nor superficial. He had come to his position as the result of a long series of events and some

⁵⁷ [Webster], Examination, p. 47.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 28-29, 34, 19, 8, 23.

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very strong emotions. The Constitution, he believed, embodied the best ideals for which the Revolution had been fought, and was worthy of "the ashes of our slaughtered brethren" who had died during the war. It also created an authority strong enough to prevent anarchy and was thus a cure for "our own suffering." When he thought of the new system, he could not help but think of the symbol which had been emblazoned on many flags during the conflict, and which had been designed by Benjamin Franklin: a divided snake over the words "UNITE, OR DIE." He begged his fellow citizens to support the new system. "Let us, then, be of one heart, and one mind. Let us seize the golden opportunity to secure a stable government" This government would bring man closer to the utopia of his dreams. He was convinced that it was the answer:

A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF CANNOT STAND...
 CONSOLIDATION MOST ASSUREDLY INVOLVES OUR
 PROSPERITY, FELICITY, AND SAFETY.⁵⁹

⁵⁹American Museum, October, 1787.



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CHAPTER IV

THE PROMPTER

A PROMPTER is the man who, in plays, sits behind the rehearser, and with a moderate voice corrects him when wrong, or assists his recollection when he forgets the next sentence. A Prompter then says LITTLE, but that little is very necessary and often does MUCH GOOD. He helps the actors on the stage at a dead lift, and enables them to go forward with spirit and propriety.

N. W., 1791

With the end of the Constitutional Convention, Webster decided that his usefulness in Philadelphia had ended. New York looked more promising, and there he began the first truly national and reform-oriented publication in America. Unfortunately the magazine ran less than a year before it failed, and in the winter of 1788-1789 he retreated to Hartford, where he married and remained until 1793. Throughout these years, Webster perceived himself as a prompter, pointing out America's faults in a moderate tone while advocating nationalism and humanitarian reform.

The new nation needed a national voice, he decided in the fall of 1787, one that would tie the various threads of the whole country together. He admired Josiah Meig's New Haven Gazette and Mathew Carey's Columbian Magazine in

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Philadelphia, but they did not fit the image of what a truly national magazine should be. He believed that he could found a broadly appealing national paper without financial support. Original essays on every conceivable topic would be included along with the latest political, commercial and cultural news from all corners of the country. History, geography, satire, poetry, science and peculiar customs would grace its pages. Indeed, there would be something for everyone, and all would be written in nationalistic tones.

The end of the year was consumed in seeking subscribers. He wrote to people up and down the Atlantic coast, asking for encouragement. Much time was spent looking for a printer, since Webster had neither the energy nor inclination to do the actual physical work of placing the ink on the page. In January, 1788, the first issue appeared (although it was dated December, 1787), and for the next ten months the American Magazine was Webster's main occupation.¹

In the course of editing the Magazine, Webster commented on many diverse subjects. He personally wrote and edited histories of the discovery of America, essays on the possible origin of ancient buildings, poetry, gothic and sentimental stories of European romance, theological tracts, and essays on agriculture, botany and law. Writing under the pseudonym "Giles Hickory," he personally fought for the new Constitution, and also expounded on economics and education.

¹Ford, Notes, I, pp. 176-77. Benjamin Rush wanted Webster to call it the "Monthly Asylum."

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Giles Hickory reaffirmed much of what Noah Webster had already said in favor of the new system of government. By its very nature, all mankind had the right to "enjoy life, liberty and property." Laws should be made by the consent of the governed, and the key to good representation was the freedom of election. Government was a sacred contract which neither party should break, and the basis of the laws made by the people's representatives should be "a regard to the greatest good which can be produced to the greatest number of individuals in the state." The "collective sense" of the whole must be followed.²

But new questions had arisen about the Constitution and he did his best to answer them.³ A few convention delegates had refused to sign the document, most notably Elbridge Gerry, Edmund Randolph, and George Mason. In general, the opponents feared centralized power. They believed that the new federal⁴ government would be too strong, that too much power had been given to the President and the Senate. They

²American Magazine, December, 1787, p. 9; January 1788, p. 76; March, 1788, p. 204.

³The best source of information concerning opposition to the constitution is Jackson Turner Main, The Anti-Federalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781-1788 (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1961).

⁴As Main points out, at this point in time a "federal" government was one in which the sovereignty remained in the federated units. A "national" government was one in which the central authority was supreme, and in which the states had only limited powers. Thus the Antifederalists were in fact federalists, and the federalists were opposed to a "federal" system. Ibid., p. 120.

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were convinced that state sovereignty would be obliterated.

The Constitution, in the mind of Noah Webster, was now synonymous with stability and order, and the anti-federalists were a real threat. Their objections were echoes of the cries first raised at Middletown in 1783 and in Massachusetts in 1785-1786. They stood for anarchy, and must be beaten back, or the work of utopia building could not go on. He noted that extra-legal mobs had not disappeared, that they were still active. One riot in which a jail had been taken over by men armed with rifles particularly disturbed him.⁵ In his eyes the decade of the 1780's had been a continuing breakdown of respect for authority, and with that came a certain amount of disillusionment.⁶

The anti-federalists advanced specific arguments which Webster tried to refute. They called for an unalterable constitution and a bill of rights as safeguards against future evils. Both of these were useless, as far as he was concerned. Government took its form and structure from the values and habits of the people. It did not accommodate those habits. The people would have no difficulty making changes. The delegates to the convention were not infallible, and must not be

⁵Diary, April 11, 13 and 14, 1787.

⁶Gordon S. Wood notes that this disillusion was widespread: "...because the Revolution represented much more than a colonial rebellion, represented in fact a utopian effort to reform the character of American society and to establish truly free governments, men in the 1780's could actually believe that it was failing. Nothing more vividly indicates the intensity of the Americans' Revolutionary expectations than the depth of their disillusionment in the

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allowed to make laws which would be oppressive to future Americans.⁷ Following this train of thought, a bill of rights would simply be "absurd." The present generation had no right to tell the next what privileges they may or may not have. Those decisions must be left up to them. America was not Europe, and there was no one here to fear. Barriers "against our own encroachments against ourselves," he thought, were ridiculous. Those who attempted to construct them were "Don Quixotes fighting windmills."⁸

By 1788 Webster's nationalistic vision led away from self-control. The anti-federalists raised a call for the right of local instruction of representatives, to which he was adamantly opposed. Again the fears raised by Middletown and Daniel Shays were at work. Webster felt that this issue boiled down to whether, in a free state, there ought to be any distinction between the powers of the people or electors, and the powers of the representatives in the legislature. The correct division, he felt, lay in the abilities of the legislators themselves. The people in the towns and villages, some hundreds of miles from the Capitol, could not possibly have all the information necessary to make a sound judgment on every vote in Congress. As he had said before, although the opinions of the people should be collected, they should

eighties." Wood, Creation, p. 395.

⁷American Magazine, February, 1788, pp. 95, 139.

⁸Ibid., December 1787, pp. 13-14.

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not be allowed to bind the representatives to a specific action. "When the people are well informed their general opinion is perhaps always right," he said, but the simple and obvious fact was that they were not always well informed. The people often had only partial knowledge of the facts in any situation at best.⁹

The problem of instruction rested on a general misunderstanding of the common conception that power resided in the people. The incorrect interpretation, he said, had been one of the principal sources of discontent and disorder. For power to directly reside in the people, all would have to attend conventions on every issue, and with four million people in the country, that was of course impossible. Instructions also were inadequate; the representatives must be free to negotiate. "In short, the collected body of Representatives is the collected sense and authority of the people...."¹⁰

The American Magazine's views on education were heavily nationalistic. By 1788 Webster had become a leading voice in American education.¹¹ While his political and economic writings may have been overshadowed by the Federalist Papers of Hamilton, Madison and Jay, his agitation for educational reform was surpassed by no one. Every issue of the Magazine

⁹Ibid., January, 1788, p. 75; December 1787, p. 10.

¹⁰Ibid., March, 1788, p. 204; January, 1788, p. 75.

¹¹Frederick Rudolph, ed., Essays on Education in the Early Republic (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

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carried at least one article on the subject, ranging from general calls for change to specific programs. Foremost in Webster's mind was the necessity of using education for the advancement of freedom. "Americans unshackle your minds, and act like independent beings," he wrote. "You have been children long enough, subject to the control, and subservient to the interest of a haughty parent." A broad program must be formed and acted upon, for the national character, like the national government, was not yet formed, and education could be used to inculcate virtue, liberty and patriotism in all Americans.¹²

No mere shouter of slogans, Webster always had specific suggestions on how to build a useful system. One of the central problems, as he knew from his own experience, was the poor quality of instruction. Parents wished their children well educated, which was difficult when their teachers were "clowns." He felt that in many states the school laws were still "monarchical;" no provision was made for teaching the children of people too poor to send them to school, and thus only the rich obtained even the meagerest education. This situation must be changed, and women must also be given a solid schooling, although not above their station. Most important for the new nation, however, was that its system of education be made practical. Dead languages were useless for farmers or merchants, and should be replaced with basic

¹²American Magazine, May, 1788, p. 374; December, 1787, p. 23.

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courses in English. Since all students were not exactly alike, each should be allowed to formulate an individualized plan of study. Students should obtain a minimum level of competence in math and grammar, and then be allowed to pursue a course connected with their destiny in life. In the classroom, he added, rote memorization must be eliminated, since it did not teach ideas nor help develop patterns of thinking. All of this was indeed visionary, since it depended on a system of public education which basically did not exist.¹³

Webster's nationalistic prompting was symbolized by his participation in the "Grand Procession" held in July to celebrate the adoption of the Constitution. New Yorkers paraded up and down and through the town in orderly groups, divided according to their occupation. It was a happy event; tailors marched beneath a giant flag on which Adam and Eve sat, surrounded by a chain of state-named links around the word "majority." Tanners, curriers, skinners, cordwainers and furriers marched among giant statues of Washington, federal eagles with wings spread emblazoned on even more colorful flags, while large horse-drawn stages depicting work or scenes of heroism symbolic of past episodes in the life of the new republic. The procession, containing at least 5,000 people, was over a mile and a half long. Among the throng marched Noah Webster, proudly numbered as a member of the Philological Society which he had helped to found the previous

¹³Ibid., March, 1788, p. 213; April, 1788, p. 311; February, 1788, pp. 159-160.

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March. His group was dressed uniformly in black, and he marched at its head, bearing a large scroll "containing the principles of a Federal language."¹⁴

Despite his involvement in national questions, life in New York was not altogether pleasant for the young editor. The American Magazine was unsuccessful and began to fail almost immediately. He was becoming increasingly well known in high circles and now corresponded regularly with men of prominence like Franklin,¹⁵ yet he was not becoming more popular. As early as 1786 he had been stung by charges of excessive vanity and egotism.¹⁶ The recognition won by his lectures, pamphlets and magazine swelled his ego and he dropped the names of his famous acquaintances with regularity in his everyday conversations. Now thirty years old, he was becoming arrogant, vain, contentious and generally unpleasant. One potential subscriber referred to him as "the monarch," and "a literary puppy," who was downright "intolerable."¹⁷ The few friends he had made in New York grew tired of his egotism and by the fall of 1788 even they disliked his company. Writing to one of them shortly after he had left for New England, Webster remarked bitterly that "it is a satisfaction

¹⁴Ford, Notes, II, pp. 461-465; Warfel, Webster, pp. 185-186.

¹⁵Ford, Notes, I and II.

¹⁶Timothy Pickering to Noah Webster, July 4, 1786, Ford, Notes, I, p. 102.

¹⁷Ebenezer Hazard to Jeremy Belknap, March 5, 1788, Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, Fifth Series, Vol. III, Part II, p. 230.

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to find a few friends whose attachment is not shaken by slight faults or popular opinions."¹⁸ On top of this, he strongly wanted to marry Rebecca Greenleaf, but his lack of financial stability brought nothing but discouragement from her family.¹⁹

In addition, Webster himself felt a growing sense of alienation. He believed his magazine was beneficial to all Americans, and its lack of financial support upset him. His prompting seemed to bring only negative results. Few seemed to pay attention to what he was saying, and he recognized that he was losing friends because of his growing bitterness. As his situation deteriorated, he described his emotional reaction to his future wife:

I sometimes think of retiring from society and devoting myself to reading and contemplation, for I labor incessantly and reap very little fruit from my toils. I suspect I am not formed for society; and I wait only to be convinced that people wish to get rid of my company, and I would instantly leave them for better companions: the reflections of my own mind.²⁰

In October he left New York. The magazine circulation had dropped to a mere 200,²¹ and he was growing anxious to see Miss Greenleaf. He officially closed the magazine and fled to New England. Stopping only briefly to see his parents in

¹⁸Quoted in Warfel, Webster, p. 189.

¹⁹James Greenleaf to Noah Webster, January 19, 1788, Ford, Notes, I, pp. 185-188.

²⁰To Rebecca Greenleaf, January 11, 1788, Warfel, Letters, p. 73.

²¹Hazard to Belknap, January 13, 1789, Collections, p. 94.

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Hartford, Webster reached Boston in December.²²

He was in a state of bewilderment. One observer during this period described him as "unstable as water."²³ Once again, he found himself with no place to go, no one to turn to and with no real plans for the future. He knew only one thing for sure: that he was in love and that he wanted "the happiness of a friend whose interests should be mine."²⁴

His task, then, was to gain financial solvency. The effort to find a viable means of supporting a wife became the most important thing in his life. As he told James Greenleaf, "Becca is all that is good and to me that is dear. If happiness depends on a Union of souls, I am sure we have the most flattering hopes...."²⁵ Since his lectures were the most successful project he could fall back on, and since there seemed to be an interest in subjects national and educational, it was the only thing he could think of to do. He spent the next four months revising his notes and arranging publication of his lectures.

By spring he managed to find a publisher but still had no income. He returned to Hartford in May, where he believed he could make enough money to support a family. He attempted to practice law, and his books began to provide a

²²Warfel, Webster, p. 189.

²³Hazard to Belknap, February 4, 1789, Collections, p. 101.

²⁴Hazard to Belknap, January 13, 1789, Ibid., p. 94.

²⁵To James Greenleaf, May 16, 1789, Ford, Notes, II, p. 409.

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little in royalties, so by fall he was almost solvent.²⁶ A small loan from his future brother-in-law helped, and in October of 1789 he married Rebecca Greenleaf.²⁷

With marriage came the first stable period of his adult life. For the next four years he felt at home in Hartford and concentrated mostly on making money and participating in the local social life. Hartford in the late 1780's and early 1790's was one of the cultural centers of the young republic, and Mr. and Mrs. Noah Webster enjoyed themselves, dining with the leading citizens. They socialized with John Trumbull, Chief Justice of Connecticut Jesse Root, and with Peter Colt, the state's treasurer. Their social circle included many of the young lawyers about town and the Friendly Club, which included Dr. Samuel Hopkins, Dr. Mason F. Cogswell, Theodore and Timothy Dwight, and David Humphreys.²⁸

Most important of all was Webster's family. During the entire course of his long and publicly turbulent life, his relationship with his wife and family remained singularly positive and supportive. Indeed, they stood in stark contrast to his relationship with the rest of the world. The births of his eight children²⁹ were joyous occasions; their education

²⁶Letters to James Greenleaf, February 1 and June 6, 1789, Webster Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

²⁷Letter to James Greenleaf, August 12, 1789, The Papers of Noah Webster, Box 1, Archives and Manuscripts, New York Public Library.

²⁸Warfel, Webster, p. 196.

²⁹Emily Scholten (August 4, 1790), Frances Juliana (February 5, 1793), Harriet (April 6, 1797), Mary (January 7,

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and general upbringing were among his deepest and most absorbing interests. When he moved to New Haven in 1798 and found no schools suitable for them, he began one of his own.³⁰ He spent hours and hours with his children, singing, reading, laughing and playing;³¹ with them he had a relationship that was warm and full of positive, loving feelings. Webster was not a man given to expressing these kinds of emotions, and quite possibly never mentioned his family in public. Yet when one daughter died giving birth in 1819, both he and Rebecca were despondent for many months. They then raised the grandchild as if she were their own. Another daughter was evidently retarded; yet Webster never spoke of the burden. William, his only son to live past childbirth, suffered from "a native imbecility of mind." Of him Webster often said: "He is my only son, and you know I love him."³² His letters to his wife were filled with questions about his children; "I love my children," he often wrote. Rebecca Webster once wrote to her children that "Papa longs to see you all. I heard someone conversing in the drawing room the other day and found him standing before your portraits.... We often

1799), William Greenleaf (September 15, 1801), Eliza (December 21, 1803), Louisa (April 2, 1808), and Henry Bradford, (who died shortly after his birth on November 20, 1806). Warfel, Webster, p. 298.

³⁰ Warfel, Webster.

³¹ For example, see Warfel, Webster, p. 419, and dozens of letters in the Papers of Noah Webster, Archives and Manuscripts, New York Public Library.

³² Quoted in Warfel, Webster, p. 328.

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talk together (your father and myself) of our singular happiness in our sons-in-law and daughters and such a promising batch of grandchildren."³³ Indeed, from the scant written information that survives, it almost appears that there were two Noah Websters. The cold, cantankerous, authoritative and self-righteous public man shielded a private, sensitive, warm and loving family man. It was this private side to which he turned at crucial times, as in 1788-1789 and 1798. His family was a refuge and when his relationship with them was threatened in 1808, he endured his most profound crisis.

The security of his family relationships often gave him the strength to write, and while in Hartford he continued to advocate the development of a national language. Webster felt that in publishing his Dissertations he was going out on a limb. "I shall assert some strange things," he wrote, "some of them will be proved; and others, the world will say, are left unsupported." He was about to attack a few gods, and was prepared for the reaction. "Some great men, with whose works I have taken liberties," were standing with their mouths open, "ready to devour the child as soon as it is born." But he would go forward anyway, for "an author's brats are doomed to be the sport of a mad world."³⁴

Noah Webster's Dissertations on the English Language³⁵

³³Ibid., p. 417.

³⁴Quoted in Carpenter, Bibliography, p. 268.

³⁵Noah Webster, Dissertations on the English Language: with notes, Historical and Critical. To which is added, by

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was not the product of hasty thoughts. As early as October, 1785, he had written to Timothy Pickering that he had begun a major reformation of the language.³⁶ For two years before that he had been thinking about grammatical reforms which his teaching experiences had made him believe were necessary. His Dissertations, as he himself acknowledged, were the fruit of ten years labor.³⁷

Webster had some strong ideas about changing the language. He felt that the grammars of Johnson, Horne Tooke and others, as laudable and honored as they were, had done more damage than good. The heart of their mistake was that they had tried to base the English language on rules derived from Latin grammar. To adopt Latin or Greek rules was absurd; they must be based on the language itself. Yet that was a difficult task, for he knew quite well that languages were not fixed, concrete things, and the rules must be flexible enough to flow with the changes in the language. A perfect analogy, he thought, was an attempt to build a lighthouse on a floating island. New words appeared, old ones disappeared, and changes in usage, emphasis and even pronunciation occurred continuously. Yet when examined closely, all languages contained analogies to others, and it was on this principle that

way of Appendix, An Essay on a Reformed mode of Spelling, with Dr. Franklin's Arguments on that Subject (Boston: Isiah Thomas and Company, 1789).

³⁶Ford, Notes, I, p. 100.

³⁷Webster, Dissertations, p. vii.

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he based his work.³⁸ He hoped this line of investigation would lead to the necessary rules for the use of the language.

His proposed reforms had a practical purpose. It was not an accident that this work was dedicated to Benjamin Franklin, who shared his interest in language reform. His praise of the sage exhibited the qualities which he himself valued most and tried to live by. Franklin was the hero of the book because he had not labored at useless systems or theories which would serve no purpose but to confuse his readers; he thought up no "unintelligible speculations in theology and metaphysics." Instead, Franklin was the enlightened Puritan par excellence. He had lived by a plain doctrine, never far from some useful business or some practical truth. Collecting facts and applying them to useful purposes had been his hallmark, and that was what Webster intended to do in his Dissertations.³⁹

The central concern of this work was his theory of etymology, the development of language. The study of the true derivation of words, as he defined it, had long been an accepted scholarly activity in Europe. John Horne Tooke and Dr. Samuel Johnson, the great English lexicographer, were the best known etymologists, but no American had emerged as a leading theorist and student of the subject. Webster's interest had been sparked by his attempts to organize and analyze the

³⁸Ibid., p. 25.

³⁹Ibid., pp. [iii-vii].

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language and to make it easier to understand, especially for the young students. His trip south in 1785 had originally given him the opportunity to put his observations down on paper. He had since revised them.

He believed that language had evolved slowly, over long periods of time. At the beginning, he thought, there had been only one language, spoken by different tribes of people living in what was now Europe. That first language had been basically "Phenician or Hebrew," and from it had developed the different languages: Celtic and Gothic. People had migrated from Asia Minor into Russia and Northern Europe, and by comparing similar "radical" or common words, he found that the two languages had developed into no less than twenty-four others. Over the years, certain words had taken on different meanings, and new events, objects and inventions peculiar to each culture had originated new terms. Different peoples advanced at different rates of speed and their languages gradually separated. Yet a few words remained constant in sound, structure and significance.⁴⁰

Elaborate diagrams graced the pages of his work, setting forth the precise path taken by the various dialects.⁴¹ Webster's main interest was the development of English, which he believed could be easily traced. The original inhabitants of Northern Europe had spoken Celtic, and four hundred years

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 316, 41.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 340-341.

of Roman rule had not substantially altered it. But then the German tribes had invaded the island in the fifth century, and among them was a tribe of Saxons. "The universality of the conquest is demonstrated by the total change in the language," he wrote, "there being no more affinity between the Saxon or English, and the ancient British, than between any two languages in Europe." The ancient British had fled to Wales, where they still remained as proof of his theory, speaking what he believed was the purest descendant of the original Celtic. The language had been static until the twelfth century, when gradual changes began which were recognizable in his own speech.⁴²

This account of the evolution of language led Webster directly to the main message of his book: the need for a truly American language. He was acutely aware of the fact that the new nation had been and would continue to be settled by emigrants from many lands. Through a national language the differences in sectional dialects would be lessened and all citizens would eventually speak the same tongue. These Americans, he prophesized, would eventually number a hundred million. This fact alone was sufficient reason to systematize the language.⁴³

But there was an even more important reason for establishing a common and distinct tongue. "A national language

⁴²Ibid., pp. 46-47.

⁴³Ibid., pp. 19-21.

is a brand of national union," he wrote, and sincere efforts must be made to render all citizens national in outlook and character. Americans had not yet become sufficiently independent; they still exhibited an "astonishing respect" for the customs, manners, arts and literature of Europe.⁴⁴ But Webster had lived through the previous decade, and he believed that Americans were susceptible to change. Their minds had been awakened to the possibilities of reform in every area, and language was no exception. New inventions had aroused attention and expanded and invigorated the "intellectual faculties." "Here men are prepared to receive improvements," he believed, which would be rejected by nations, whose habits had not been shaken by similar events. As he had said in 1783, now was the moment to embark on new adventures:

NOW is the time, and this the country, in which we may expect success, in attempting changes favorable to language, science and government. Delay, in the plan here proposed, may be fatal; under a tranquil general government, the minds of men may again sink into indolence; a national acquiescence in error will follow, and posterity be doomed to struggle with difficulties, which time and accident will perpetually multiply.... Let us then seize the present moment, and establish a national language, as well as a national government.⁴⁵

The idea of basic changes in spelling and the alphabet was not entirely new. In his first spelling book Webster had opposed the drastic changes in this area others called for,

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 397.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 405-406.

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such as the omission of the "u" in honour, colour, and so forth. That was an unnecessary step brought on by a "rage of singularity," he believed. If any letter should be dropped in those cases, it should be the "o," which was silent.⁴⁶

By 1785, however, he had begun to think about the possibilities for greater coherence in spelling as a means of speeding up the development of a national language.⁴⁷ By 1789, with encouragement from Franklin, orthographic reform had become a central part of his agitation for a national language. All superfluous letters would be dropped. In situations in which a letter had a vague or inconsistent pronunciation, a fixed, specific sound would be represented by a new character. Points would be placed over vowels to distinguish their fluctuating sounds.⁴⁸ Thus "publick" would become "public," "neighbor" would become "nabor," "hed" would be substituted for "head," and so on.

In a collection of essays published in 1790, Webster put his ideas into operation:

In these essays, ritten within the last year, a considerable change in spelling iz introduced by way of experiment....The man who admits that the change of housbande,...into

⁴⁶Letter to Timothy Pickering, May 25, 1786, in Warfel, Letters, pp. 51-52.

⁴⁷Ford, Notes, II, pp. 455-457.

⁴⁸See Webster, Dissertations, pp. 391-394. Also Noah Webster, The American Spelling Book: containing an easy STANDARD PRONUNCIATION. Being the FIRST PART of a Grammatical Institute of the English Language (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1789), p. x.

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husband, iz an improovement, must acknowledge also the riting of helth, breth, rong, tung, munth, to be an improovement. There iz no alternativ. Every possible reezon that could ever be offered for altering the spelling of words, stil exists in full force; and if a gradual reform should not be made in our language, it wil proov that we are less under the influence of reezon than our ancestors.⁴⁹

Webster's nationalism also extended from language into the area of economics. Again and again throughout the years between 1787 and 1793, in newspaper articles and private letters he encouraged a whole series of new directions which he thought should be taken in that sphere of life. In December, 1791, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton delivered his "Report on Manufactures" to Congress. Hamilton had visionary plans for building a new and aggressive American economy. The new nation, believed the Secretary and his chief assistant, Tench Coxe, must construct a modern, national economic system along the lines of Great Britain's. Most Americans were farmers, so incentives for manufacturing must be instigated in the form of tax breaks, liberal government bounties, protective tariffs and high guaranteed profits. Northern ships should carry southern agricultural products to new factories. Women and children should be allowed to work in manufacturing plants and mills, since otherwise there would be insufficient labor to run the plants. This new national economy would benefit every one, they claimed, from farmers and merchants to carpenters and soapmakers. And, of course, Hamilton

⁴⁹Webster, Essays, p. xi.

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had a few other devices that he would like to see implemented in order to ensure that it functioned as it should, including a bank, a mint, and an extensive system of credit.

Noah Webster fully supported the Hamiltonian system. Many of the same ideas had crossed his own mind. Manufacturing would be good for the poor as well as the rich, for they would be able to find employment, and this would make them better citizens in the long run.⁵⁰ Bounties on wool as well as material for sails should be offered. "Let the monied man assist the artisan," he argued, "let the wealthy give the manufacturer a reasonable credit for his wool, that the manufacturer, in turn, may give a reasonable credit to the merchant in his cloths...." A society should be established to promote the arts and sciences which could then disseminate manufacturing advice and ideas. A national bank would make more capital available and perhaps attract foreign investments. Roads must be improved to carry the new goods, so Webster drew up plans for a canal between Boston and Hartford.⁵¹

Indeed, he supported several significant movements toward progressive social change and the expansion of human

⁵⁰"The Patriot, No. 3," Connecticut Courant, May 2, 1791. Reprinted in Warfel, Letters, pp. 95-96. See also Courant, April 18, 1791.

⁵¹"The Patriot," Connecticut Courant, January 2, 1792. This was part of a long series of articles urging economic improvements. For Webster's equally nationalistic views on economics in the 1780's see "On a Discrimination between the Original Holders and the Purchasers of the Certificates of the United States," reprinted in Webster, Essays. See also his articles in the Pennsylvania Gazette, March 21 and December,

freedom. He applauded the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789,⁵² and on the first day of the next year he sang its praise in verse:

Fair Liberty, whose gentle sway
First blest these shores, had cross'd the sea,
to visit Gallia, and inflame
Her sons their ancient rights to claim.⁵³

His opposition to slavery was strengthened and extended during this period. The American Magazine carried his abolitionist poem, "The Negroes' Complaint," a romantic, anguish-filled narrative of the life of a slave (Maratan), who had been captured in Africa, separated from his lover (Adila), and shipped across the Atlantic. Half way across the ocean, Adila appears "as the mist that hangs light on the wave;" she beckons Maratan to join her and escape the fate for which he is headed:

She beckons, and I must pursue.
To-morrow the White-man in vain,
shall proudly account me his slave;
My shackles I'll plunge in the main,⁵⁴
and rush to the realms of the brave.

During or shortly after his trip through the South, where he had undoubtedly seen slaves at work, he met Anthony Benezet in Philadelphia. Benezet was a Quaker pioneering in

1787, and "To the Public," May 8, 1788, Warfel, Letters, pp. 62-67.

⁵²See comments at bottom of Webster's copy of his article in the Freeman's Chronicle, October 27, 1783, in Yale University Archives.

⁵³[New Haven, Connecticut] American Mercury, January 2, 1790.

⁵⁴American Magazine, September, 1788, p. 751.

anti-slavery agitation and he awakened Webster to the cause, as well as to the contradictions implicit in his vision of American utopianism and the existence of men in chains. By 1789, Webster actively supported the abolitionist society in Philadelphia. He was in frequent contact with Benjamin Rush, writing about the "progress of justice and humanity towards the poor Africans,"⁵⁵ as well as ordering part of the proceeds of his Dissertations to be given to the Pennsylvania Society.⁵⁶ His revulsion against slavery had both moral and economic foundations. It was an evil of the worst kind, and he quoted Washington saying that it was unprofitable and counter-productive. Agriculture, they both believed, was successful in a directly inverse proportion to the number of slaves involved.⁵⁷

The question of emancipation was a difficult one, for Webster as for many other Americans. Several possible plans were put forward, but none seemed to really solve the problem.⁵⁸ Liberating all slaves at once, it was widely believed, would

⁵⁵Letter to Benjamin Rush, December 29, 1788, in Ford, Notes, Vol. I, p. 274.

⁵⁶Letter to Benjamin Rush, December 4, 1789. Webster Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania Archives.

⁵⁷Webster, Essays, p. 365.

⁵⁸Recent studies of early abolitionist movements are David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1966) and Winthrop D. Jordan, White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1968).

bring chaos. Webster rejected the possibility of freeing them gradually and allowing them to live with whites, for that would risk discord of the greatest kind. There was only one solution he felt was acceptable: colonization. Yet even that route aroused deep fears within him, for in the amount of time that it would take to find a suitable place and begin the process, he believed, the "blacks would all be blended with the whites; the mixed race will acquire freedom and be the predominant part of the inhabitants of the south."⁵⁹

Despite his dilemma over the question of the proper means of implementing emancipation and his fears of the mixing of the races, he continued his attack on slavery. Later in the year, he published a book which was, on the surface, just another reader for schoolchildren. In fact, The Little Reader's Assistant⁶⁰ was an early abolitionist tract. Indeed, in a letter accompanying the copy he sent to Thomas Jefferson, Webster acknowledged that he did not expect it to become widely used, "yet it may diffuse some useful truths; which is my primary object in all my publications."⁶¹ Among the stories of Columbus, the founding of New England and others drawn from American history were two concerning slavery. "Lamentation of an old female Slave" was a long narrative about a woman captured

⁵⁹ Webster, Essays, pp. 367-368.

⁶⁰ Noah Webster, The Little Reader's Assistant (Hartford: Elisha Babcock, 1790).

⁶¹ Quoted in Carpenter, Bibliography, p. 192.

and enslaved by whites while on her way to church. It included a graphic description of a slave ship and fifty wretched years of bondage under cruel masters. The other, "Story of the treatment of African Slaves," was even more alarming. In it slaves were marked for identification with hot irons applied to their cheeks and driven through the desert. The slave ships, in all their filth and horror, were lucidly described. The blacks in Webster's stories were not pathetic, debased creatures, but strong figures, capable of rebellion. "Sometimes they rise against their cruel masters, and attempt to regain their liberty," he wrote, "but for this, they are stabbed on the spot or beat and mangled in the most barbarous manner; or tied to the topes and scourged with whips and chains." He described atrocity after atrocity. There could be no doubts about where his sympathy lay, despite his own fears of emancipation:

Shall the barbarous and unlawful practice
always prevail? Are the negroes brutes?
Or are they men, like ourselves? Have not
the negroes the same right to steal us our
wives and children, transport them to Africa,
and reduce us to bondage, as we have to en-
slave them? If there is justice in heaven,
vengeance must fall upon the heads of men who
commit this outrage upon their own kind.⁶²

In 1791 he helped found an abolitionist society in Hartford, and in November, 1792, he delivered his strongest attack. In a speech which was later published, he tried to go beyond mere rhetoric and attempted to present an actual

⁶²Webster, Assistant, pp. 41-42.

program for the destruction of the evil. All those who heard him or read his pamphlet, he believed, knew in their hearts that slavery violated the basic rights of humanity. It was such an obvious injustice that many elaborate essays had been written stating the case against it, so he could not waste time rehashing that aspect.⁶³ Instead of attacking slavery on moral grounds, as he had previously done, Webster employed another tactic. The defenders of the system called on economic and more down to earth justifications, so slavery must be dealt with on the basis of its role in the everyday operations of society.

Its effect on the slaves themselves was perhaps the most pernicious part of bondage. When men of any race were prohibited from exerting themselves in their own behalf, it had a profound effect. They became mere machines, acting only when compelled. They also became insolent, villanous, cruel, deceitful and lazy. Thus all the peculiarities that Webster and almost all other white Americans saw in the slave were not inherent, but due to their condition. This was a logical extension of the environmental determinism which stemmed from the underpinning of enlightenment thought, John Locke's Essay on Human Understanding. As proof, Webster presented another stereotype believed by writers on Africa, who unanimously agreed that blacks were innocent, contented, joyous, hard

⁶³Noah Webster, Effects of Slavery on Morals and Industry (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1793), p. 5.

working and inoffensive people.⁶⁴

Oppression of blacks had ultimately to end in revolt. For a man who was profoundly shocked at the Middletown Convention, the specter of angry blacks fighting for their freedom was quite alarming. Hardened by severe labor, exasperated at insults and disciplined in cruelty, normally humane people became "doubly ferocious," he believed, "and their insurrections are marked with more than savage barbarity." This happened not only in America, but everywhere that slavery as an institution had ever existed. Greece, Rome, France and Germany had witnessed cruelty and murder from both slaves and masters, regardless of race.⁶⁵

The effect on masters, he thought, was equally odious. Those who held the rod of tyranny became equally hardened and cruel. The civilized man who owned other men quickly became a savage, and all the other attributes of slaves gradually infiltrated the master class; especially obvious, he felt, was the spirit of revenge and oppressive instincts exhibited by children of slaveowners.⁶⁶

Webster found the effects of slavery on agriculture (which he generally referred to as industry) to be equally profound. When one man labored for the benefit of others, he would not be nearly as industrious as when he worked for himself.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 12.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 14.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 18.

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Freeholders produced much more than slaves. He provided a wealth of statistics comparing the annual production of slave and non-slave states to prove it. His figures, he believed, proved that there was a direct positive correlation between the rate of production on the one hand and the length of leases of farms, the smallness of rent, and a low level of taxation. Furthermore, this correlation held true in Europe as well as in the United States. "The actual produce of a country is nearly in exact proportion to the degree of freedom enjoyed by its inhabitants," he concluded.⁶⁷

Webster realized that there was no alternative to emancipation. By 1793 he believed he had solved the problem. Immediate emancipation would have disastrous effects and no one advocated that drastic course. All cultivation south of New York would halt, and thousands would be impoverished. Famine would occur followed by blood baths between the races which would depopulate the entire region. Colonization, he now decided, was too costly and impractical; the slaves wouldn't go without resistance anyway.

Webster urged Americans to raise the slaves gradually to the status of free tenants. The wealthier slave owners should begin by giving small groups of slaves sections of land to work for themselves. He had discovered that this plan had worked in Poland, and, with help in the areas of agricultural knowledge from whites, it could work here. It would "answer

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 50-56; 22-24; 43.



the double purpose of giving freedom to a miserable race of men, without injuring their owners and [without] obstructing the cultivation of the country." It was a sound, practical, safe way to deal with the problem of slavery without upsetting the social structure, and to Noah Webster it seemed quite fair to all concerned. If Americans followed his plan, slavery would be "utterly extirpated in the course of two centuries, perhaps in a much shorter period," he believed, "without any extraordinary efforts to abolish it."⁶⁸

While his anti-slavery efforts consumed much time and energy, other humanitarian reforms also received his support. His long term of unemployment made him realize that not all men could find such sedentary ways to earn a living as the practice of law. Those whose jobs required them to daily face conditions they could not control encountered dangers from which they could not escape. Merchants could insure their ships and their cargo, he noted, but the men who also sailed in the ships could not replace their lives. Thus in 1792 Webster recommended that the good citizens of Hartford establish a "Charitable Society." Its purpose would be to relieve the distresses of the laboring poor who were "of good deportment and industrious." Widows and orphans would be assisted and a good education provided for the children. Those laboring poor who had families too large to support on what they earned should be given financial assistance.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 38, 37.

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Reform of penal laws also attracted his attention. Cruelty in criminal punishments was widespread in the new nation, and he felt it contradicted the entire nature of republicanism. Capital punishment was mere revenge. Webster denied that it could be justified under any circumstances. Instead he suggested more and better means of detention and rehabilitation.⁶⁹ Finally, his society would provide financial assistance for the laboring poor who were too old to work any longer.⁷⁰

Webster's interest in national affairs and humanitarian reform was broad indeed, and he was not always satisfied with his role as a behind-the-scenes prompter. Life in Hartford was pleasant enough, but he yearned to return to the center of activity. He was not yet financially stable, and still required some assistance from his brother-in-law. By 1793 he felt, as he had put it when he first moved to Hartford four years before, "out of the sphere of information," cut off from the "bustle of public life."⁷¹ In the spring he began to look around for some way to move to either New York or Boston, a way to return to a more publicly active life and make money as well.⁷²

⁶⁹"To the Inhabitants of Hartford," September, 1792, in Warfel, Letters, pp. 105-106. See also Connecticut Courant, December 12, 1791.

⁷⁰Connecticut Courant, September 5 and 26, 1791.

⁷¹Letter to James Greenleaf, June 6, 1789. Historical Society of Pennsylvania Archives.

⁷²Letter to James Greenleaf, June 24, 1793. Historical Society of Pennsylvania Archives.

CHAPTER V

ALONENESS

Let us never forget that the cornerstone of all republican governments is, that the will of every citizen is controlled by the laws or supreme will of the state.

N. W. 1798

People who begin fighting for freedom often end up on the side of the oppressors. Psychologist Erich Fromm has noted that this phenomenon is world-wide and has occurred in all periods of western civilization since the end of the middle ages.¹ Human history since that time, according to Fromm, has been characterized by the extension of freedom and the dissolution of the primary ties which bound men together into coherent societies. The reaction to the extension of human freedom is the key to the transition from rebel to authoritarian. Fromm has described a psychological state, "moral aloneness," as the product of the reaction and which he believes leads to a call for and submission to authority as a substitute for the old order. Karen Horney has described a similar state, effected by certain social and cultural factors, and which Fromm agrees is complimentary to his own thesis.²

¹Erich Fromm, Escape from Freedom (New York, Discus Books, 1941).

²Ibid., p. 162.

The insights of Fromm and Horney form a perspective within which the experiences of Noah Webster during the years between 1793 and 1798 may be understood.

The extension of human freedom, believes Erich Fromm, is one of the most important problems facing western civilization. It was also a problem that received much attention from Webster and his contemporaries. The breakup of the authoritarian world order of medieval society, characterized by feudalism and Catholicism, has produced a form of freedom dialectic in nature. It is freedom from the authoritarian bonds of church and state which gave man limitations and a sense of security and unity with the rest of the world in which he lives. It is also freedom to emerge as strong, integrated, self-reliant individuals. The dissolution of these primary ties creates anxieties and a feeling of aloneness and powerlessness which Fromm and Horney believe is intolerable and must be assuaged. When man breaks free from one set of coherent ordered relationships with the rest of the world and perceives that his former security has been severed, he must reorient himself and seek to create secondary bonds between himself and the rest of society. In one way or another, man realizes that he must face the world outside of himself without recourse to an omnipotent force. The response to this situation, says Fromm, may take two forms. Man may seek to unify himself with others through constructive exercise of his emotional and intellectual capacities; or he may fall back, give up his freedom, and try to overcome the resultant

anxieties and aloneness by submitting to an authority figure. Webster chose the latter, for himself and for American society as a whole. This is the response Fromm labels an "escape from freedom."

Anxiety over the expansion of freedom was widespread in America in the 1780's and 1790's.³ With independence had come a release of the restrictions of English and controls in all spheres of endeavor. A vacuum had been created producing the unrest of the 1780's as well as attempts to re-establish coherence and solidarity. Webster's own support of the Constitution, the essence of which was a reliance on certain restrictions on political expressions through a system of checks and balances, is a clear example of this reaction to the events of the 1780's, although not quite as economically determined as Charles Beard and others have thought.⁴ It was established, the founders themselves admitted, to form a "more perfect union" than the rather imperfect

³The historical literature concerning the 1790's is massive. The most thorough annotated bibliography is Jacob E. Cooke, "The Federalist Age: A Reappraisal" in Billias and Grob, American History. See also Richard J. Moss, "The American Reaction to the French Revolution, 1789-1801," unpublished dissertation, Michigan State University, 1974. The events and phenomena discussed in this paragraph are analyzed extensively and explained in terms of Fromm and Freud.

⁴For a full discussion of the various interpretations of the making of the Constitution, see Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, The Founding Fathers: Young Men of the Revolution (Washington, D. C.; Service Center for Teachers of History, 1962).

confederation, and to "insure domestic tranquillity," as well as "secure" the "Blessings of Liberty." Indeed, the new government as a whole was clearly a movement towards social coherence. It was widely believed that the forces of human passion unleashed by the Revolution in America had spread to France. Many Americans, especially after 1793 when the guillotine came into widespread use, believed that stability could never be restored to western civilization. The political rhetoric of the 1790's, hysterical at times and characterized by one historian as "phrenzy," can also be understood as a product of anxiety over the loss of social stability. Fromm notes that strong authority figures are often a product of the release from domination, and George Washington has long been viewed as America's father-figure, guiding the republic through the disorder of birth.⁵ Indeed, the seemingly chaotic events of these years, including civil unrest, the establishment of extra-political organizations such as the democratic societies which sprang up in the 1790's, as well as the beginnings of the first political parties, all appear as logical attempts to form secondary social bonds.

Noah Webster, during the years between 1793 and 1798, exemplified Fromm's escape from freedom and the development of moral aloneness in an individual. By the end of this phase

⁵William Alfred Bryan, George Washington in American Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952); Robert Hay, "George Washington: American Moses," American Quarterly, 1969, pp. 780-791.

of his life he had rejected virtually every positive attitude toward social change. He had reversed his view of human nature and had begun looking for an authority to which he and the rest of the American people could turn as a means of ensuring social stability. All of this was a direct reaction to his analysis of the events of the 1780's and especially the more traumatic and intense effects of his experiences of the 1790's.

Re-entry into public life was neither disturbing nor difficult. By the summer of 1793 Webster was ready to return to a more active life. His law practice was still a struggling venture, and he did not enjoy it enough to invest the energy necessary to make it more successful. National politics still interested him; in fact he could not control his desire to participate in the debates over important issues. Despite his isolation in Connecticut, Webster managed to keep up with the events in Philadelphia and New York, where the new government was now lodged. He also retained his contacts in many influential circles. Thus when an opportunity to return to the center of power and activity was offered to him in 1793, he accepted it.

Webster's willingness to return is not surprising. He was, after all, still a firm believer in the future of America, a firm nationalist who felt strongly that he must do everything possible towards the construction of a new world characterized by freedom and virtue. His ever present ego would also be served by the attention which would be given to

him. Moving to New York also seemed to offer a real chance of financial success. For quite some time, the city had been without a journalistic outlet for the loosely-knit group of men, led by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and Rufus King, whom we now know as "federalists." A new newspaper, they believed, was needed to combat the work of Benjamin Franklin Bache in Philadelphia, Thomas Adams in Boston and Thomas Greenleaf in New York, all of whom ardently opposed the Washington administration. Noah Webster, friend of federal principles and advocate of federal culture, former editor of the American Magazine, was a logical choice. He had experience, was learned in the business of words, and most importantly, had a proven ability to use political invective. Webster was approached and replied that he needed a minimum amount of financial support, and a deal was made. Each of the three leading friends of the central government, plus nearly ten others would "loan" him \$150. In the early summer he prepared the move.⁶

Perhaps in preparation for what was to come, Webster retired to his study in Hartford early in the summer of 1793 and wrote out a summary of his political viewpoints. He was, he believed, a "true republican," and it seemed to him that others who were "true republicans" would believe in the same logical, obvious principles that he did.⁷

⁶Ford, Notes, I, pp. 364-377.

⁷"True Republicanism," Connecticut Courant, August 12, 1793. For Webster's views on neutrality, see "Address from the

"True Republicanism" was, to Noah Webster, a coherent and simple program. Those who qualified as true republicans opposed war because it was the most terrible calamity that could befall mankind. War wasted energy, caused the shedding of human blood, and disrupted all commerce and order. True republicans were friends of the French Revolution, and ardently wished her freedom, civil liberties and a sound constitution. They also knew that neutrality was necessary for the survival of America, and thus favored Washington's neutrality proclamation. At home, true republicans supported a republican form of government because of its liberty and stability. Most importantly, true republicans believed that equality consisted of an equality of rights, not of an equal division of property, as he himself had written so often in the past. The revolution had destroyed hereditary ranks and titles, and all offices must now be filled by men according to their "talents and virtues." Finally, all true republicans realized that there was no need for extra-legal political groups like the democratic societies. There was simply no evil, no opposition or any corruption of a magnitude sufficient to warrant extra-legal bodies. Thus the societies which had recently sprung up in Philadelphia and New York were both useless and could even be dangerous if they proceeded to nourish discontent, jealousy and mistrust of the country's leaders. He believed that these groups could cause a serious weakening of the government in the face of danger, especially if war with either

Inhabitants of this City [Hartford], to the President of the United States," Ibid., August 19, 1793.

France or England threatened.⁸

Despite these dangers, Webster still celebrated America in 1793 as a veritable utopia. Here the mind of man was as free as the air he breathed, here the laws applied equally to all. Property was distributed fairly. All religions were tolerated, and no state supported church demanded payment of lordly exactions or tithes. In comparison to Europe, it was a land of freedom and prosperity for all. Everyone could find employment, even the poorest could accumulate wealth:

Here no beggarly monks and fryars [sic], no princely ecclesiastes with their annual income of millions, no idle court-pensioners and titled mendicants, no spies watch and betray the unsuspecting citizen, no tyrant with his train of hounds, bastards and mistresses, those vultures of government, prey upon poor peasants and exhaust the public treasury of the nation.⁹

Before leaving Hartford, Webster also took time to expand his comments favoring the course of the Revolution in France. Much had happened in that country since 1789, including the rise and fall of governments, riots and beheadings of royalty. Americans had written a great many words about these events and had exhibited much concern. Webster detected the beginning of a change in attitude toward the Revolution from positive to negative. He attempted to reverse this trend. Americans, separated by thousands of miles of ocean from the Ancien Regime and living amidst bounty unknown in Europe, could

⁸Ibid.

⁹Webster, Morals, pp. 13-15

not realize the horror of peasant life before the Revolution. He detailed the crimes committed by the monarchy in lucid fashion, defending the rebellion as a desperate response to tyranny and as an extension of the Revolution in America.¹⁰

Webster finally left Connecticut for New York City in August. An incident involving the French minister, Edmund Genêt, immediately revealed the tension in his mind over the course of events. When Genêt arrived in America in 1793, he was perceived by many as the very embodiment of the French Revolution so highly praised by Webster.¹¹ Young, headstrong, handsome and bellicose, Genêt loudly voiced slogans calling for rule by the people, and went even further by attacking George Washington. His arrival elicited large demonstrations by the democratic societies,¹² newly organized groups of people friendly to France and in general opposed to the Federalist administration.

By the time Genêt reached New York on August 7, Washington and Jefferson had already decided to have Genêt recalled. Manhattan, however, welcomed Genêt with wild parades; people by the thousands marched through the streets singing the Marseillaise, wearing cockades and shouting democratic

¹⁰Connecticut Courant, July 27, August 5, 1793.

¹¹For a thorough study of the Genêt mission, see Harry Ammon, The Genêt Mission (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973).

¹²An excellent study is Eugene Perry Link, The Democratic-Republican Societies 1790-1800 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

and revolutionary slogans. The ship which had brought Genêt to America, L'Ambuscade, had sailed into New York ahead of the Minister, emblazoned with similar rhetoric.¹³

On August 12, Noah Webster arrived in New York. Financial support for the American Minerva was still being negotiated, and since he had no permanent quarters, he fought his way through a large pro-Genêt crowd to Bradley's tavern and secured temporary lodging. Unfortunately for Webster, that was also the home of Edmund Genêt.¹⁴

It was only a matter of a few hours until the two met. Webster had heard reports of Genêt's activity and progress while he was packing in Hartford, but had paid little attention. There were other, more serious concerns on his mind, and thus when Webster and Genêt were introduced at dinner, all seemed pleasant with only minor apprehension on Webster's part. Yet in a few minutes, Webster was furious and enraged. A United States frigate, the Concord, had recently taken a few ships as prizes. Genêt stated loudly that the incident proved that the entire United States government, including President Washington, was under the influence of England. Webster instantly became upset. Genêt went on to say that he believed, and could prove, that the officers of the government were involved in a plan to subject the United States to English rule, and that the Americans would soon be slaves again. One of the

¹³National Gazette, July 10, 1793. Quoted in Moss, "Reaction," p. 111.

¹⁴Ammon, Genêt, p. 118.

Minister's aides remarked, in French, (obviously thinking that no one in primitive New York could speak his language,) that "General Washington is making war on the French nation." Webster, unable to control his temper, stood up and shouted at the French party that they were quite mistaken; it would be impossible to subject the independent farmers of America to England, or for that matter, any other foreign power. Furthermore, he said, the executives knew quite well that it was impossible and would never dare try such a frivolous scheme for fear of losing their jobs. Webster questioned Genêt: did the French Minister really believe that Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson and Knox were fools? Genêt, undoubtedly with a faint smile on his lips, replied that "Mr. Jefferson is no fool." Webster was livid with rage.¹⁵

The Genêt incident marked the beginning of the most important change in Webster's life. As the French Revolution moved into a more radical phase it gained an increased importance in his mind. Its excesses frightened him and began to symbolize all that was wrong with man and the world as a whole. His analysis of its essential character led him to rethink his conception of the nature of man, which in turn commanded fundamental changes in his view of all else.

¹⁵ Webster was so upset over the incident that he made out several affidavits concerning the event. See Letter to Oliver Wolcott, Jr., Wolcott Papers, Connecticut Historical Society, Volume 8, No. 42. Another is deposited in the Webster Papers, New York Public Library. A third, probably a copy of the one in the Connecticut Historical Society, appears in [Webster], "Memoirs," p. 27. See also Ford, Notes, I, pp. 368-369.

"Almost every man who espoused the cause of America in her struggle for independence," he said in the spring of 1794, "is now friendly to the revolution in France." Yet the guillotine was in use in Paris, and mob action in Philadelphia and New York brought shivers to his spine and visions of headless men and women to his mind. All around him he saw a growing spirit of selfishness, opposition to lawful authority and even to law itself. His own shop was threatened several times by mobs, and to Webster it must have seemed that society was disintegrating. Was this what republicanism was like? He certainly hoped not. "A King of France and a Mob in America have committed equally an outrage on the liberties of others," he thought; "it is an attempt to subdue opinions the right of which is sacred and inviolable...."¹⁶ Not law, but passion and despotic will seemed to reign. The tables had turned. In Europe the aristocracy believed their rights in danger from freedom of discussion. In America the democratic societies slandered all those who opposed anarchy. They had become "the tyrants of America."¹⁷

What really frightened him, however, was the guillotine. Its use was now regular in France, and to one who had grown up in the quiet hills of Connecticut, its bloody work was terrifying. It had "filled France with human blood," and been used unmercifully against anyone who differed with even

¹⁶American Minerva, May 2, 1794.

¹⁷Ibid., May 6, 1794.

the slightest whim of those in power.¹⁸ Webster had had occasional doubts about the nature of man, but now those doubts turned to fear:

Is man a tyger [sic], a savage, restrained only by law and a little education, but let loose from these, delighting in war, in death and all the horrid deeds of savage ferocity[?] ...inflamed by passion, what is he but a beast of prey? A more ingenious animal indeed; for the beast has the teeth, the horns, and the poisonous sting that nature gave him to destroy his adversary; but man has improved upon the works of Nature and invented numberless weapons of destruction. One part of men are forging bloody instruments to slay another part, and a third, more fortunate perhaps, amuse themselves with staring at the horrid spectacles.¹⁹

As the Terror in France spread, Webster's anxieties increased. "Quem Deus Vult Perdere, prius dementat! [Whom the God's would destroy, they first make mad!] he wrote to a friend upon hearing of the beheading of Marie Antoinette.²⁰ By early 1794 he believed that the Revolution was unfortunate no matter which way it turned. If the Jacobins won other revolutions would undoubtedly occur around the world, and they would open a pandora's box. If the Jacobins failed, Webster predicted to a friend that there would be a reaction even more oppressive than the Ancien Regime. Tyrants would appear who would make Louis XIV look quite tame. Liberty would be extinct. Either way, human nature would be degraded, the human

¹⁸Ibid., May 2, 1794.

¹⁹Ibid., April 10, 1794.

²⁰To Timothy Pickering, January 8, 1794, Ford, Notes, I, p. 381.

mind subdued, and France in general would be destroyed.

"There is no other alternative," he moaned.²¹

These fears aroused by the events in France produced specific ideas concerning American foreign policy. The new nation, he now believed, must resist the poison of French ideas and avoid involvement in European affairs at all costs.²² He believed that Marat and Robespierre were the heads of a large conspiracy, organized in local groups spread all across France. They had the country in their control, and he was sure they had their eye on America. Vigilance must be kept, for those who opposed the Washington Administration and who built "Magical systems, castles in the air" could easily become their dupes.²³

The Revolution absorbed much of Webster's time. He contemplated its nature, and its long-term effects on France and the world, determined to understand its cause and to discover a method of control. In March of 1794 he produced one of his most extraordinary essays. The Revolution in France²⁴ was an uneven document; sometimes brilliant in its insights, it was also marked by verbosity and near hysteria.

²¹To Oliver Wolcott, May 3, 1794, Ford, Notes, I, p. 382.

²²Ibid.

²³American Minerva, November 3, October 31, 1794.

²⁴The Revolution in France considered in respect to its progress and effects. By an American. (New York: George Bunce and Company, 1794). Reprinted in Noah Webster, A Collection of Papers on Political, Literary and Moral Subjects (New York: Webster and Clark, 1843). (Cited hereafter as Webster, Collection.)

The Revolution in France marked a significant turning point in Webster's life in at least two ways. His studies of literature and economics during the previous twenty years had often displayed a sensitivity to time and development, but this was the first conscious attempt to view a subject as a product of its past. In this essay, Webster strove to accomplish what he thought a good historian should achieve. From this point on, Noah Webster utilized an historical approach in all of his work. Time and development, and more importantly, theory and explanation, were the bases of his studies of language, science and literature; even his essays on politics and religion were historical in nature after 1794.

Webster's methodology did not consist of simply gathering facts and splicing them together. He was sure that his assignment was not to merely narrate the chronological sequence of events, although he did not neglect that aspect of any problem or story. Instead, he believed that his job was to explain the real action of history, to examine the "why" of any situation as well as the "who, what, where or when." He was not the narrator of a dead past, but a central part of the whole process:

It is conceived to be the duty of the historian...not merely to collect accounts of battles, the slaughter of the human race, the sacking of cities, the seizure and confiscation of shipping, and other bloody and barbarous deeds, the work of savage man towards his fellow men; but to discover, if possible, the causes of great changes in the affairs of men; the springs of those important improvements, which vary in the aspect

of government, the features of nations,
and the very character of man.²⁵

Even more important was the change in his social views. With this essay, Webster's support of progressive social change virtually vanished. Nearly everything he had written before had emphasized the need for an extension of human freedom and human rights. Even his essays on government and on the Constitution after 1787 had been cast within the framework of an improvement in the human condition, although he often favored change in a structured manner. After 1794, he would never again agitate for an extension of man's freedom or for his right to make decisions for himself. Instead, he became increasingly convinced of the need for social control and restraint.

The French Revolution was, he believed, a radical advance in human freedom and had broken forever the primary ties which held society together. The authority of the Church and the state (in the form of the monarchy) had been overthrown. The essence of the entire matter was that the Revolution was not merely a change in the political or economic institutions. It went much further and much deeper than that. Instead the Revolution represented a basic change in the mind of man. Habits of deference and obedience had been shattered. Political, social and economic changes were secondary manifestations of a deeper, more profound intellectual change. It was "attended

²⁵Ibid., p. 1.

with a change in manners, opinions and institutions, infinitely more singular and important, than a change of masters or of government," he said.²⁶ Revolutionary thought, or "french principles," was a new world-view, based on atheism and materialism, which threatened the "Supreme Intelligence" which man had traditionally perceived to be at the center of all creation. The French would instead substitute "matter and motion" in their explanation of all things, and thereby destroy the entire structure of man's knowledge of his world, including, of course, the laws based on that worldview which controlled the passions of man.²⁷

Webster's invention of a new word emphasized the clash between the events in France and his own intense Protestant ethic. Here, in fact, was the heart of the whole matter. It was becoming clear that human freedom brought deep changes that he was unwilling and unable to accept. The events of the 1780's and 1790's had destroyed Webster's optimistic view of man and replaced it with a belief that man was innately evil and depraved. The French Revolution cut man loose from all restrictions and unleashed his wild nature. The second clause in the sentence introducing his new word, "demoralizing," both defined what he meant and indicated the depth of his analysis of the profound nature of the Revolution. It had removed all means of social cohesion, all sources of authority. The emerging French rebelliousness and anti-authoritarianism was clearly

²⁶Ibid., p. 6.

²⁷Ibid., p. 21.

the true nature of man and foretold an awful future. It signified a "total change in the minds of the people."²⁸

The concept of reason was at the center of revolutionary thought. In the 1780's Webster had placed many of his hopes for America on man's ability to use his own mental powers to achieve social change. Now, the use of "reason" by the Jacobins had given it an ominous meaning in his mind. To Webster, "reason" became a codeword which summarized all their rhetoric about freedom, rights, matter and motion, as well as their attacks on religion and civil authority. The man who a decade earlier had seen America as an "Empire of Reason" now felt that reason itself threatened all order, stability, and civilization itself. Robespierre's crowning of a prostitute during the Festival of Reason gave it an even more satanic edge. Those who celebrated reason would worship anything, it seemed, and were the "least rational" of all beings.²⁹ Throughout the history of man one idol after another had attracted the admiration of man in ways which Webster now considered irrational. "The deity or the day has no connection with men's happiness....The oath of the Druids was just as good and as powerful a deity as the temple or altar of Reason." Greece, Rome and Egypt had all had similar idols, and like those forms of worship, Reason was merely

²⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 33.

a "blind superstitious enthusiasm."³⁰

Faction was another disruptive manifestation of reason, and Webster traced its development.³¹ Without guidelines other than their own minds, men often entered into personal quarrels over trifling subjects, and these grew into senseless, irrational, dangerous and explosive battles. Both sides assumed they were correct, and it was usually not long before victory became submerged beneath the growing hostilities of two often equal parties. Exasperation resulted, and the stage was set for the entrance of a demagogue. This was the point that Webster believed France had reached by 1794, and there seemed to be no way to stop the flow of events. He predicted that the end result would be unprecedented tyranny. The victorious party would inflict a cruel revenge on their opponents, and do so with the words "liberty" and "reason" on their lips.³²

³⁰Ibid., p. 12.

³¹Webster saw no difference between "faction" and "party." In his first dictionary, published in 1806, he defined "faction" as "a party, tumult, sedition, discord." Webster never accepted the concept of political opposition or organized parties, as others did after 1820. See Richard Hofstadter, The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840 (Berkeley, Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1972).

³²Webster, Revolution, pp. 24-39. The most famous attack on the Revolution came from Edmund Burke in his Reflections on the Revolution in France (London, 1790). Webster and Burke had much in common. Both saw the Revolution as a powerful force disrupting all stability, order and civilization. Its attack on authority was especially feared. Although Webster was at this time less concerned than Burke with organized religion as a tool of social control, both realized its role in restraining the passions of man. Yet there was also a striking difference between the two analyses. Burke

Webster clearly believed that the French Revolution threatened the very stability of human society. In changing man's beliefs and ideas, it attacked government at its foundation; without government, there could be only bloody chaos. America had her Constitution as a "sheet anchor" (a word which he had used in the 1780's to describe the rights of man), and without that document it would be "afloat among the surges of passion and the rocks of error."³³ Jacobinical ideas could "spring up any moment, and unexpectedly spread devastation and ruin at any time, in any place, and among any class of citizen."³⁴ America as well as Europe was threatened.

Piety now took on more importance in his thoughts. "Religion has an excellent effect in repressing vices, in softening the manners of men, and consoling them under the pressure of calamities."³⁵ But the Revolution had a devastating effect on the social role of religion. Looking back, Webster believed that the philosophes led by Voltaire and Rousseau, had seen the Church as a tool of the Monarchy and an instrument of tyranny and ignorance. They had attempted

was content to point out that the Revolution shattered all the traditions and precedents on which he believed social stability was constructed. Webster agreed, but his emphasis on the Revolution as an intellectual movement based on reason went one step farther than Burke.

³³ Webster, Revolution, p. 41.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

³⁵ Webster, Revolution, p. 21.

to destroy the Church along with the Ancien Regime.³⁶ The Jacobins had gone even further, turning their attack on the Church and Monarchy into an attack on Christianity in general. They had abolished the sabbath, substituting one day in every ten as a day of rest, and had thus disrupted man's mode of reckoning time. Fear of death had been used by the clergy, so the Jacobins had denied the immortality of the soul by depicting death as mere sleep. The Notre Dame had been converted to a temple of reason and Jehovah himself had been replaced by the omnipotence of the nation-state.³⁷ The social role of religion had been severely shaken, and perhaps even destroyed.

As the Revolution continued, Webster's fear verged on paranoia. A friend had witnessed a gathering of high officials, including Aaron Burr, at which an attempt to overthrow the government had been planned. Webster dutifully reported the story to his good friend Oliver Wolcott, Jr., then Secretary of the Treasury.³⁸ The continuously increasing number of immigrants flooding into America represented a threat of subversion, since Webster believed that they were all democrats, if not outright Jacobins.³⁹ When a church burned in Philadelphia, Webster immediately became convinced it had been

³⁶Ibid., p. 19.

³⁷Ibid., p. 10.

³⁸Letter to Oliver Wolcott, March 8, 1795. Connecticut Historical Society, Wolcott Papers, Vol. 6. No. 92.

³⁹To Theodore Sedgewick, January 2, 1795, Warfel, Letters, p. 125.

set ablaze by subversive elements and said so in his newspaper. A few days later he formally retracted his statement and apologized for jumping to conclusions.⁴⁰

Again and again he lashed out at the bogeymen of French principles. They were spread by the intrigues of democrats and spys, and the result, he repeated, could only be anarchy and bloody chaos.⁴¹ In the end, a form of tyranny even worse than Monarchy would prevail under a popular military figure.⁴² Already at work in the west, French agents in America sought to "sever the United States" and control the commerce of the entire world.⁴³ He pointed out specific areas

⁴⁰American Minerva, January 3, 1795. See "To the Public," May 1, 1796, Warfel, Letters, p. 134; To Oliver Wolcott, July 30, 1795, Ford, Notes, I, p. 392; Webster, "Vindication..." American Minerva, May 14, 15, 1795. By 1796-1797, Webster had developed a conspiratorial frame of mind, something not uncommon in American history. Conspiracy theories have appeared in virtually every decade of the nation's existence. Two recent studies of this phenomena are David B. Davis, ed., The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), and Richard O. Curry and Thomas W. Brown, Conspiracy: The Fear of Subversion in American History (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1972). The best theoretical study of conspiratorial fear is Franz Neumann, The Democratic and Authoritarian State (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957). Neumann believes that conspiracy theories give a false concreteness to fears and anxieties which often have vague foundations, thus providing specific objects, real or imagined, upon which hatred and resentment of one's self or others may be expended. He also notes that conspiracy theories are often based on some small kernel of truth, and are not always mere figments of the imagination. Neumann's insights seem to be applicable in Webster's case.

⁴¹Commercial Advertiser (hereafter cited as C. A.) November 9, 1797.

⁴²Ibid., December 6, 1797.

⁴³Minerva, March 15, 1797.

in which conspiracies were actively being carried out.⁴⁴ In fact no place seemed to be free of subversion. "I am convinced that they formed as early as 1792, the vast project of a general Revolution," he wrote in 1796, "and have since added to their views the design of conquests as extensive as the Roman Empire, in the plenitude of the Greatness of her power."⁴⁵ The French Ministers in Philadelphia were suspected of secretly organizing armies.⁴⁶ Webster firmly believed that they were interested only in "confiscation, blood and conquest."⁴⁷

Fear of spreading revolution dictated certain political conclusions. Legislative action, he believed, must be taken to combat the growth of Jacobin-inspired democratic societies. Since the South, through Jefferson and Madison, had close connections with France, it must be carefully watched. He expected opposition to the central government to appear there, and even predicted a movement toward separation of the region from the northern states. The Jay Treaty represented to Webster a move toward internal as well as external peace, and thus he encouraged its acceptance despite the heavy criticism leveled at it. Above all, America must do everything it

⁴⁴To Timothy Pickering, October 21, 1797, Ford, Notes, I, pp. 430-431. See also Minerva, September 14, 21, 1796 and To Timothy Pickering, November 24, 1796, Ford, Notes, I, p. 408.

⁴⁵To Timothy Pickering, December 8, 1796, Ford, Notes, I, pp. 409-410.

⁴⁶To Timothy Pickering, November 24, 1796, Ford, Notes, I, p. 408.

⁴⁷C. A., November 22, 1797.

could to oppose foreign influence and avoid being tricked into European alliances.⁴⁸

Indeed, the editor of the American Minerva, which became the Minerva and then the Commercial Advertiser,⁴⁹ strongly criticized any opposition to authority. The bitter clash over Hamilton's financial schemes and Federalist foreign policy deeply disturbed him. There was, he felt, little need or justification for opposition to the central government. After all, the officials at the highest levels were all veterans of the Revolution, the Confederation and staunch supporters of the Constitution. Their integrity was unquestionable. Also, he felt that most of the measures passed since 1789 benefited all citizens. There had been opposition to funding and assumption, but those policies had eventually proven sound. The events of the years since 1789 seemed to indicate that the opposition to the Constitution had also been unjustified.

⁴⁸"To the Public," May 1, 1796, Warfel, Letters, p. 134; To Oliver Wolcott, July 30, 1795, Ford, Notes, I, p. 392; Webster, "Vindication of the Treaty..." American Minerva, May 14, 15, 1795.

⁴⁹While Webster actually edited only two papers between 1793 and 1798, they came under a total of five names. The daily began on December 9, 1793 as the American Minerva. On May 2, 1796 it became The Minerva and Mercantile Evening Advertiser, and changed to The Commercial Advertiser on October 1, 1797. He also published a semi-weekly, which went into print on June 4, 1794 as The Herald: A Gazette for the Country and changed to The Spectator on October 1, 1797. Sidney Kobre, Development of American Journalism (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1969), p. 114, notes that Webster's daily had a circulation of 1700, while the next highest in New York City had a circulation of 1000. For a column-inch analysis of subject matter, see Gary R. Coll, "Noah Webster: Journalist, 1783-1803," unpublished dissertation, Southern Illinois University, 1971.

Indeed, to his mind the success of the Federalist programs was decisive proof that any form of opposition of leadership must be wrong in principle.⁵⁰ To his way of thinking it was "mad work."⁵¹

As might be expected, he supported John Adams in the election of 1796. Adams' simplicity of manners, deferential character and concern for constitutional principles made him like a mirror image of Webster, and Adams' emphasis on neutrality ensured the editor's support. When someone accused Webster of conspiring with Hamilton to deprive Adams of certain votes and thereby elect Pinckney, Webster was outraged.⁵²

Webster realized that his ideas were undergoing fundamental changes. In 1797 he sent a copy of his Sketches to Jedediah Morse, and could not resist commenting on the changes in his political principles and attitude toward dissent. "I was once a visionary and should now leave out a few ideas contained in it," he noted.⁵³ Furthermore, his analysis of a local election reinforced his view that ownership of property was directly related to stability and virtue. He found that the Federalist candidates received a majority of votes from men who held assets of £100 or more, and that opposition candidates received their votes from men who held

⁵⁰To C. I. Volney, July 10, 1796, Warfel, Letters, pp. 137-138.

⁵¹C. A., November 9, 1797.

⁵²Affidavit, July 13, 1797, Warfel, Letters, p. 160.

⁵³Letter to Jedediah Morse, July 24, 1797, Webster Family Papers. Archives and Manuscripts, Yale University.

less than £100 in property. It was true, he said, that "faction has found materials to work among the poor and the ignorant."⁵⁴

Fear of revolution also changed his evaluation of the past. History, which a decade before had led him to envision a utopia in the future, now seemed to be merely "a history of crimes, follies and contradictions."⁵⁵ Human Reason, previously the key to all progress, was now also highly suspect. Paine, Godwin and others who relied on man's innate goodness and his use of Reason in their political theories were merely ignorant visionaries.⁵⁶ Because they deluded men into false hopes and thereby created only more turmoil, they were "a pack of scoundrels." They undermined stability and order, and were therefore "refuse, the sweepings of the most depraved part of mankind." America, it now seemed, had become not a utopia characterized by freedom, but the dumping ground for the most undesirable people in all the rest of the world.⁵⁷

With these judgments, Webster's belief in America began to crumble. As the torrents of political slander that characterized the late 1790's⁵⁸ poured down around him, as

⁵⁴Minerva, June 14, 1796.

⁵⁵Ibid., November 7, 1796.

⁵⁶Ibid., January 27, 1797.

⁵⁷To Timothy Pickering, July 7, 1797, Ford, Notes, I, p. 422. See also Minerva, August 14, 1797.

⁵⁸Marshall Smelser has clearly shown how hysterical the rhetoric of the period was in his "The Federalist Period as an Age of Passion," American Quarterly, X (1958), pp. 391-419; "The Jacobin Phrenzy: Federalism and the Menace of

Federalists accused Republicans of Jacobinical subversion and Republicans accused Federalists of Monarchism, the editor began to believe that corruption and moral turpitude had made severe inroads in every area of American life. He saw the highest officers of the government lie, cheat and swindle to advance their own interests. Secretaries of state, members of Congress, presidents of banks, collectors of customs and governors of states all appeared to be committing fraud, treason and other crimes. He watched those who had been patriots during the Revolution become "political prostitutes, who hang out their infamous traffic, and for some price or other, are always ready for villainy."⁵⁹

Visions of utopia were finally destroyed by political vituperation. The bickering, slander, hatred, deceit and general degeneration which he now believed characterized politics in the United States shook his hopes and plans for the future. America, divinely favored, provided with a specially-created, corruption-free continent, with whom a decade earlier he had believed the hopes of all mankind rested, was on the verge of degenerating into complete degradation:

From the day of Adam, to this moment, no country was ever so infested with corrupt and wicked men, as the United States.

Liberty, Equality and Fraternity," Review of Politics, XIII (1951), pp. 457-482; "The Jacobin Phrenzy: The Menace of Monarchy, Plutocracy and Anglophobia, 1789-1798," Review of Politics, XXI (1959), pp. 239-258.

⁵⁹ Minerva, July 12, 1797. Webster did not give the names of the specific individuals he had in mind.

Imported 'patriots,' bankrupt speculators, rich bankrupts, 'patriotic' atheists, and other similar characters, are spread over the United States without number, deceiving the people with lies, gaining their confidence, corrupting their principles, and debauching their morals. We see now in our new Republic, the decrepitude of Vice; and a free government hastening⁶⁰ to ruin, with a rapidity without example.

And the political atmosphere in the United States grew even hotter. While relations with England had improved since 1794 and 1795, those with France had become strained. President Adams sent a diplomatic team to Paris where they asked for what amounted to a bribe from Tallyrand, the French minister. This event, known as the "X, Y, Z" affair after the three unnamed emissaries from Tallyrand, drew a storm of indignation and protest.⁶¹ This situation aggravated a growing polarization of American politics and intensified the distinction between two types of political preferences. The adoption of the Constitution, Hamilton's economic program and Jay's Treaty had been issues around which two groups had organized themselves into relatively stable coalitions.⁶² Those who called themselves Republicans favored a decentralized system of government and extension of the suffrage. The

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹The best study of this episode is Alexander De Conde, The Quasi-War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France, 1797-1801 (New York: Scribner, 1966).

⁶²This is an oversimplification of specific studies of political development in the period. See footnote 3 for bibliography.

Federalists, with whom Webster sided, favored a more centralized form and opposed suffrage extensions.⁶³ In fact, they were basically anti-democratic, opposed states' rights, and believed that true freedom depended on restraint and order, not on specious rights. American liberty, as defined by a leader of this coalition in Massachusetts, "calms and restrains the licentious passions like an angel that says to the winds and troubled seas, be still." The mass of Americans, according to another Federalist, "do not think at all," and should not be listened to."⁶⁴

As the nation edged closer to war, Noah Webster became frantic. America's situation he believed was serious and alarming; all efforts must be made to stem the overwhelming torrent of foreign influence. The growing French influence especially threatened the subversion of all government, order, peace and happiness.⁶⁵ America seemed to have gone completely crazy: "No people on earth were ever guilty of so many wild and silly projects," he screamed, "as the Americans." If things continued, "we should be judged worthy of a mad-house and strait-jackets." The world seemed to Noah Webster to be spinning out

⁶³Ronald Formisano, "Deferential-Participant Politics: The Early Republic's Political Culture, 1789-1840," The American Political Science Review, June, 1975, pp. 473-487.

⁶⁴Quoted in John C. Miller, The Federalist Era, 1798-1801 (New York: Harper, 1960), p. 110.

⁶⁵Minerva, August 18, 1797.

of control, on the verge of complete chaos. Even the plan to remove the capitol of the government from New York to the mud flats of the Potomac seemed absurd. He denounced it as "one of the wildest projects that ever entered the head of insanity itself."⁶⁶

The only area that still appeared relatively sane was New England. It seemed a bastion of stability where the people were "firmly attached to the religion, moral and political institutions from which we have hitherto derived our private blessings and political prosperity...."⁶⁷ He had once criticized New England's schools for their rigidity, but now valued their discipline. They were institutions "where the teacher has his pupils under such subordination, that they pass hours almost without a whisper or a smile; and where they are instructed and compelled to be respectful to superiors."⁶⁸

Webster's opinions made him the subject of much invective. Two leading editors, Thomas Greenleaf and Benjamin Franklin Bache, led the attack. "Dunghill cock of faction" and "pusillanimous, half-begotten, self-dubbed patriot," were two of the kindest phrases they hurled at him. "Most learned stultus," "self-exalted pedagogue," "quack," "Mortal and incurable lunatic" were less kind. William Cobbett, an English

⁶⁶C. A., March 7, 1798.

⁶⁷To Timothy Pickering, May 12, 1798, Ford, Notes, I, pp. 462-463.

⁶⁸Minerva, September 27, 1796.

writer who became famous as "Peter Porcupine," editor of Porcupine Gazette in Philadelphia, accused him of being a monarchist. "Wonderful Noah! amazing prophet!" he yelled, "prophetical, political, and dictatorial newsman," "spiteful viper," "base creature." "Rancorous villain," "contemptible creature," "political hypocrite," "demagogue coxcomb," "this prostitute wretch," "disappointed pedant," and "a most gross calumniator, a great fool, and a barefaced liar," were other tags Cobbett had for him.⁶⁹

This personal abuse bothered Webster. His own journalistic and deferential principles precluded character assassination, and while his political invective sometimes reached hysterical heights, he always used general terms. Personalized venom, he believed, led only to a habit of disrespect for all characters, and thus weakened the entire Republic. Yet he could no longer contain himself. He attacked Cobbett as an "arch butcher of reputation," popular only with "the dupes of British influence and with the coffee house dram and beer drinkers."⁷⁰

The deterioration of Webster's relationship with Joel Barlow is an indication of the stress Webster was experiencing and an example of how the events of the world affected his personal life. They had met in 1774 and for most of the years in between Barlow had been his closest and most trusted

⁶⁹Quoted in Warfel, Webster, p. 234.

⁷⁰Minerva, August 22, 1797.

friend. But in the late 1780's Barlow had gone to France and become a strong supporter of the Jacobin faction in France. In one of the strongest revolutionary statements made by any American in the eighteenth century, Advice to the Privileged Orders (1792), Barlow endorsed all revolutions, attacked organized Christianity and expressed deistic principles.⁷¹

Webster saw Barlow's advocacy of world-wide revolution as a classic example of the work of Jacobinism. French principles worked in darkness like a vicious mole, corrupting even the strongest men, he believed. They were a "Pandora's box of evils which are let loose upon the world to curse mankind," and Barlow was proof that no person was safe from their influence. Ideas, he felt, were even more dangerous than "war, famine and pestilence:"

A manly enemy in war disdains to assail his foe without giving him a chance to defend himself, but the French policy creeps in the darkness of midnight into the hearts of the country, secretly undermining all political confidence, and arms neighbor against neighbor. Men never know when they are safe: all is jealousy and apprehension. Men whose labor and prudence have accumulated a little property know not when they shall be robbed of it.⁷²

Webster felt so strongly about these dangers that he published the letter in the Commercial Advertiser, denouncing Barlow as

⁷¹A good introduction to Barlow is Arthur L. Ford, Joel Barlow (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971).

⁷²To Joel Barlow, November 16, 1798, Warfel, Letters, pp. 192-193.

a "fanatic" who had been "warped" by his passions.⁷³

By the spring of 1798 Noah Webster had clearly reached a state of moral aloneness. To say that he exhibited anxiety over the dissolution of primary ties and over the extension of human freedom is an understatement. At times he became nearly hysterical. He also experienced tension in his own personal life and relationships, as his clash with Barlow indicated. In addition, strong personal abuse had been published in the opposition press and no one came to his defense. Only James Kent and a handful of physicians visited him at his home two miles outside the city. He seemed to have no effect on the public displays of passion and he undoubtedly felt rather helpless in the face of the course of national and world events. Karen Horney believes that feelings of alienation, hostility and diminishing self-confidence pave the way for psychological trauma.⁷⁴ She also notes that they create a feeling of personal helplessness much like Fromm's concept of moral aloneness. All of these are apparent in Webster's work, and this combination, says Fromm, "leads to mental disintegration just as physical starvation leads to death," and that it is "intolerable."⁷⁵

The situation was certainly intolerable for Webster, and everything came to a climax in the spring of 1798.

⁷³C. A., November 16, 1798. This version is slightly different than the previous citation.

⁷⁴Horney, New Ways, pp. 172-173.

⁷⁵Fromm, Escape, p. 34.

Hamilton and Adams strongly disagreed over American policies toward France and national defense. Webster sided with Hamilton against his old friend John Adams, and criticism of the editor and his papers increased. Webster had been ill frequently during the previous five years, and in fact had collapsed twice because of the physical strain. The combination of grueling work, public attacks on his character, disillusionment with America in general and her leaders in particular, in addition to his fear of the spread of French ideas, resulted in mental and physical exhaustion. The breaks with personal friends like Adams and Barlow were especially difficult to handle. His eyes, said a friend, were "lined with red ferret;" the "absurdities of man" finally got the best of him.⁷⁶

Escape from the center of controversy was "essential to my happiness, if not my life," Webster told a friend. He was a beaten, dispirited man, in even worse condition than he had been during that long ago winter in Goshen. "I found in more instances than one that my best endeavors to please those whose esteem I valued gave offence," he wrote; "to a gentleman of my education and standing in society this treatment became intolerable."⁷⁷ His motives, he believed, were the purest possible; he could not understand why they seemed to be consistently misinterpreted in the worst possible way. By late March

⁷⁶Quoted in Warfel, Webster, pp. 239, 241. Also C. A., February and March, 1798.

⁷⁷To E. Waddington, July 6, 1798, Warfel, Letters, pp. 181-182.

he had lost his will to continue, and turned editorial control of his papers over to someone else. On April 1, 1798, he left New York and the center of power and activity and fled to the safe environs of solidly-federalist Connecticut, to "seek peace and quietness in more private occupations."⁷⁸

Not long after his return to New Haven, Webster was invited to give a fourth of July oration. That day was an important one in 1798, celebrated all over the country with patriotic gatherings amidst rampant war fever. By July, Webster had found time to think about the problems he saw around him, about their development and possible solutions. His own experiences during the last two decades had been bound closely to those of the nation at large, and Webster took the opportunity to summarize and analyze them. The idealistic democrat of the early 1780's had vanished, and in his place stood a man concerned with what he thought was social and moral degeneration.

Echoing his essays of the previous decade, Webster rehashed much of what he had said in favor of the American Revolution, with some important points left out. Looking back at the 1770's, he saw the Revolution as a result of England's attempt to legislate laws for the colonies without their consent. He said nothing about internal conflicts which he himself had spoken of in the early 1780's. His need for identification with that cause had long since disappeared beneath a variety

⁷⁸To Timothy Pickering, July 17, 1798, Ford, Notes, I, p. 465.

of other problems and concerns. In his own mind, the Revolution had already been transformed into a mere fight for independence, not for the rights of man or for "power to the people." No attempt to perfect human society through the use of reason had evidently taken place. Indeed, events had shown that reliance on reason was dangerous and that natural laws did not apply to human society. The fear generated by fifteen years of social upheaval from Middletown to Paris had altered his view of the past and of the world in general.

The American Revolution was now a symbol that could be used to instill the values of order, tranquillity and deference. There had been, he believed, no "popular tumult," no rabble rousing and no rebellion except against the tyranny of England. All Americans must now fight as they had in 1775, but this time the battle would be against France and anarchy. The Revolution had been led by wise and able men, not wild philosophers, and this example, somehow lost in the years after the war, must again be raised and embraced by the whole country: "May the illustrious example of the conductors of the American revolution [sic] be sacred to imitation in every period of history!"

Yet the new nation was now on the brink of collapse. The vicious propensities of mankind had been unleashed, had taken up the sword, and were now "stalking over the earth, with giant steps, leveling the mounds which wisdom and policy raised" to restrain them. Webster placed the blame for the growing chaos squarely on the shoulders of man himself. Those

who shouted for reason and equality were dividing the country into factions, pitting the physical against the moral forces, encouraging violence and robbery, and in general "dragging from the seats of justice, the wise and the venerable, and replacing them with bullies and coxcombs...."

Time and time again throughout his oration, Webster made it quite clear that certain ideas were the root cause of all problems. Economic and political events were manifestations of the deeper, far-reaching effects of ideas. Untried and fallacious theories, half-baked opinions and illogical, dangerous views, when held by thoughtless and unquestioning people, led to the condemnation or simple ignorance of moral and political laws. False ideas resulted in war, the overthrow of authority, piracy and the denial of justice. Webster left no doubt about who or what he was talking:

Such are the inevitable consequences of that false philosophy which has been preached in the world of Rousseau, Condorcet, Godwin and other visionaries, who sit down in their closets to frame systems of government, which are as unfit for practice, as a vessel of paper for the transportation of men on the troubled ocean. In all ages of the world, a political projector or system-monger of popular talents, had been a greater scourage to society than a pestilence.

Near the end, his oration became a frenzied call for order and authority. He issued angry warnings against change in the direction of "lawless democracy" in any area of American life, and especially in her civil institutions. "Experience is a safe pilot," he shouted, "but experiment is a dangerous

full of rocks and shoals."

Tranquillity and social cohesion could only be achieved by the firm imposition of authority. The events since the town Convention, including Shays' Rebellion and especially the French Revolution, had taken their toll on Webster's political beliefs. By July 4, 1798, he had come to a position that was diametrically opposed to the views he had held in the 1780's. He no longer believed that the purpose of human government was to enhance freedom, or to ensure equality in any way. Instead, its primary role was the restraint of human passions. Social control was his central concern:

Let us never forget that the cornerstone of all republican governments is, that the will of every citizen is controlled by the laws or supreme will of the state.⁷⁹

⁷⁹"An Oration, Pronounced before the citizens of New York on the anniversary of the independence of the United States, July 4, 1798, and published at their request," C. A., 4, 1798.



CHAPTER VI

FEAR

[The people] would be more free and happy, if all were deprived of the right of suffrage until they were 45 years of age, and if no man was eligible to an important office until he is 50, that is, if all the power of government were vested in our old men, who have lost their ambitions chiefly and have learnt wisdom by experience.

N. W., 1800

Noah Webster spent the first decade after 1798 amidst the relative calm of Connecticut. There no mobs threatened his home or shouted Jacobinical slogans on election day. For eighteen months he worked on his Brief History of Epidemic and Pestilential Fevers,¹ a treatise that Benjamin Rush praised highly and that even today is considered a landmark in its field.² In 1800, he began compiling his dictionary,

¹Noah Webster, A Brief History of Epidemic and Pestilential Diseases... In Two Volumes (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1799).

²William Osler, "Some Aspects of Medical Bibliography," Bulletin of the Association of Medical Librarians, July-October, 1902, pp. 151-167, calls it the most important work written by a layman in this country. See also Alfred S. Warthin, "Webster as Epidemiologist," Journal of the American Medical Association, Vol. 80 (March 17, 1923), pp. 755-764, and Charles Edward Amory, The Conquest of Epidemic Disease: A Chapter in the History of Ideas (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1943).

on which he worked almost daily for the next quarter-century. Webster spent the years after 1798 in New Haven and fit easily into New England Federalist society. During these years he espoused many of the main points of Federalist ideology.

As Linda Kerber has pointed out, the Federalist believed that their world was quickly disintegrating. Their writings reveal a profound fear of the future.³ James Banner indicates that Federalism offered a kind of reassurance for those cut off from the securities of the past.⁴ Jeffersonian rhetoric stressed social mobility, economic opportunity and individual self-reliance. The Federalists, especially after 1800, emphasized the reverse; stability, tradition, dependence and the common good. Especially in New England, it fed on feelings of a loss of regional importance and power and a fear of the very nature of man. From their vantage point within an ordered society, the Federalists saw chaos everywhere. Europe was torn by unparalleled revolution and war that also threatened to spread to America.

Men like Timothy Pickering, John Adams, Oliver Wolcott and Fisher Ames had believed deeply in the cause of the American Revolution. To them it had been a grand experiment, the

³Linda Kerber, Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. xi.

⁴James M. Banner, To the Hartford Convention: The Federalists and the Origins of Party Politics in Massachusetts, 1789-1815 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 44.

hope of civilization. Now it seemed to be failing. Man himself appeared to be inherently depraved, quite the opposite of the perfectable creature of the revolutionary days. The cycle of history continued, America was succumbing to decadence and corruption as had all other nations. These negative appraisals led to and appeared in the Federalists' extreme political invective. Time and again they called America a wicked land full of corrupt and degenerate people. Some of the heaviest abuse was levelled at the symbols of social change, men like Paine, Jefferson and Gallatin.

Federalist rhetoric, including the writings of Noah Webster between 1798 and 1808, boils down to a search for authority. Anything that offered a chance to stop the changes that seemed to threaten the very existence of civilization drew their support. They advocated a stronger, more centralized government, a more powerful executive branch, the Alien and Sedition Acts and an independent Senate and judiciary system. Noah Webster embraced all these concepts and like other New England Federalists, was highly critical of all facets of democratic theory. Anything that increased man's freedom or self-reliance came under attack. Universal white male suffrage, the concept of the equality of all men and the right of instruction of political representatives contradicted the need for order and authority. Fear of man and of change led Noah Webster and others to see subversion and conspiracy everywhere. In essence, during the years between 1798 and 1808 Noah Webster continued his escape from freedom and sought a means of

controlling the passions of man.

Connecticut in the years around 1800 was a conservative state, controlled by a tightly-knit oligarchy.⁵ Both those who lived during this period and the historians who have written since agree on this analysis. "The State of Connecticut has always been governed by an aristocracy, more decisively than the empire of Great Britain...", said John Adams. "Half a dozen, or, at most a dozen families, have controlled that country when a colony, as well as since it has been a state."⁶ The standard work on Connecticut during the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Richard Purcell's Connecticut in Transition: 1775-1818, bears this out, as does more recent scholarship.⁷ All authors agree that one party ruled Connecticut until 1818, and that there were no closely contested elections in the decade before 1802. In addition, Purcell says that only about 2% of all eligible voters actually voted during these years.⁸ Every U. S. Senator before 1818 was a Federalist.⁹

⁵Albert E. Van Dusen, "Connecticut History to 1763: A Selective Bibliography" in Connecticut History, January, 1975, pp. 49-55, is by far the best source of secondary information on Connecticut history. The title is misleading, since it notes works which cover the years up to 1818.

⁶Purcell, Connecticut, p. x.

⁷See Manning J. Dauer, The Adams Federalists (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1953).

⁸Purcell, Connecticut, p. 147.

⁹Ibid., p. xiii.

Thus Connecticut was for all intents and purposes a closed society, and Webster was a part of the circles of prominence. His old Yale classmate and lifelong friend, Oliver Wolcott, was the third of his family to become Governor of the state and presided over the formation of a new Constitution in 1818. The upper house of the state legislature was the center of power. It "represented the aristocracy of the state, the leaders in the ruling caste."¹⁰ Its members were men of family, wealth, education and influence. Many of Webster's closest friends and associates were senators, including his son-in-law, Chauncey Goodrich. Another son-in-law, William Wolcott Ellsworth, was the son of Chief Justice Oliver Ellsworth, and also became Governor. Thus Webster was an intimate of the most powerful circles of the oligarchy, and it was not unusual for many Ellsworths, Wolcotts, Websters, Trumbulls, Swifts and Dwights to spend their leisure hours in Webster's home in New Haven.¹¹

The Standing Order of Connecticut and other New Englanders believed that mankind was inherently depraved. "The most ferocious of all animals....is man," said Fisher Ames.¹² The people wrote Uriah Tracy, "are vicious," and

¹⁰Ibid., p. 126.

¹¹A good example is an account of a dinner gathering attended by several of the most prominent men in Connecticut in Letter to William Webster, 1835, Webster Papers, Yale University Archives, Box 1.

¹²Quoted in Miller, Federalist Age, p. 110.

"love vicious men for their leaders."¹³ Webster's political hero, John Adams, believed that man was "so corrupt, so indolent, so selfish and jealous, that he is never good but through necessity."¹⁴ The New England clergy, led by Timothy Dwight, Jedediah Morse and David Tappan, delivered weekly jeremiads against man's pride, avarice, dissipation, idleness, sensuality and impiety.¹⁵

Webster shared this deeply negative evaluation of the nature of man. "As to mankind," he wrote to Benjamin Rush, "I believe the mass of them to be copax rationis. They are ignorant, or what is worse, governed by prejudices and authority--and the authority of men who flatter them instead of boldly telling them the truth...."¹⁶ Novels and other forms of modern literature enfeebled rather than strengthened man's already weak mind.¹⁷

Webster's view of man appeared in a new edition of his humorous anthology, The Prompter, published in 1803. The difference between it and the 1791 version was striking. The

¹³Quoted in David Hackett Fischer, The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p.23.

¹⁴Quoted in Charles F. Adams, ed., The Works of John Adams (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1856), Vol. I, p. 462.

¹⁵See Miller, Federalist Age, Fischer Conservatism, and Sydney E. Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

¹⁶Letter to Benjamin Rush, December 15, 1800 Ford, Notes, I, p. 479.

¹⁷C. A., January 6, 7, 1801.

original had become an early American classic. During the 1790's its thirty editions were standard fare in taverns and roadhouses. Selections were reprinted in newspapers all over the country.¹⁸ But the new edition had nineteen additional essays, and whatever humor Webster had intended was buried beneath overwhelming bitterness and fear. Most of the new essays were vehement attacks on democrats and popular government with titles like "pride," "prejudice," "popular discontent," "popular delusion," "the counsels of old men despised," and "envy, hatred, and revenge." "A Guillotin" [sic], the most effective of the new material, was downright lurid in its depiction of man as beast. Obviously inspired by the revolution in France, it graphically detailed the implication of the current political trend as Webster saw it. He feared that "that terrible instrument of death, that chops off heads, as a butcher's cleaver severs a joint of mutton!" would be used in America.¹⁹

Webster viewed man as a savage. Discipline and government were the only things which kept the "wild beast" from becoming the servant of his passions. Man was restrained only by the fear of the dungeon and the gallows, like a tiger enclosed in a cage. Human beings invented bows and arrows, darts, guns and all kinds of instruments of pain and torture

¹⁸See Carpenter, Bibliography, for details.

¹⁹Noah Webster, The Prompter, A Commentary on Common Sayings and Subjects, which are full of Common Sense, The Best Sense in the World. A New Edition, improved and Enlarged. (New Haven: Joel Walter, 1803), p. [75].

to use their neighbors; long wars were systematically planned and fought to subdue or exterminate whole nations. The "lust for prey," once unleashed, could never be satiated. And all of this was in store for America if it continued in its present direction.²⁰

Webster and the Federalists saw subversion and conspiracy everywhere. James Banner points out that one remarkably continuous thread in the political rhetoric of New England between the 1770's and the early 1800's was the recourse to conspiratorial explanations. Yet a distinctly different kind of fear marks the later period. The Revolutionaries saw danger from the Monarch and his court, while most of the Federalists' bogeymen were American. While some of the plots they described involved direct foreign influence, most seemed to come from within the breast of wicked and degenerate Americans. After 1798 a whole host of conspiracies plagued the minds of the New England Federalists. The threat of secession by Aaron Burr was only the largest and most notable among many attempts to rig elections, undermine the government, destroy tradition and religion and make secret agreements with France.

Most widespread was the belief in an organized, secret revolutionary movement known as the Bavarian illuminati.²¹ John Robison, a Professor of Natural Philosophy at Edinburgh, had written an intriguing book in which he theorized that the

²⁰Ibid., pp. 78-80.

²¹Vernon Stauffer, New England and the Bavarian Illuminati (New York: Columbia University Press, 1918).

French Revolution was only one manifestation of a gigantic plan to destroy "ALL RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENTS," and to overturn "ALL EXISTING GOVERNMENTS OF EUROPE." The plan, according to Robison, was the product of a group of masons in Bavaria.²² Quite a few New England clergymen evidently believed that Robison had really uncovered a worldwide conspiracy. Timothy Dwight, spiritual leader of the state and President of Yale College, was convinced that the Jeffersonians were at least friends of the illuminati, if not outright members. His brother Theodore agreed.²³

Fears of other subversive activity abounded. Towns with 15 or 16 professed supporters of the French Revolution were said to be infiltrated, jacobinized or revolutionized.²⁴ Thomas Paine's Age of Reason was available in cheap editions and was even occasionally distributed free of charge, which added to the anxiety of many.²⁵ When a new state constitution was proposed in 1804, the outcry against it grew to near hysterical heights.²⁶ David Daggett led the attack on the proposition by calling it a "mischievous and alarming project" and

²²John Robison, Proofs of a Conspiracy Against all... The Religions and Governments of Europe (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1797).

²³Moss, "Reaction," Chapter IV.

²⁴For examples of this belief, see the Connecticut Courant February 25, April 22 and June 3, 1799.

²⁵Anson Ely Morse, The Federalist Party in Massachusetts in 1800 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1909), pp. 213, FF. More also discusses Connecticut.

²⁶Purcell, Connecticut, p. 162.

a jacobinical plot.²⁷ At attempt to organize an effective republican political party in 1806 was denounced as "a conspiracy, active, daring and wicked, in the midst of the State for the destruction of our Government."²⁸

Noah Webster was as frightened as anyone in New England. There seemed to be an organized movement under way to overthrow the government and replace it with one based on French principles. The method being used was the spreading of lies, deceit and misrepresentations, and the victims always turned out to be Federalists. The true leadership of the country was being undermined; the chief voices of subversion were Greenleaf's New Daily Advertiser in New York and Connecticut's New London Bee. They engaged in slanderous attacks on the government, reprinting the words of its critics from Maine to Georgia. The conspiracy seemed to be well organized and controlled many presses.²⁹

Webster counterattacked. He was unable to understand how anyone could think differently than he did and unwilling to consider the possibility that the opposition's position might be valid. By 1800, Webster was beginning to think about his dictionary and this led him to formulate a definition of

²⁷ J. Hammond Trumbull, Historical Notes on the Constitutions of Connecticut, 1639-1818 (Hartford: Case, Lockwood and Brainard Company, 1901), p. 28.

²⁸ Middlesex Gazette in Connecticut Courant, March 19, 1806.

²⁹ C. A., July 24, 1799.

"Jacobinism." "It consists in an opposition to established government and institutions, and an attempt to overthrow them," he wrote, "by private accusations or by violent and illegal means." It was founded on no clear principles; anyone who opposed legitimate authority, from Tom Paine to an insignificant newspaper editor, was one and the same in the eyes of Noah Webster. All were dupes of revolutionaries.³⁰

Historian Webster traced Jacobinism back through time. It now seemed that conspiracies, defined broadly as self-pride, the inability to understand another point of view and the urge to impose one's viewpoint on others, had always existed. Jacobinism seemed to be a passion inherent in mankind. He saw it at work in the Garden of Eden, in Cain and Abel, and throughout all of biblical and recorded history. Its center was now in Paris. "The whole story of the fall of man, whether literally true, or an allegory designed to represent the beginning and progress of evil in the human heart," he believed, "is a sample of Jacobinism."³¹

It also seemed as though the American People were on the verge of succumbing. The revolutionary schemes of the 1770's and 1780's had been "too visionary," and the wild hopes for the future (which of course he had shared,) had been too

³⁰ Ibid., October 21, 1799. See also his letters to Joseph Priestly in Warfel, Letters.

³¹ C. A., October 23, 1799. See also October 28, 30, November 1, 4, 6, 8, 11, 19, 21, 23, 27, 30, December 3, 5, 13 and Webster, Prompter (1803).

sanguine.³² The willingness to believe in them was still prevalent however, and therein lay a great danger. The people, he feared, were being enticed by "visionary theories, or the mad projects of designing men." People must be awakened.³³

A proposal by one resident to celebrate a Republican victory brought forth his wrath. It was a scheme directly subversive at all freedom of election because it was an attempt to influence electors. He even threatened legal action claiming that such events violated the spirit and letter of the Constitution.³⁴ When the opposition in Connecticut did manage to begin an organization, Webster saw it as a "violation of our ancient fundamental laws: and a flagrant violation of the right of suffrage...." Their only aim, he believed, was to "subvert the liberties of the people."³⁵

Even education when controlled by the wrong people, seemed dangerous. The Republicans, he feared, were taking over the schools and destroying the habits and obedience of

³²Noah Webster, An Oration, Pronounced before the Citizens of New Haven, on the Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence; July, 1802 (New Haven: William W. Morse, 1802), pp. 24-25.

³³Noah Webster, An Address to the Freemen of Connecticut (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1803), p. 3. Hereafter cited as Address (1803).

³⁴Ibid., p. 15.

³⁵Noah Webster, An Address to the Freemen of Connecticut (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1806), p. 5. Hereafter cited as Address (1806).

future generations. Their permissive ways were undermining discipline and teaching children to be disrespectful of authority. He seemed to have forgotten his own essays of the late 1770's and early 1780's in which he called for just such permissiveness. Now the manipulation of education was part of a larger conspiracy, and was in fact a central method "devised to undermine the foundations of civil order."³⁶

Suspicion and distrust of political parties is of course nothing new. Before 1820, fear of extraconstitutional organizations was widespread. English radicals, led by Trenchard and Gordon had denounced them. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and most of the other political leaders of the 1780's and 1790's criticized their development. John Adams believed that parties "destroyed all sense and understanding, all equity and humanity, all memory and regard to truth, all virtue, honor, decorum, and veracity."³⁷ To Noah Webster, political parties were another form of subversion. They now appeared to be stronger and more threatening than they had been in the 1790's. Naturally, he was especially afraid of the Republican party. Centered in Virginia, it had members from Maine to Georgia. They corresponded regularly, planned specific campaigns, had "secret agents or delegates" who traveled to the seats of

³⁶ Webster, Prompter (1803), p. 114.

³⁷ Quoted in Richard Hofstadter, The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 12-29.

ments to spy on everyone, publish subversive pamphlets, influence voters and in general destroy all good order.³⁸

views were "opposed to everything that can render this country great and respectable." The Sedition Act should be used to punish them, and all aliens who were Republicans should be exported. If they weren't, America faced "national degradation."³⁹

Instead of enlisting under the banners of a party, men should investigate the character and ideas of each candidate and evaluate the effects of his election on the good of the nation. "If the charm of names cannot be discarded, our condition is hopeless."⁴⁰ Indeed, the whole idea of following leaders and parties, along with the use of flattery and campaigning for votes seemed to be a "perversion" of the true principles of an elective government.⁴¹

The threat of political subversion conjured up fears of despotism. Words like "tyranny," "despotism," and "oppression" appeared in the Federalists' predictions for the future.

"Liberty is no longer the question," said Fisher Ames in 1804, instead "to mitigate the rigors of despotism is all that is left us."⁴² Republicans, believed Webster, were all

³⁸Letter to Rufus King, April 12, 1800, in Warfel, Letters, pp. 216-217.

³⁹C. A., March 22, 1800, and Boston Gazette, October 1800.

⁴⁰Webster, Miscellaneous, pp. v-vi.

⁴¹Webster, Oration, pp. 9-10n.

⁴²Quoted in Banner, Convention, p. 40.

ists, atheists, adulterers and profligate men" who, if
 ed, would bring either monarchism or anarchy.⁴³ The
 . commotion caused by them could only lead to a dissolu-
 of the union which would in turn lead to "civil war--and
 . war must end in strong government" quite unlike the kind
 avored.⁴⁴

Ironically, it seemed to him that the only way of con-
 ling political parties was to organize against them. The
 of suffrage, if used correctly, could preserve order
 stability by voting Republicans out of power.⁴⁵ At one
 he even helped draw up a list of candidates for office.
 ustified his attempt to entice others to vote for Oliver
 ott, Jr., David Daggett, William Hillhouse, Chauncey and
 ur Goodrich, Stephen T. Hosmer, Simeon Baldwin as well as
 r relatives and high federalists. It was a defensive move,
 aid, one that should be used against those who already
 iced it.⁴⁶

After 1800 it became clear that the Federalists were
 ng power and influence, and as David Hackett Fischer has
 ed out, a second generation tried to incorporate election-
 ng tactics into their campaigns.⁴⁷ Harrison Gray Otis and

⁴³ [Noah Webster], A Rod for the Fool's Back (New Haven:
 and Morse), [1800], p. 7.

⁴⁴ C. A., April 22, 1800.

⁴⁵ Webster, Address (1806), p. 4.

⁴⁶ Webster, Address (1803).

⁴⁷ This is the main thesis in Fischer, Revolution.
 ter's attitudes would support Fischer's work.

others tried to overcome their antipathy toward parties, and on at least one occasion Webster agreed. There was no reason, he said in 1807, why honest, independent men could not find a middle ground between the self-interest of Hamilton and the wild democracy of Jefferson. The Federalist loss of power was so serious that something must be done. Yet they should not attempt to win by yielding entirely to popular opinion, but by using political campaigns to control it. The people could be gradually weaned from their most foolish schemes and brought back into the fold. Good men must not "lose their weight or character for if they do not lead the people, fools and knaves will."⁴⁸

This attempt to control the people and political parties included control of newspapers. In an obvious reference to his own experience, he noted that those who spoke out against slander in the press often found themselves the object of the same abuse. John Adams had been pushed from office by torrents of malicious abuse in the public prints. The press debased the public mind, discouraged virtue, and in general created social schisms and widened others. They were a source of "unrelenting passions, and irreconcilable factions."⁴⁹ Laws must be passed to exercise a restraining power over such slander.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Letter to Rufus King, July 6, 1807, Warfel, Letters, pp. 277-278.

⁴⁹C. A., January 8, 1801.

⁵⁰Ibid., March 22, 1800.

To many Federalists, democracy meant unlimited suffrage, corrupt electioneering and a general degradation of all civilized values.⁵¹ In short, democracy meant disorder, and they were strongly opposed to it. "There is in all popular governments," said one New Englander, "a natural tendency, to a state of things, which constitutes tyranny." Democracy made government "a despotism beyond rule," a monster quite different than "a republic confined to rule" which the Federalists preferred.⁵² They saw the effects of democracy not only in politics, but in all areas of American society, including education and scientific societies.⁵³

The Federalists denied the equality of all men. This concept must be opposed wherever it was found, for as Fisher Ames said, "little whirlwinds of dry leaves and dirt portend a hurricane."⁵⁴ Instead, order, deference and inequality must be stressed. "In all societies some must be uppermost," said one editor, for "the levellers only change and pervert the natural order of things."⁵⁵ Each American should learn his proper place, said another, and should busy himself "keeping in it."⁵⁶

⁵¹Banner, Convention, chapter 1.

⁵²Quoted in Ibid., p. 42.

⁵³Kerber, Federalists, contains an interesting discussion of Federalist views of education and science, pp. 76-123.

⁵⁴Quoted in Ibid., p. 173.

⁵⁵[Boston] Columbian Centinel, October 21, 1801.

⁵⁶Quoted in Banner, Convention, p. 54.

Hierarchical social relationships provided one means of securing order and authority, as well as insuring domestic tranquillity. "The doctrine of equality," said Webster, was "fallacious." Elijah Parish preached that "order is the glory of the universe. The excellence of creation results from the subordination of the parts to the whole. In civil government, the people obey. The magistrates rule, and order and security follows."⁵⁷ That all men had an equal right to life and the purchase of property Webster would not deny. But if equality meant that all men were equal in talent, distinction, influence or power, then men were definitely "not equal." He would have felt right at home in the Adams-Jefferson correspondence after 1812. They would have agreed with Webster's belief that age, talents, virtue and public services carried with them just claims to distinction, influence and authority.⁵⁸

Webster firmly rejected the concept of universal white male suffrage. "No government, in which the right of suffrage is founded on population can be durable," he wrote to Wolcott, "and the cheapness of that right will greatly accelerate the destruction of ours."⁵⁹ Suffrage should be based on property and only those who were fatherly figures of authority could really be trusted:

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 56.

⁵⁸ Webster, Oration, p. 16. Also C. A., May 28, 1802.

⁵⁹ Letter to Oliver Wolcott, September 16, 1800, Ford, Notes, I, pp. 504-506.

It would be better for the people, they would be more free and more happy, if all were deprived of the right of suffrage until they were 45 years of age, and if no man was eligible to an important office until he is 50, that is, if all the power of government were vested in our old men, who have lost their ambitions chiefly and have learnt wisdom by experience.⁶⁰

Wise, experienced John Adams was the epitome of the type of leader envisioned by New England Federalism. Webster supported his candidacy in 1800. The two were similar in age, background and political philosophy. Adams' career had rendered him highly worthy of public confidence according to the lexicographer. He had exhibited a clear concern for the public interest, not just for himself. Webster believed that his theoretical writings had also proven Adams sound in mind as well as in action. Jefferson, on the other hand, was a foolish visionary.⁶¹

More importantly, Webster believed that Adams' break with Hamilton had proven him a firm but fair ruler, the kind America needed. When the two had clashed over the question of war with France in 1798, Webster had temporarily sided with Hamilton. Adams had opposed all attempts to raise a standing army in preparation for war, preferring instead to build a navy and send negotiators to France to forestall any real war. Webster looked back and saw the incident as an example of how Adams had suppressed faction. His efforts to defeat the "high

⁶⁰Letter to Benjamin Rush, December 15, 1800. Ibid., p. 479.

⁶¹C. A., August 22, 1800.

federalists" were evidences of his firmness and independence, which rendered him doubly worthy of the public confidence.⁶²

Adams was a symbol of stability and righteousness, honesty and sincerity. In 1800 he was threatened by both Hamilton and Jefferson, and Webster defended his fellow New Englander against subversion from both sides. In an effort to help elect Adams, he published a long and strenuous denunciation of Hamilton. The Secretary of the Treasury had publicized his private intrigues with the wife of another man and had thus degraded himself beyond repair. Unfit for office and even unfit to be listened to, Hamilton had stooped to the point of scandalizing not only himself but an entire family in order to clear himself of charges which no one had believed. Adams, of course, had no such moral flaws. Webster charged that Hamilton had tried to manipulate policies through his influence with certain unnamed cabinet members. Finally, Webster flatly stated that if Jefferson were elected, Hamilton would be solely responsible.⁶³

And if Hamilton was dangerous and unfit for office, the election of Jefferson was downright frightening. Webster attacked the Virginian in harsh terms. He was an infidel, unqualified for public office, and "nothing but the madness of party could ever have held up Mr. Jefferson as a candidate."

⁶²Boston Gazette, October 13, 1800.

⁶³[Noah Webster], A Letter to General Hamilton Occasioned by His Letter to President by a Federalist, Warfel, Letters, pp. 222-226.

The two elected to the Presidency before him were sound, practical men with sufficient experience to insure their capacity to govern the country. Jefferson was a silly philosopher who wasted his time dabbling in useless metaphysics. He had "very little sound philosophy, and still less practical knowledge." His Notes on the State of Virginia, charged Webster, was full of factual errors and foolish principles. Jefferson had merely adopted the wildest French theories of philosophy and government. His work could not compare favorably with Webster's own Brief History or Adams' Discourses. More importantly, Webster feared Jefferson because those who had opposed the work of Washington and Adams considered him to be their candidate. As far as Webster was concerned, this fact alone was enough to disqualify him from any office. The greatest condemnation he could heap upon Jefferson was that "the French wish him elected."⁶⁴

After the election, Webster resumed his attacks. At first he advocated a calm acquiescence to Jeffersonian rule, or so he told James Madison. He was resolved to allow Jefferson's policies to have their full effect before denouncing them.⁶⁵ When they did, he reacted quite strongly. One of Jefferson's first moves was to replace the New Haven port collector, an avid Federalist, with an old, feeble man who

⁶⁴C. A., August 28, 1800.

⁶⁵Letter to James Madison, July 18, 1801, Ford, Notes, Vol. 1, pp. 515-516. See also Letter to Oliver Wolcott, October 1, 1801, Ibid., p. 481.

knew little about collecting taxes but was a firm Republican. In addition, the man's son was one of Webster's arch-enemies.⁶⁶ This was the type of appointment and maneuver Webster had expected, and he quickly denounced it as government by "money and favor." It was an example of the failure of representative government. Webster was convinced Jefferson had used flattery and promises of patronage to secure his election.⁶⁷

Webster vigorously attacked the men appointed to office by Jefferson. In an obvious reference to Albert Gallatin, he accused Jefferson of placing "foreigners" in positions of power.⁶⁸ Most of his appointments seemed to be based not on merit, but on political preferences, and Webster felt that this did great harm to government.⁶⁹ The Jefferson men, it seemed, openly reviled religion, marriage, and all that was good. They were all men who "live in the habitual indulgence of the most detestable vices, as adultery and lewdness...." It was as if Jefferson deliberately picked the worst criminals he could find, and sent them into Connecticut. They openly

⁶⁶Webster, Rod. This heavily sarcastic, vitriolic attack was on Abraham Bishop, who also happened to be one of Webster's Yale classmates and who, like Barlow, came from a background similar to Webster's but turned out to be a strong Republican.

⁶⁷Letter to Benjamin Rush, September 11, 1801, Warfel, Letters, pp. 236-237.

⁶⁸See note 65, to Madison.

⁶⁹Noah Webster, Miscellaneous Papers on Political and Commercial Subjects American Classics in History and Social Science. (New York: Burt Franklin Research and Source Works, 1802), pp. 18, 19, 29.

violated laws, destroyed the peace and committed atrocious crimes.⁷⁰

The most vicious attacks were saved for the personal character of Thomas Jefferson. By 1801, he had become the symbol for all of the political and social changes then in progress. Timothy Pickering, Elijah Parish, Fisher Ames, Harrison Gray Otis and other New England Federalists accused him of being corrupt, deceitful, vicious, hypocritical, and of having virtually every other moral flaw imaginable. To them the Virginian was an Anti-Christ; Jereboam, Absalom and Beelzebub rolled into one.⁷¹ One Federalist orator even called him "a mean-spirited, low-lived fellow" who was "half Injun, half nigger, half Frenchman." Anyone who voted for him, he continued, "ought to be deemed guilty of treason...."⁷² Webster believed that he was generally a "wretched man;" ambitious, totally corrupt even in his personal life, and interested only in his personal gain at the expense of the best interest of the general public.⁷³

Webster had much in common with many in Connecticut after 1798, yet he was clearly unhappy with some aspects of his personal situation. He felt a keen sense of alienation from not only the mainstream of American society but even from

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 56.

⁷¹ Quoted in Banner, Convention, p. 35.

⁷² Quoted in Albert Jay Nock, Jefferson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1926), p. 141.

⁷³ Webster, Miscellaneous, pp. 71, 49.

many Federalists. Ironically, he may have been a relatively popular figure, at least among those who could vote. The town of New Haven elected him to the city council in 1799 and several times thereafter. He was elected Justice of the Peace yearly between 1801 and 1810, and was a member of the state legislature off and on between 1800 and 1807. Even though he served when chosen, he had little enthusiasm for public office, preferring to write pamphlets and work on his dictionary.

One reason for his personal unhappiness was his lack of financial stability. He held no steady job after 1798, existing on the rather small revenues from his speller. While it sold about 200,000 copies yearly, his share of the profits had been reduced enormously by the sale in the 1780's of the rights to the royalties.⁷⁴ After 1800 the Webster family struggled along, eating little and counting every penny.⁷⁵ Time after time Webster was forced to ask friends for loans or to attempt to sell copies of his books by subscription, years ahead of actual publication. In 1803, for example, he wrote to a friend about his financial problems. He begged Oliver Wolcott, Jr., whose business was thriving, to help him out.⁷⁶

⁷⁴To Joel Barlow, October 19, 1807, Warfel, Letters, p. 292.

⁷⁵See especially a letter from Rebecca Greenleaf Webster, December 5, 1803, Ford, Notes, II, pp. 533-534.

⁷⁶Letter to Oliver Wolcott, April 13, 1803, Ford, Notes, I, p. 530.

Lack of financial security reinforced Webster's already deep sense of alienation. His books, with the exception of his speller, did not sell in large quantities, and he felt that no one agreed with him about anything, or cared what he had to say. He was at odds with anyone who favored the ideas he opposed, and as Linda Kerber has noted, even many Federalists criticized his linguistic work.⁷⁷ Instead, their attacks on Webster, which sometimes reached the level of acidity of his own on Jefferson, are an indication of the deep hostility and fear which characterized Federalist rhetoric. Webster expressed a sense of isolation not only from the course of national events, but even from those with whom he shared much common ground. "Either from the structure of my mind, or from my modes of investigation, I am led very often to differ in opinion from many of my respectable fellow citizens," he said, "and differences of opinion is now a crime not easily overlooked or forgiven." No one seemed to have confidence in him, and his influence and reputation seemed to decay because of his political view. As early as 1802, he felt that he should "withdraw myself from every public concern, and confine my attention to private affairs and the education of my children."⁷⁸ Between 1803 and 1807 he made very few public appearances and said very little about national affairs.

⁷⁷Kerber, Federalists, p. 77.

⁷⁸Letter to Stephen Twining, January 22, 1802, Ford, Notes, I, p. 524.

His mistake, he felt, was that he could not help but criticize those who deserved it. The human mind felt discomfort when its errors were pointed out and he knew he had experienced the folly of many men in positions of power. He believed that he had done so in the best interests of his country, and thus he refused to stop being critical. "No task is more delicate and hazardous than that of criticism and censure," he remarked. Yet if no one pointed out errors, wrongs would not be corrected, nor peace, tranquillity or authority restored. It was the duty of each citizen to criticize public policy. Without an honest and candid discussion the best course of procedure could not be found.⁷⁹

But perhaps the most important reason for Webster's unhappiness after 1800, underlying his personal sense of alienation, was his inability to cope with the general trend of changes in the nation at large. The sense of change and doom exhibited by Webster and the Federalists was at times overwhelming. Some of the older New Englanders simply gave up and retired from participation in public affairs.⁸⁰ In their attempts to check the flow, the Federalists grasped at any means they could think of to ensure domestic tranquillity and shore up what they perceived to be the crumbling foundations of American society. Yet nothing seemed to work. While Adams was in office a man like Webster could advocate the adoption of the

⁷⁹ Webster, Miscellaneous, p. iii.

⁸⁰ Fischer, Conservatism; passim.

attitude that "the Executive can do no wrong," and he did.⁸¹
 After 1801, with Beelzebub in Washington, that option was impossible.

The only way to avoid a calamity, felt Noah Webster and the Federalists, was for the people to submit to some sort of authority. "The very essence of civil liberty consists in the entire subjection of every citizen to the laws and constitution," he said in 1803. The "monstrous absurdity" of dissent, turmoil and party politics must end. The effort "to make rulers servants, and the citizens masters" must be halted.⁸² Yet that obviously was not happening. The year after Webster spoke those words, Jefferson was reelected, and the lexicographer said very little until 1807.

⁸¹Boston Gazette, October 13, 1800.

⁸²Webster, Address (1803). The same idea appears in Webster, Oration.

CHAPTER VII

SUBMISSION

Real religion, which implies a habitual sense of the divine presence, and a fear of offending the Supreme Being, subdues and controls all the turbulent passions; and nothing is seen in the Christian, but meekness, forbearance, and kindness, accompanied by a serenity of mind and a desire to please, as uniform as they are cheering to families and friends.

N. W., 1809

In 1808 Noah Webster found an answer to all problems: belief in an omnipotent God. A descendant of Puritans, he reverted to a system of values and world-view not unlike those of the generation of John Webster. Yet his emotional conversion in that year was motivated by factors that were very much products of his own time. He had experienced intense anxiety over past and contemporary national events, and the failure of Federalism as a means of controlling social trends and providing public leadership was quite evident. The negative view of human nature and need for strong authority he had espoused since the 1790's had prepared him for acceptance of evangelical Protestantism. A crisis in his personal relationships with his own family added to his preparation. Altogether these factors provided an emotional matrix that made his conversion possible. The result was a psychological and

intellectual submission to authority that led to profound alteration of his views on every subject.

After his conversion Webster believed that religion provided the only valid basis for social stability, and in this he was not alone. Many old Federalists like John Jay, Stephen Van Rensselaer, Timothy Dwight, John Cotton Smith and Elias Boudinot voiced the same conclusion. Known to historians as the religious benevolence movement, they perceived themselves as moral stewards for the entire nation.¹ As "their brother's keepers," these latter-day Puritans founded several large national organizations with the express purpose of

¹Several studies of religious benevolence in the early nineteenth century have been written, the most recent of which is Stephen E. Berk, Calvinism versus Democracy: Timothy Dwight and the Origins of American Evangelical Orthodoxy (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1974). The most extensive study of its emphasis on social control is Clifford S. Griffin, Their Brother's Keepers: Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1815-1865 (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1960). Other less helpful works are John R. Bodo, The Protestant Clergy and Public Issues, 1812-1848 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1954), Charles I. Foster, An Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1960) and Charles C. Cole, Jr., The Social Ideas of the Northern Evangelicals (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954). The most interpretive work and most insightful of all is Charles S. Griffin, "Religious Benevolence as Social Control, 1815-1860," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, LXIV (December, 1957), pp. 423-444, reprinted in David Brion Davis, Ante-Bellum Reform (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 81-96. Out of this same general atmosphere of evangelicalism Charles Grandison Finney and others developed a more positive view of man, stressing his perfectibility rather than his depravity. It was this wing of the evangelical movement that formed the foundation for more progressive ideas like abolitionism and utopian socialism. David B. Davis, Reform, p. 82, notes that no historian has yet adequately explained the relationship between these diverse forces and movements.

proselytizing the central concepts of God's absolute sovereignty and man's total depravity as a means of securing social tranquillity. The American Education Society, founded in 1815 in Boston, subsidized divinity students while New York's Home Missionary Society provided funds for ministers to the poor. The American Bible Society distributed millions of free gospels and the American Tract Society sold 200,000,000 pamphlets.

The heart of the value-system they espoused was a negative evaluation of the basic nature of man. They distrusted democracy and warned that it could only lead to chaos, tyranny of the majority and eventually to dictatorship. Instead, their own minority of solid Christians should rule. They were hostile to the nation's press and highly critical of the concept of universal white male suffrage. The only viable bases for social organization, they repeated endlessly, were set forth in the Bible. Moreover, they advocated a personality structure and pattern of individual conduct that I have designated the Quiet Christian. All Americans should attempt to live by the word and will of God as interpreted by his disciples, who were members of evangelical organizations. Men should not argue among themselves over offices or agitate for broad reforms that would weaken social cohesion. Americans should be deferential to authority and should only concern themselves with living good Christian lives in meek, passive ways. As one committee of the American Tract Society stated, the country could not be considered sound or stable until each American citizen professed his "absolute dependence

on God" in all areas of political, social or religious endeavor.² Noah Webster became one of the most vocal proponents of these ideas.

Religion had not been central to the life of the young Noah Webster. Indeed, he had developed no strong convictions while growing up in the tolerant atmosphere of Connecticut in the 1760's and 1770's. Yale during his residency had been significantly less orthodox than it became in the 1790's.³ After his conversion in 1808 he looked back at his early life and noted that while his family had observed the outward forms of piety, he had not understood nor fully absorbed "the doctrines of the Christian religion." At Yale, he had fallen into "vicious company," lost what little concern he had developed, and "contracted a habit of using profane language."⁴

In the years after college Webster embraced a rather open-minded view of religion. As Gary B. Nash has noted, Webster believed in a mild deism that included rejection of the doctrines of regeneration, election, salvation by free grace, atonement, and the divinity of Christ. A broad sort of toleration had been among the principles he had advocated in the 1780's, and he had specifically attacked the narrow-mindedness of the early Puritan inhabitants of New England

²Quoted in Griffin, "Control," p. 89.

³Kelley, Yale.

⁴Letter to Thomas Dawes, December 20, 1808, in Warfel, Letters, p. 309.

and their descendants.⁵ At the same time he had praised the Quakers. In the late 1780's Webster published a new edition of the New England Primer.⁶ His version differed significantly from the original. The early editions had used the alphabet to introduce a strict, Calvinistic catechism:

- A. In Adams Fall
We sinned all.
- B. Thy Life to Mend
This Book [The Bible] Attend.
- S. Samuel anoints
Whom God appoints.⁷

Webster's edition omitted orthodox religious tenets and substituted rather pallid aphorisms:

- A. Was an Apple-pie made by the cook.
- B. Was a Boy that was fond of his book.
- S. Was a Simpleton, ready to cry.⁸

Furthermore, Webster publicly rebuked Timothy Dwight in 1788 for his harsh religious convictions. Dwight had gone through a religious change of heart between his Conquest of Canaan (1785), which Webster had praised highly, and his

⁵Gary B. Nash, "The American Clergy and the French Revolution" William and Mary Quarterly Ser. 3, 22 (1965), p. 400; Webster, "Remarks on the Manners, Government, and Debt of the United States." This essay was first printed in the Pennsylvania Packet, February 15, 17, 19 and 21, 1787. It was reprinted in Webster, Essays.

⁶The New England Primer, Amended and Improved. By the author of the grammatical institute Embellished with Cuts. (New York: J. Patterson, 1789).

⁷Paul Leicester Ford, ed., The New England Primer (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1962), N. P.

⁸Quoted in Warfel, Webster, p. 91.

Triumph of Infidelity (1788). The latter traced the efforts of Satan throughout history while strongly attacking Hume, Voltaire, paganism, Popery and eastern mysticism. Webster accused Dwight of being a theological dogmatist who had found the right way to heaven and excluded all other opinions. Webster's own religious views were abundantly clear in his hostile reaction to Dwight's poem. "A man who can group together such men as Shaftesbury, Priestley, Chauncey and Allen and stigmatize these and many of the first philosophers promiscuously as fools and knaves," he said, "can hardly be a candidate for that heaven of love and benevolence which the scripture informs us is prepared for good men."⁹ When other newspapers attacked his views, Webster responded with the clearest statement of his religious beliefs before 1808. To say they were unorthodox is an understatement. "I believe that all men are my brethren," he said: "I believe that religion which teaches God is Love...."¹⁰

Beginning in 1790, Webster slowly approached an awareness that religious beliefs are connected to other kinds of values and ideals. In thinking about the American experience of the 1780's, he concluded that those areas with well-supported clergy had fewer rebellions and social unrest than those without. The example which came to his mind was Shays' Rebellion. He noted that in 1785-1786 those areas with few or no

⁹ Webster, American Magazine, pp. 587-590.

¹⁰ [New York] Daily Advertiser, September 5, 1788.

clergy had been scenes of rebellion, while strongly religious areas had suffered less. Opposition to strong religion in Rhode Island, traceable to Roger Williams, had prepared that state for social convulsions. Since the body of the people were unaccustomed to the sobriety and decent deportment necessary in religious worship, he wrote, they became licentious, vulgar and unable to tell right from wrong.¹¹ The French Revolution had made him even more aware of the social role of religious belief.

When Webster wrote about religion after his flight from New York in 1798, he seemed somewhat closer to a fundamental Christianity. A new edition of The New England Primer, published in 1801, restored the original alphabet and contained many harsh stories which described the omnipotence of God and the helplessness of man. "The Dutiful Child's Promises" included a promise to fear God and obey superiors. It also instructed the reader to say: "I will honor those in authority, I will submit to my elders...."¹² In 1801 Webster wrote to a friend that he believed in the all-powerful Supreme Being who was the first cause of all things and could cause rain to fall at will. Indeed, he said that "every operation in the universe" could be explained by the "direct exertion of

¹¹ Webster, "Miscellaneous Remarks on Divisions of Property Government...." in Essays, p. 335. Essay dated February, 1790.

¹² The New England Primer. Improved and adapted to the use of schools. By Noah Webster, Jun. Esq. Designed as an introduction to The American Spelling Book. Embellished with Cuts. (Hudson: Asbel Stoddard, 1801).

omnipotence."¹³ His schoolbooks reflected these views¹⁴ and he once came very close to making the connection between spiritual and civil tranquillity. "How little of our peace and security depends on Reason and how much on Religion and government" he remarked without further elaboration in 1805.¹⁵

Specifically, Webster characterized his own beliefs before his conversion in 1808 as "a species of scepticism." He did not doubt that there was a God or that he was perfect and sublime; yet he could not convince himself that the fundamental doctrines of the need for regeneration, election, or salvation by free grace were necessary or even correct. In fact, he believed that even a mere profession of faith was not absolutely necessary to salvation.¹⁶ When he did connect religion and government he spoke only of a mild form of religiosity. A free government, he remarked in 1802, "must be raised upon the pure maxims, and supported by the undying practice, of that religion, which breathes 'peace on earth, and good will to men.'" Its character would induce "humble

¹³Letter to Samuel Lathem Mitchill, March 2, 1801, in Warfel, Letters, pp. 229-230.

¹⁴Noah Webster, Elements of Useful Knowledge. Volume I. Containing a historical and geographical account of the United States: for the use of schools. (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1802) p. [1]; Noah Webster, Elements of Useful Knowledge, Volume III. Containing a historical and geographical account of the empires and states in Europe, Asia and Africa.... (New Haven: Bronson, Walter and Company, 1806. p.11.

¹⁵Noah Webster, An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking--(Salem, Massachusetts: Joshua Cushing, 1805), p. 147.

¹⁶To Dawes, p. 311.

pride" and restrain oppression. It would, by itself, "banish tyranny from the earth."¹⁷ Yet it was not central to his political or social thought, and certainly of minor importance to him as an individual human being. When he was presented with a petition opposing a tax on all citizens to support religion, he signed it.¹⁸

Nevertheless, Webster's sensitivity to the social and political aspects of religion gradually increased before 1808. As early as 1798 friends had written to him expounding the non-religious benefits of evangelical Protestantism.¹⁹ His conversion, then, was not only a religious phenomena, but was in fact intricately related, both casually and affectively, to all aspects of his life, including his personal relationships and his concern with national affairs.

By the spring of 1808, Webster's anxiety over national events had reached a level which evidently surpassed even his fears of 1798. He observed the decline of the Federalist group in national affairs. The Embargo seemed to him to be aimed at the destruction of New England, commerce, and civilization itself. Webster long believed and often stated that commerce opened communication, reduced friction between people

¹⁷Noah Webster, An Oration, Pronounced before the Citizens of New Haven, on the Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence; July, 1802 (New Haven: William W. Morse, 1802).

¹⁸Ford, Notes, I, p. 527.

¹⁹Benjamin Rush to Noah Webster, July 20, 1798, Ford, Notes, I, p. 466.

and knitted mankind into "one great brethren." He sincerely believed that trade was "the child of peace, the parent of civilization, and the friend of universal liberty."²⁰ The Embargo threatened all this. To a newspaper editor he wrote that "no period since the conclusion of the revolutionary war has been more important than the present."²¹ The Embargo, a Jeffersonian measure aimed at keeping the United States out of the Napoleonic wars by stopping all commercial interaction with Europe, had a disastrous effect on New England merchants. By May the situation appeared desperate. "The present crisis in this country seems to call for extraordinary attention and perhaps for extraordinary measures," said Webster.²²

The Embargo was to Webster the final failure of the political parties and factions that he had been criticizing for twenty years. The northern commercial states had lost all influence in national circles, and Webster believed that the federal government was run by southern agrarians. Furthermore, it seemed that the best interests of the country as a whole were ignored by both parties, who instead concentrated on winning "temporary triumphs." Only a few politicians benefited from political parties and the rest of America, Northerners

²⁰American Minerva, December 9, 1793. These ideas appear in nearly everything he wrote between 1781 and 1843.

²¹Connecticut Journal, April 7, 1808.

²²Letter to Oliver Wolcott, May 13, 1808, in Warfel, Letters, p. 300.

and Southerners, Federalists and Republicans, merchants and farmers, suffered greatly. The time had come for "the sound friends of the country" in both parties to come together and discuss the situation.²³

By 1808 it was obvious that the Federalist group was failing to exert effective national leadership. Instead of controlling the divisive elements that had concerned him for so long, the Federalists appeared to be on the verge of collapse. In desperation he tried to find some means of controlling the drift of events. He now believed that both parties must be abandoned and a person unaligned with the main factions must be elected President. He favored George Clinton, then the Vice President under Jefferson, and formerly Governor of New York.²⁴

As "public spirit," Webster wrote a circular, "To All American Patriots," in the spring of 1808. It indicated his anxiety and emphasis on the need for unity. The essential message was that neither the Republican nor the Federalist party was run by friends of the warring European nations, and that both must cease their self-centered manipulations. The last few paragraphs were frantic calls for cooperation and unity:

²³Ibid.

²⁴Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, ed., Dictionary of American Biography (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), Volume IV, pp. 226-228.

Citizens of the northern states, our condition is deplorable and there is no resource but in UNION. This is the only remedy for our political evils; and the remedy must be speedy; we are upon the brink of a precipice. Our party dissensions must cease--we MUST UNITE--or our country is doomed to encounter calamities which in prospect, apall the stoutest heart.²⁵

Conformity of opinion and obedience to a greater authority was the answer. Once again, as he had since the 1790's, Webster sought to quiet dissent "under a firm, vigorous, administration." Americans must, he believed, array a "single phalanx of united opinions and united resources against these [European and domestic] encroachments."²⁶

Webster's anxiety was increased by events in another area of his life. A small revival supervised by Moses Stuart, who later spent over forty years as Professor of Sacred Literature at Andover, occurred in New Haven in 1807-1808.²⁷ At first, Webster rejected the movement, criticizing it because of its stress on the very emotions and passions which he struggled to control. However, in the spring of 1808, just when his anxiety over the Embargo reached its peak, his two eldest daughters and his wife experienced conversions.²⁸

²⁵"To All American Patriots," May, 1808 in Warfel, Letters, pp. 301-308.

²⁶Connecticut Herald Journal, May 17, 1808.

²⁷John H. Giltney, "Moses Stuart." Unpublished dissertation, Yale University, 1956.

²⁸To Dawes, p. 311. See also Noah Webster, Letter from Noah Webster, Esq., of New Haven, Connecticut, to a Friend in Explanation and Defence of the Distinguishing Doctrines of

Webster innately distrusted enthusiastic and evangelical religion, and thus this development caused significant amounts of stress. In reaction, he attempted to convince his family that they should attend the rational, authoritarian and hierarchically-structured Episcopal Church.²⁹ He was unsuccessful. Since his marriage in 1789, his family had been the one consistently positive aspect of his life. Now it appeared that a serious deterioration in his most intimate relationships might develop. This produced the greatest of all anxieties. "In this situation, he wrote, "my mind was extremely uneasy."³⁰

The conversion itself occurred in the spring of 1808. He admitted that he had "for a number of years just past," become more aware of religion and the importance of regulating his own conduct according to certain principles.³¹ He reexamined religion in general early in the year, and even though he still did not believe that a public confession of faith was necessary, he did express a desire to join a church. The Episcopal Church seemed to offer the type of theology that he found acceptable, and he had applied for a pew in the local congregation.³² It was at this time that his wife and two

the Gospel (New York: J. Seymour, 1809), p. 1. Hereafter cited as Webster, Doctrine.

²⁹To Dawes, p. 312.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹To Dawes, p. 310.

³²Ibid., p. 312.

eldest daughters had their conversions and pressured him to attend Stuart's services.

The culmination of all of these factors and especially his "extreme reluctance against a separation from my dear family in public worship filled" his "mind with unusual solicitude." Under these pressures he once again examined the creeds of the Episcopal and Congregational churches; this time he found fewer differences than he had before. Most of his objections to Stuart's brand of Calvinism were removed after a conversation with the minister. Yet even then he could not make the final decision. The tension increased:

During this time, my mind became more and more agitated, and in a manner wholly unusual to me unaccountable. I had short composure, but at all times of the day and in the midst of other occupations I was suddenly seized with impressions, which called my mind irresistably to religious concerns....³³

Webster attempted to assuage his troubled mind "by reasoning with myself...." It did not work. An emotional conversion was the result:

The impressions however grew stronger till at length I could not pursue my studies without frequent interruptions. My mind was suddenly arrested, without any previous circumstances of the time to draw it to this subject as it were fastened to the awakening and upon my own conduct. I closed my books, yielded to the influence which could not be resisted or mistaken and was led by a spontaneous impulse to repentance, prayer and entire submission and surrender of myself to my maker and redeemer. My submission appeared to be cheerful and was soon

³³To Dawes, p. 312.

followed by that peace of mind which the world can neither give nor take away.³⁴

New England was enveloped after 1800 by the Second Great Awakening, and as historian Stephen Berk has pointed out, conversion experiences were common. Indeed, evangelical newspapers like the Massachusetts Missionary Magazine and the Connecticut Evangelical Magazine, published by local or state organizations, were filled with conversion stories. Many were quite similar to Webster's and stressed submission to authority and social control.³⁵ Webster's account of his experience was published in a widely circulated paper, the Panoplist,³⁶ and he wrote several essays for another, the Religious Intelligencer.³⁷ Timothy Dwight, leader of the revival, stressed the role of religion in preserving and enforcing social order,³⁸ and Moses Stuart was his student.³⁹ William James, in his seminal work, The Varieties of Religious Experience,⁴⁰ analyzed the different types of conversions. Webster's was a good example of what James classified as a form of "self-surrender."⁴¹

³⁴Ibid., pp. 312-313.

³⁵Berk, Calvinism, passim.

³⁶Panoplist, July, 1809, pp. 58-74.

³⁷For a full listing of Webster's miscellaneous essays, including those in the Religious Intelligencer, see Carpenter, Bibliography, pp. 433-482.

³⁸Berk, Calvinism, Chapters 1-3.

³⁹Giltney, "Stuart."

⁴⁰William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature (New York: The Modern Library, 1902).

⁴¹Ibid., p. 240.

James indicated that the mind of the candidate is filled with two things. The first is sin, which he defines in psychological terms as a present incompleteness or wrongness. This is the factor that the individual is eager to escape from, and Webster's mind was clearly occupied with several different varieties of incompleteness. One of James' students defines this factor as a feeling of unwholeness and moral imperfection, both of which are apt descriptions of Webster's state of mind. The second factor in the mind of the candidate for self-surrender is the positive ideal which he longs to encompass. National Unity, peace and tranquillity at home and in the nation were the ideals Webster longed for.⁴²

Finally, James indicated that there is a third mental area that also may guide an individual toward conversion. It is the elusive memories, emotional residues and fragmentary beliefs, the half-remembered scars that remain in the mind of every human being. In this paragraph James could be speaking about Webster's experiences with the Middletown Convention, the French Revolution, or his memories of his flight from New York in 1798. James could even be talking about the long-range effects of Webster's Puritan heritage, of growing up in New England and living among religious fundamentalists like Timothy Dwight. It is part of our "total mental state," both within the "entire wave of consciousness" and outside it:

⁴²Ibid.

Our whole past store of memories floats beyond this margin, ready at a touch to come in; and the entire mass of residual powers, impulses, and knowledges that constitute our empirical self stretches continuously beyond it. So vaguely drawn are the outlines between what is actual and what is only potential at any moment of our conscious life, that it is always hard to say of certain mental elements whether we are conscious of them or not.⁴³

Webster's conversion was clearly one that James would classify as "self-surrender." With it came a deep and enduring belief in moral stewardship. Like his old friends John Jay, President of the American Bible Society, and Stephen Van Rensselaer, President of the American Home Missionary Society, Noah Webster concluded that men were utterly unable to control themselves by their own talents and powers. Each individual must become a Quiet Christian: meek, passive, humble, devout and submissive. Religious training, said the American Sunday School Union, was an excellent way of keeping youths out of crime and making worthy citizens of them.⁴⁴ The Bible, wrote one evangelical, had the same effect as a good police force.⁴⁵ One way to stop the destruction of property by mobs, said another, was to encourage reading of the Bible, which acted like "moral police."⁴⁶ The leaders of the Missionary Society

⁴³Ibid., pp. 206-207.

⁴⁴Quoted in Griffin, "Control," p. 91.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 95.

of Connecticut commanded that all individuals should practice "civil order and...subordination," among other "principles and habits...which are essential to the welfare of society."⁴⁷ Man's "natural pride and opposition to God," believed Noah Webster, was the source of all problems, and was the method by which "multitudes of men, especially the more intelligent and moral part of society are deluded into ruin."⁴⁸ During the remainder of his life Webster advocated principles widely accepted by evangelical protestants. In doing so he published books and essays designed to spread the social lessons of the gospel, helped found a college specifically dedicated to the work, and even edited the Holy Bible.

After his conversion, Webster consistently emphasized man's "duty" to authority, not his rights or freedom. Moral and political corruption would disappear if all followed His word as set forth in the Bible. Peace and tranquillity would reign and man could finally achieve the "supreme happiness" to which he was entitled in America if all would become Quiet Christians, conforming totally "to God's image."⁴⁹

It was immediately apparent that he had found the only way to control human passions. God the father was clearly the source of discipline for the American family:

⁴⁷Quoted in Griffin, Keepers, p. 34.

⁴⁸To Dawes, p. 314.

⁴⁹Webster, Doctrines, p. 5.

For the minds of the best regulated by family discipline, the rules of civility, there will at times break forth sallies of envy, jealousy, petulance, and discontent, which annoy the peace of families and neighborhoods. Nothing seems effectually to restrain such passions but divine grace. The fear of man, and a regard to decorum, will not produce the effect, in minds of a particular structure. But the humbling doctrines of the gospel change the tiger to a lamb.--Real religion, which implies a habitual sense of the divine presence, and a fear of offending the Supreme Being, subdues and controls all the turbulent passions; and nothing is seen in the Christian, but meekness, forbearance, and kindness, accompanied by a serenity of mind and a desire to please, as uniform as they are cheering to families and friends. On this subject I speak with delight from observation.⁵⁰

Webster viewed the human family as a sort of psychological agent of society, transmitting its repressive tendencies and controls to the child through its very structure.

Nations were merely large families, and both social organizations should be run in an authoritarian manner. "No small part of the vices and disorders of society, personal enmities, quarrels and lawsuits originate in the wrong or defective governments of families."⁵¹ The family system was "the origin of nations" and "the subordination of children in families, tends to favor subordination in citizens: respect

⁵⁰ Webster, Doctrine, p. 22. See also to Thomas Dawes, February 23, 1809, New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives, Noah Webster Papers, Box 1.

⁵¹ Noah Webster, Value of the Bible and Excellence of the Christian Religion: for the use of families and schools (New Haven: Durrie and Peck, 1834), p. 72. Hereafter cited as Webster, Value.

for parents generates respect for rulers and laws...."⁵²

Webster detailed the exact attitude that he believed the Quiet Christian should have. Obedience to authority, be it in religion, national affairs or in the human family, was of the utmost importance. A slow, reluctant obedience, accompanied by murmurings of dissatisfaction was not acceptable "to parents, nor to God." The inferior being in any situation should be ready to comply like a good slave to a command: easily and cheerfully. Webster summed up the interrelationships or subordination to the father, God and to political rulers quite succinctly:

The subordination of children to their parents, is the foundation of peace in families; [it] contributes to foster those kindly dispositions, both in parents and children, which are the sources of domestic happiness, and which extend their influence to all social relations in subsequent periods of life.⁵³

There could be no doubt that this submission to all authority was the will of God. "This entire subjection to parents [is] expressly enjoined by divine precepts," he said.⁵⁴

Webster stated that "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom; the foundation on which the whole system stands."

⁵² Noah Webster, Instructive and Entertaining Lessons for Youth; with Rules for Reading with Propriety, illustrated with Examples.... (New Haven: S. Babcock and Durrie and Peck, 1835), p. 211. See also p. 106. Hereafter cited as Webster, Lessons.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 219-220.

⁵⁴ [New York] Commercial Advertiser, January 20, 1835.

The "social benefits of Christianity" were no less "obvious than the spiritual." Authoritarian religion was his ultimate escape from freedom.⁵⁵ As he himself admitted, "my belief is the fruit of some experience and much inquiry...."⁵⁶ It was clearly an escape from freedom, an attempt, as Fromm puts it, to become a part of a bigger whole outside of oneself, to submerge oneself in an organic unity in which all questions are answered.⁵⁷ It was an attempt to find both inner peace and external tranquillity:

The soul of man is, I am persuaded, never tranquil, till the will is subdued, and has yielded, with implicit submission, to God's sovereign grace. This submission, however humiliating it may appear to the natural man, is accompanied or followed with unspeakable satisfaction. The most dignified attitude of feeble, sinful man, is that of a penitent at the foot of the cross, imploring pardon from an offended God, and I firmly believe, that everyman must be brought to this posture, before he can enjoy any permanent tranquillity of mind in this life, or possess any qualification for the happiness of the next.⁵⁸

From 1808 on Webster described himself as a Calvinist and fundamentalist. He prayed three times a day.⁵⁹ The Bible, he claimed, was the one and only fount of all knowledge. In

⁵⁵To Dawes, February 23, 1809.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Erich Fromm, Psychoanalysis and Religion (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), p. 177.

⁵⁸Webster, Doctrine, pp. 8, 9. See also to Dawes, February 23, 1809.

⁵⁹Ford, Notes V. II, P. 371.

short, his view of everything was Christian-oriented. He had gone through a "regeneration" which he said was "an entire change of the affections."⁶⁰ His view of the scriptures, religion, salvation and of God's moral government were very much changed, he said, "and my heart yields with delight and confidence to whatever appears to be the divine will."⁶¹

He had virtually reverted back to the belief-system of the Puritan generation. The longer he lived, the stronger became his belief in the correctness of his fundamental Calvinism. "I am perfectly well satisfied that what is denominated 'modern Calvinism' is the genuine religion preached by Christ and his Apostles," he said in 1835, "and that there is no other genuine religion."⁶² The "fear of God" was "the spring, the source of all religion and piety;"⁶³ it would reduce man to a full sense of the feebleness of his powers, as well as his utter depravity.⁶⁴

The duty of men was not to do good to other men, but to love the Almighty. Social and even moral reform came second to worship. God had a right to the love and reverence of the beings he created. Man must respect God first, then

⁶⁰Webster, Doctrine, p. 8.

⁶¹To Dawes, December 20, 1808, p. 313.

⁶²Letter to Harriet Webster Fowler, January 7, 1835, in Warfel, Letters, p. 445. See also Webster, Doctrines, p. 10.

⁶³Webster, Lessons, p. 210.

⁶⁴To Dawes, February 23, 1809.

be concerned with good works.⁶⁵ Morality was only a secondary obligation. Moses had come down from the mountain with two tablets; the first and most important contained his duties to God, the second his duties to other men.⁶⁶

Revelation was now more important and reliable than man's reason. The latter had been given by the Creator to use, but it was not enough. Man must also rely on the mysterious revelations of God for guidance. Men, and especially young students, must ask the cosmic question: "Who made me? Why was I made? What is my duty?" The answers to such questions constituted the whole business of life, yet they could not be reached through man's mind. Instead, revelation alone could furnish correct knowledge.⁶⁷

Americans must accept the Bible as literal truth. The doctrine of the divinity of Christ and all other miracles were true: "God does, at times directly interpose in behalf of those who ask him in faith." He restored health to the sick, sight to the blind, and so on. Christ was God manifest in the flesh. Predestination and election, although beyond human comprehension, were also real.⁶⁸

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Webster, Doctrines, pp. 3, 10. See also Webster, Value, pp. 154-155.

⁶⁷"Letter to a Young Gentleman Commencing his Education," Webster, Collection, p. 295. This essay was first published in 1823.

⁶⁸Webster, Doctrines, pp. 17, 11, 12, 19.

Most importantly, the Bible was man's only safe guide in worldly operations. Without it there could be no peace, no civilization, only destruction:

...if we reject the Scriptures as our own rule of faith and practice, we are in a most deplorable situation. We have no other guide that has any pretensions to unfallibility. We are cast on the ocean of life, without chart, or compass, or rudder--nay, we are ignorant of our own port--we know not where we are bound--we have not a ray of light to guide us in the tempestuous sea--not a hope to cheer us amidst the distresses of this world, or tranquillize the soul in its passage into the next--and all beyond the present state, is annihilation or despair!⁶⁹

Such an important work must have no flaws, and Webster was convinced that some improvements should be made. As early as 1822, he wrote to Moses Stuart of the need for a new edition of the Bible.⁷⁰ Webster's version of the Holy Scriptures appeared in 1835. Its importance, he believed, far outweighed his dictionaries. "I consider this emendation of the common version as the most important enterprize of my life," he said just before it was published.⁷¹

Webster was convinced that there were many parts of the Bible which should be corrected. The vocabulary was restricted and many words were obsolete. There were grammatical errors. Since the Bible would have no inconsiderable influence

⁶⁹To Joseph Priestley, 1800, Warfel, Letters, p. 86.

⁷⁰To Moses Stuart, April 23, 1822, Ford, Notes, II, pp. 186-187.

⁷¹To Messers Morse, February 24, 1834, Warfel, Letters, p. 433.

on the formation of a national language, its contents should be correct and easy to read. Even more important to Webster was the elimination of what he believed were vulgar phrases, which might hinder the dissemination of its message. The common version contained many impolite words which could not be used in mixed company; many parents, he felt, would not let their children read certain chapters because of vulgarisms. Other young people refused to go to Bible classes in which they were required to read certain passages which made them blush. "To retain such offensive language" would be "injudicious, if not indefensible...."⁷²

Most of the words and imagery he changed were sexual in nature. Names of the parts of the body were often altered; "breasts" was often substituted for "teats," for example. In discussions of birth, "belly" was changed to "born" and "womb" was usually omitted. All references to male genitals were deleted. Another area of concern were terms for excretion and secretion. Webster exercised a complete taboo on "dung," "stink," and "piss." The sexual act itself was severely censored "fornication" was changed to "lewdness" or "lewd deeds," and "fornicators" became "lewd persons." "Whore" was deleted in every instance.⁷³

⁷²Noah Webster, The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments, in the common version. With amendments of the Language. (New Haven: Durrie and Peck, 1833), p. xvi.

⁷³Ibid., pp. v, xvi, xiv. Allen Walker Read, "Noah Webster as a Euphamist," Dialect Notes, VI (1934), pp. 385-391, and Harry R. Warfel, "The Centenary of Noah Webster's Bible," New England Quarterly, 1934, pp. 578-582 are interesting secondary commentaries.

After 1808, Webster's conversion, his belief in the Bible and evangelical Protestantism all affected his view of American history. If the Bible was literal truth, then of course its story of the origin of man must be correct. Thus when he wrote his History of the United States in the 1830's. Webster began with Genesis. Adam and Eve were the first real human beings, and all Americans were descendants of Japeth, one of Noah's three sons. All three had been together at the Tower of Babel, and when God dispersed them, Japeth's descendants migrated to England, then to America.⁷⁴

His account of the Revolution also differed considerably from the view he had espoused before. The role of religion, which he had previously ignored, now took on greater significance. Webster noted that the roots of the Revolution went back to the first generation of settlers. The essential point of contention, from the very beginning, had been religion, not politics or economics. He believed that opposition to the English church naturally fostered an enmity to monarchy, and this had developed into outright opposition.⁷⁵ Furthermore, Webster stressed the religiosity of the colonists.

⁷⁴Noah Webster, History of the United States; to which is prefixed a brief historical account of our English ancestors, from the dispersion of Babel, to their migration to America; and of the conquest of South America, by the Spaniards. (New haven: Durrie and Peck, 1832), p. 9. Hereafter cited as Webster, History (1832). See also Noah Webster, History of the United States (Cincinnati: Corey, Fairbank and Webster, 1835). Hereafter cited as Webster, U. S. See also Webster, Value, p. 39.

⁷⁵Webster, History, p. 197.

At each point in his narrative of the events before and during the war, Webster carefully pointed out that the colonists always sought divine blessings and the aid of Christ in making decisions.⁷⁶ When Cornwallis surrendered, Congress reacted by proceeding to the nearest church to "make public acknowledgment of gratitude to Heaven for the singular event."⁷⁷

Alterations in his view of history coincided with changes in his political and social thought. God had "a right to give laws to man for his government."⁷⁸ On this question as on all others, men must not perplex their minds with abstruse reasonings, on subjects beyond mortal comprehension.⁷⁹ The "adaptation of the law of God to human society," both in temporal and spiritual things, "was absolutely necessary."⁸⁰

Webster echoed the evangelical doctrine that the fear of God was necessary for political tranquillity. Without it there could be "no effectual restraint on all the evil propensities of mankind, of lust, ambition, anger, and revenge."⁸¹ Disobedience to divine law was the "cause of almost all the sufferings of mankind." Conformity to it in society brought peace, prosperity and happiness. If men are wretched, it is

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 210.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 242.

⁷⁸Webster, Doctrines, p. 3.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 18.

⁸⁰Webster, Value, N. P.

⁸¹Webster, Lessons, p. 210. Also. p. 10.

because they reject the government of God. The fact that men have not obeyed God's precepts was in his mind "the most prominent cause of all political evils."⁸²

The teachings of Christ formed the moral basis for the Quiet Christian's life. In 1823 Webster wrote an essay of instructions to young men about to enter college. It was a specific example of how the Quiet Christian should live. Good breeding and close attention to virtue and complimentary habits were guides to the selection of friends, and of course evangelical Protestantism was central to the development of good character. "Never maintain a familiar intercourse with the profane, the lewd, the intemperate, the gamester, or the scoffer at religion," he warned. The common civilities of life should be extended towards these people, but beyond that, "nothing is required of men who reverence the divine precepts, and who desire to keep themselves unspotted from the world."⁸³

After 1808 his heroes were the very people whom he had chastised as bigots in the 1780's. The Quiet Christians would do well to model themselves after the original pious and devout settlers of New England. That had lived every detail of their lives by the Bible and had managed to avoid crime, vice and corrupt amusements, he fantasized. The regularity of their worship, their simple rituals, their industry and plain clothes all made them seem saintly. The nineteenth

⁸²Webster, Value, pp. 173, 174-175.

⁸³Webster, "Letter to a Young Gentleman," pp. 300-306.

century could learn much from the seventeenth.⁸⁴

"The Bible must be considered as the great source of all the truth by which men are to be guided in government," he said, "as well as in all social transactions."⁸⁵ It was the only basis for social as well as personal tranquillity. "I consider the Christian religion as our sheet anchor during our political storms," said Webster in 1832.⁸⁶ He looked to the past and found that civil liberty originated with Christianity. The Reformation was the birth of natural rights, and civil liberty "has been gradually advancing and improving, as genuine Christianity has prevailed."⁸⁷ The Puritans now seemed like the first true republicans and "their liberal and wise institutions...have been the foundation of our republican governments." He was careful to point out that their mode of government had been literally transcribed from the scriptures.⁸⁸

Education also took on a new significance in this light. After trying to utilize schools to encourage progressive social change in the 1770's and 1780's, Webster's concern

⁸⁴Webster, History, p. 274. See also "Minutes on Sabbath-breaking," N. D., Pierpont Morgan Library.

⁸⁵Webster, Value, p. 177.

⁸⁶Letter to William Chauncey Fowler, July 24, 1832, in Warfel, Letters, p. 431.

⁸⁷Webster, History, p. 273.

⁸⁸Letter to William Chauncey Fowler, July 24, 1832, in Warfel, Letters, pp. 431-432.

with education slowly disappeared around the turn of the century. It was of relatively little importance to him even after his conversion, and in fact he mentioned it only rarely. The reason for his loss of interest was quite clear: It was of no use in controlling human passions, and in fact a little education could even be dangerous. "Knowledge, learning, [and] talents are not necessarily connected with sound moral and political principles" he said, and universal education would not "insure unbiased elections, or an upright administration." Indeed, "eminent abilities, accompanied with depravity of heart," he thought in 1814, "render the possession tenfold more dangerous in a community."⁸⁹

Yet just after that statement his views on education took another, more drastic turn. In 1812 he moved to Amherst, Massachusetts, where he remained for ten years. There he became the real force behind the foundation of Amherst College.⁹⁰ He also began to think about the role of education in society and its possible use as a tool of social control, as well as in the propagation of evangelical Protestantism. The duty of the new college, he said in 1817, would be to inculcate certain doctrines, including the sound precepts of morality and evangelical piety. The students who passed through his school

⁸⁹ Noah Webster, An Oration Pronounced Before the Knox and Warren Branches of the Washington Benevolent Society, at Amherst, on the Celebration of the Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1814 (Northampton: William Butter, 1814), p. 16.

⁹⁰ This was the opinion of the original board of directors. See Warfel, Webster, p. 342.

would become obedient and passive, the epitome of the Quiet Christian.⁹¹ "I believe more than is commonly believed may be done in this way towards correcting the vices and disorders of society."⁹² From Amherst the entire world could be pacified through missionaries: Future Americans would find satisfaction in knowing that their fathers had gone out from Amherst to Africa and Siberia to convert entire kingdoms to Christ. Lovers of peace and security who realized the influence of Christianity in civilizing savages and in "restraining the disorders of civilized society" must lend their support to the new college. Amherst would spread evangelical Protestantism because it was the only reliable social cement. Only the Bible could convert swords to plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. "The gospel only can supersede the necessity of bolts and bars" or could "dispeople the state prison and the penitentiary!"⁹³

Finally, Webster detailed the kind of education that Amherst would provide for all good Quiet Christians. Its main emphasis would not be on science, literature or philosophy, or even on vocational training, but on moral reform. Each individual would try to model himself on God, the only perfect being. Reading would be confined to those books which helped

⁹¹Noah Webster, "Origin of Amherst College in Massachusetts," in Webster, Collection, p. 225.

⁹²Quoted in Warfel, Webster, p. 338.

⁹³Ibid., p. 340.

build moral character. Plays, novels, poetry, romance, and any other form of human expression that were not directly linked to emotional and intellectual repression or obedience would be avoided. Most important of all, each student would be taught to respect his elders and live by the ten commandments. All important knowledge would be gleaned from the Holy Bible.⁹⁴

After 1808, Noah Webster found the answers to all questions in The Bible and evangelical Protestantism. William James has said that a man is "converted" when religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, take a central place, and that religious beliefs form the core of his view of the world.⁹⁵ This is an apt description of Webster's thinking. His conversion was a product of his entire personality and life experiences, and it dominated his view of everything. Most importantly, he applied Christian characterology to all areas of life. If Americans were all Quiet Christians, he believed, there could be no political divisiveness, no economic chaos, no social upheaval. All would be serenity and tranquillity, especially if everyone thought the same way he did.

⁹⁴Webster, "Letter to a Young Gentleman," pp. 295-298.

⁹⁵James, Varieties, p. 162.

CHAPTER VIII

CONTROL

"It is obvious to my mind, that popular errors proceeding from a misunderstanding of words are among the efficient causes of our political disorders."

N. W., 1839

"I finished writing my Dictionary in January, 1825,"

Noah Webster once recalled. It was a solemn moment:

When I had come to the last word, I was seized with a trembling which made it somewhat difficult to hold my pen steady for writing. The cause seems to have been the thought that I might not then live to finish the work, or the thought that I was so near the end of my labors. But I summoned the strength to finish the last word, and then walking about the room a few minutes I recovered.¹

So ended a quarter-century of daily labor. The finished product was, by all standards, a monumental achievement. With 70,000 entries, all written out by his own hand, it was indeed a massive work, the last major dictionary ever compiled by a single individual.² It has become, in the form of its

¹Undated quote in Ford, Notes, I. p. 293.

²Robert Keith Leavitt, Noah's Ark: New England Yankees and the Endless Quest (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. and C. Merriam Company, 1947).

successors, an integral part of American culture. As early as the 1880's the name Webster had become synonymous with a dictionary.³

Throughout this quarter-century of labor Noah Webster kept his eye on national affairs. The question that drew him overwhelming concern during the last forty-five years of his life was the conflict between freedom and order. As with many others who perceived themselves as America's moral stewards after 1800, his answer to that problem was that all Americans should submit their hearts and minds to an authoritarian God and mold themselves in the image of Quiet Christians. Good citizens were passive, meek people blindly obedient to the wishes of a social leadership consisting of pious, elderly property owners. Their interest should not range beyond the safe boundaries of Christian concerns. Webster's definitions of words, both in his private correspondence and in the work itself, as well as his etymology, clearly reflect these values. If all Americans would only see the world through the eyes and mind of Noah Webster as set forth in his dictionary, Christian peace and tranquillity would reign. Webster's main motivation was social control, and his dictionary was a means of achieving it.

Virtually everyone believes that the American Dictionary of the English Language was a nationalistic tract. Webster was a great patriot, a founding father at least as nationalistic

³Scudder, Webster.

as his more famous distant cousin, Daniel. Indeed, so pervasive is this belief that many historians, like Oscar Handlin and John D. Hicks, discuss the work in the context of rising nationalism without really stating that the work was thus motivated.⁴ They write as if Webster's nationalism was common knowledge and that there could be no other possible explanation for his work. Others have made clearer statements concerning the subject. Charles Beard called the dictionary a high note of nationalism;⁵ Merle Curti and his associates believed it was a patriotic effort.⁶ Two more historians said in writing the dictionary Webster "wanted to complete our independence."⁷ Those who have concentrated specifically on Webster or the dictionary itself have been even more adamant in their conclusions. Homer D. Babbidge is representative of the attitude and methodology employed by most commentators. He consistently confused Webster's nationalistic statements of the 1780's with his later work, as if nothing occurred

⁴Oscar Handlin, The History of the United States (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1967), Volume I, p. 393 and John D. Hicks, George E. Mowry and Robert L. Burke, A History of American Democracy Third Edition (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1966), p. 185.

⁵Charles A. Beard, The Rise of American Civilization (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1940), p. 766.

⁶Merle Curti, Richard H. Shryock, Thomas C. Cochran and Fred Harvey Harrington, A History of American Civilization (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), p. 165.

⁷John A. Krout and Dixon Ryan Fox, The Completion of American Independence, 1790-1830 (New York: Quadrangle 1944), p. 33.

between 1783 and 1841.⁸ Webster's biographer, Harry R. Warfel, spent several pages explaining Webster's "inner drive of patriotism."⁹

Nationalism is a simple explanation for what was in fact the product of a complex interaction of an individual and the society in which he lived. When the work is considered within the context of Noah Webster's life, it becomes apparent that it was stimulated by much more than just patriotism. That was undoubtedly an important factor in his early conceptions of the work, and his desire to compile a scholarly dictionary superior to any in existence probably helped keep him going.

Yet in the final analysis the American Dictionary was the product of an entire lifetime. As such it reflected the events and inheritances of that human life and contained all the biases, concerns and ideals of a specific individual.

Although he had contemplated the need for a new dictionary as early as the 1780's,¹⁰ Webster did not begin the tedious task until 1800.¹¹ It was not an easy assignment, and in fact, there were many obstacles which had to be overcome. As Linda Kerber has pointed out, even staunch Federalists like

⁸ Homer D. Babbidge, Jr. ed., Noah Webster: On Being American, Selected Writings, 1783-1828 (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967).

⁹ Warfel, Webster, p. 353.

¹⁰ To Joel Barlow, November 12, 1807, Warfel, Letters, p. 298.

¹¹ Ford, Notes, I, p. 1.

Josiah Quincy, who ostensibly shared his views on politics and society, publicly criticized his work. They saw linguistic reform as another source of discord, undermining the very order that Webster was trying to strengthen.¹² In 1822 a comic opera, Samuel Woodworth's Deed of Gift, mocked Webster's work when a lead character uttered definitions and pronunciations in a pretentious and haughty manner.¹³ Even Webster's close friends, including John Quincy Adams,¹⁴ James Kent,¹⁵ John Jay,¹⁶ and his brother-in-law, Thomas Dawes,¹⁷ continually discouraged him over the entire twenty-five years. Webster was also in constant need of financial support, and was often forced to solicit funds from friends and strangers.¹⁸ In 1812 he moved from New Haven to Amherst in order to take advantage

¹²Kerber, Federalists, pp. 96-103.

¹³George Philip Krapp, The English Language in America (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1925, 1960), p. 336.

¹⁴John Quincy Adams to Noah Webster, November 5, 1806, Ford, Notes, II, p. 9.

¹⁵James Kent to Noah Webster, March 20, 1810, Ford, Notes, II, p. 75.

¹⁶John Jay to Noah Webster, January 12, 1811, Ford, Notes, II, pp. 119-120.

¹⁷See for example To Jedediah Morse, July 30, 1806, Warfel, Letters, pp. 268-269 and To Joel Barlow, November 12, 1807, Warfel, Letters, p. 207.

¹⁸See for example To Oliver Wolcott, April 13, 1803, Ford, Notes, I, p. 530; To John West, August 18, 1807, Warfel, Letters, p. 281; To Rufus King, February 28, 1807, Ibid., p. 275; To the Friends of Literature...February 25, 1807, Ibid., pp. 279-280; To Joel Barlow, November 12, 1807; Letter to Samuel Hopkins, March 17, 1808, Connecticut Historical Society,

of the lower cost of living.¹⁹ In addition, the physical aspects of writing out hundreds of thousands of words in long-hand often brought great discomfort.²⁰ He occasionally complained of exhaustion; while in the final stages of preparation he told his daughter that his labors were severe enough to produce constant pain and soreness in his hand.²¹

It is natural to draw direct links between Webster's early work and his American Dictionary. And of course he encouraged this in the seemingly nationalistic title of his most famous work. He noted that the chief glory of a nation arose from its authors and purposefully stated that he believed American writers were equal in skill and brilliance to Englishmen. He even named those on this side of the Atlantic whom he considered comparable to the best of Europe. Franklin, Washington, Adams, Jay, Madison, Marshall, Dwight, Trumbull and Irving were his favorites. Today we have forgotten many of the others he named, such as Ames, Cleaveland, Hare and Walsh.

Perhaps as an indication of what was to come, Webster did not mention an internationally famous American who was also the symbol of all that he loathed, Thomas Jefferson.

Webster Papers, and To Josiah Quincy, February 12, 1811, quoted in Scudder, Webster, p. 185.

¹⁹ Warfel, Webster, p. 323.

²⁰ Letter to William Webster, October 27, 1835, Webster Family Papers, Box 1, Yale University Library.

²¹ Letter to Emily Ellsworth, May 20, 1828, Webster Papers, Connecticut Historical Society.

Thomas Paine and all other earlier American celebrators of democracy and freedom were also neglected. As George Krapp, the most respected twentieth-century student of the development of the English language has noted, merely naming Franklin, Washington and others as authorities "is quite a different matter from the narrow patriotic zeal which was rampant in the years immediately following the Revolution."²²

In addition, Webster himself indicated that his views had changed immensely. "It is not only important, but, in a degree necessary," he said in the opening pages, "that the people of this country, should have an American Dictionary of the English language...." Notice that he did not advocate the development of a new language, or even a new dialect, separate and distinct from that spoken in England. Instead, he perceived himself to be writing merely an "American" dictionary of the English language, which is of course a very different thing than creating a whole new language. And he further explained his position, noting that the body of the language was basically the same as that of England. He added a significant statement: "it is desirable to perpetuate that sameness."²³

Thus the end product of Webster's toils was anything but a new "American tongue." He included only about fifty

²²Krapp, Language, p. 344.

²³Noah Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language... (New York: S. Converse, 1828), p. [iii]. Hereafter cited as A. D.

Americanisms, a fact which prompted H. L. Mencken to label Webster a defective observer of his own country.²⁴ The lexicographer's nationalism had in fact reached a low point in 1814, when he helped draft the first circular calling for the Hartford Convention.²⁵ In that year he also denounced the Constitution as naive and wildly democratic, ridiculed the concept of universal white male suffrage, and called for division of the union into three separate countries.²⁶

The American Dictionary was perfectly acceptable in England. The first edition of 2500 copies was quickly followed by an English edition of 3000, and one major student of lexicography had noted that Webster's crowning achievement was quite suitable for use in America and England.²⁷ Indeed, his dictionary was received more warmly across the Atlantic than in the United States. Warfel stated that "soon Webster became the standard in England...."²⁸ When his publisher went bankrupt, copies of the English edition were sold without

²⁴H. L. Mencken, The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), p. 7.

²⁵From Joseph Lyman, January 5, 1814, Ford, Notes, II, p. 124. Carpenter, Bibliography, p. 363, indicates that Webster was the author of this letter.

²⁶Noah Webster, An Oration, Pronounced Before the Knox and Warren Branches of the Washington Benevolence Society, at Amherst... (Northampton, Massachusetts: William Butler, 1814).

²⁷George H. McKnight, The Evolution of the English Language: from Chaucer to the Twentieth Century (New York: Dover Publishers, 1968).

²⁸Warfel, Webster, p. 361.

charge in America.²⁹

Yet another incident indicates that his dictionary was not a nationalistic tract. When the second American edition was published in 1841, he sent a copy to Queen Victoria. Significantly, he told the person carrying it to her that "our common language is one of the ties that binds the two nations together; I hope the works I have executed will manifest to the British nation that the Americans are not willing to suffer it to degenerate on this side of the Atlantic."³⁰ Half a century earlier he had despised England and all that it stood for. Now he told the Queen that he hoped his dictionary might furnish evidence that the "genuine descendants of English ancestors born on the west of the Atlantic, have not forgotten either the land or the language of their fathers."³¹

In attempting to understand the American Dictionary in its entirety, it must be remembered that Webster's view of language was dualistic. It was, of course, to be studied for its own sake, but it was also something much more. Language, he believed, influenced opinion and behavior. If people believed that all men were in fact "equal," they would act in certain ways, probably in different ways than if they

²⁹Ibid., p. 365.

³⁰Letter to Andrew Stevenson, June 22, 1841, The Papers of Noah Webster, Box 1, Manuscripts and Archives, New York Public Library.

³¹Letter to Her Majesty, Victoria, Queen of Great Britain, June 22, 1841. The Papers of Noah Webster, Box 1, Manuscripts and Archives, New York Public Library.

believed that men were not necessarily "equal." Thus language was something that could be used as a means to a greater end. It could be changed, altered and manipulated, and in so doing, one could affect millions of people. Although he never explicitly said so, Webster believed this from the very beginning of his work. It is implicit in his attempts to forge an "American tongue" as a means of encouraging independence from a vile and corrupt England, and to further his utopian dreams. Even in 1788 he could conceptualize the use of language in purifying society. In that year he called for studies which would "show how far truth and accuracy of thinking are concerned in a clear understanding of words." Language should be studied "if it can be proved that mere use of words has led nations into error, and still continues the delusion...."³² As early as 1790 he was actively engaged in manipulation of language as a means of influencing opinion and behavior. He had just completed another book, he told a friend. "I have introduced into it some definitions, relative to the slave trade," he said, "calculated to impress upon young minds the detestableness of the trade."³³

Webster made his intentions in the dictionary quite clear. The values expressed within the work were his. "In

³²Noah Webster, "A Dissertation concerning the influence of Language on opinions and of opinions on Language," American Magazine, May 1788, p. 399.

³³Letter to J. Pemberton, March 15, 1790, Historical Society of Pennsylvania Archives.

many cases, I have given brief sentences of my own," he declared, "and often presenting some important maxim or sentiment in religion, morality, law or civil policy...."³⁴ To his daughter Emily he confessed that he had used the definitions in his work in less than scholarly, objective ways. "I suppose you must have noticed that I have not forgotten my own country and friends....," he told her.³⁵

Webster believed that the misunderstanding of words led to social and political upheaval. Words should not be used vaguely. "There is one remarkable circumstance in our own history which seems to have escaped observation," he noted in 1838, "which is, the mischievous effect of the indefinite application of terms." The evils proceeding from the improper understanding of words were enormous, at least in his mind. It was a problem rarely observed by the mass of men, but one that sometimes led to serious mistakes, both in religion and government. In 1839 he wrote an essay in which he summed up his entire life's work in linguistics, philology, etymology and lexicography. It was "obvious" to him that "popular errors proceeding from a misunderstanding of words are among the efficient causes of our political disorders."³⁶

³⁴A. D. N. P.

³⁵Letter to Emily Ellsworth, February 24, 1829, Connecticut Historical Society, Webster Papers.

³⁶Noah Webster, *Observations on Language...* (New York: S. Babcock, 1839), pp. 31-32. See also Noah Webster, "Discourse

Webster's keen sensitivity to the use and effect of the definitions of words was often exhibited in his correspondence. His firm belief that the definitions of words affected human behavior appeared time and time again throughout the entire course of his life. Moreover, his discussions of the true meanings of words clearly records his conscious manipulation of definitions in ways that he hoped would influence events. Indeed, the thought processes that led to specific definitions of key words can clearly be seen. They reveal that Webster's strong social and political values and his longing for public submission to authority and for social tranquillity dictated what he believed should be the correct understanding of important words.

He believed that an inaccurate understanding of the word "pension" had been partially responsible for social discord in the 1780's. Congress had granted a pension to officers who had served in the continental army. Many had protested, and the convention held in Middletown had called for its repeal. This unrest had distressed Webster. It had been "a remarkable, but an unfortunate instance of the use of the word, in a sense so indefinite that the people at large made no distinction between pensions granted as a provision for old officers, and pensions granted for the purpose of bribery for favor and support." Obviously Webster thought that the half-pay for officers was the first type of pension, while to

delivered before the Connecticut Historical Society on April 21, 1840," Connecticut Historical Society, p. 29.

the convention it was the second kind. In his dictionary he was careful to say that it meant "to grant an annual allowance from the public treasury to a person for past services" No example of the misunderstanding of words, he thought, was as clear as that surrounding the phrase "union of church and state." He understood the aversion of many Americans to the unification of ecclesiastical and civil authority because of the European experience. Along with many others, Webster had spoken in favor of their separation in the 1780's. But times had changed, and by 1838 his conception of that relationship had also changed. Now the union of the two meant that "all laws must have religion for their basis." In this sense, there clearly was a strong need for a "union of civil and ecclesiastical powers; in support of the laws and institutions."³⁷ This union was the seedbed of Quiet Christians and the heart of his concept of social relations.

"Jacobinism," "democrat" and "republican" were important words that Webster's biases led him to define in significant ways. The first, he said in 1799, was not merely the philosophy of a French political faction. It was instead "an opposition to established government and institutions, and an attempt to overthrow them, by private accusations or by violent or illegal means."³⁸ "Democrat" was "synonymous with the word Jacobian in France...." Democratic organizations

³⁷ Middletown [Connecticut] Constitution, December 5, 1838.

³⁸ Commercial Advertiser, October 21, 1799.

arose from the attempt to "control our government by private associations." By 1800 the word signified "a person who attempts an undue opposition to our influence over government by means of private clubs, secret intrigues, or by public popular meetings which are extraneous to the Constitution."³⁹ "Republicans," on the other hand, were "friends of our Representative Governments, who believe that no influence whatever should be exercised in a state which is directly authorized by and developed legislation."⁴⁰ Similar definitions appeared in his dictionary.

A key word, the definition of which he believed could directly influence behavior, was "free." Most Americans really believed that all men were free to act according to their own will. The belief that this abstract condition was natural and was a basic part of American life was widely upheld, or so thought Noah Webster. To him it was absurd, and in fact "contributed to the popular licentiousness, which often disturbs the public peace, and even threatens extensive evils in this country." A misunderstanding of "free" threatened the very permanency of government, because it led people to believe that somehow individuals were "above the constitutional authorities."⁴¹ It was also simply incorrect. Instead, all

³⁹To Joseph Priestley, 1800, Warfel, Letters, p. 208.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 207-208.

⁴¹Middletown Constitution, December 5, 1838.

individuals, from the time of their birth, were subject to the commands of their parents, of God, and of the government of the country in which they lived.⁴² There would be far fewer problems in society, believed Noah Webster, if all Americans understood that "No person is born free, in the general acception of the word free."⁴³

"Equality" and "Equal" were also key terms. "Nothing can be more obvious than that by the appointment of the creator, in the constitution of man and of human society," he wrote a few months before his death, "The conditions of men must be different and unequal."⁴⁴ The common American belief that all men must be equal in conditions in which they lived was totally incorrect. The Declaration of Independence was wrong when it began by affirming as a self-evident truth that "all men are born equal." That was the work of the infamous idealist, Thomas Jefferson, and as a universal proposition could not be possible. In their intellectual and physical powers men were born "unequal," and hence inequality was a basic part of human life. Webster said that most of the men of the earlier generation had believed that each person was born with an "equal natural right to liberty and protection..."

⁴²Webster, "Discourse," p. 29.

⁴³To Daniel Webster, N. D., Warfel, Letters, p. 482.

⁴⁴Letter to James Kent, February 7, 1843, The Papers of Noah Webster, Box 8, Manuscripts and Archives, New York Public Library.

something far different than total equality, a belief that led to agitation over the right of suffrage.⁴⁵ The founders had believed in equality of opportunity, with which Webster had no argument. "But equality of condition is a very different thing and dependent on circumstances over which government and laws have no control."⁴⁶

Most importantly, when people expected equality of condition, it led inevitably to opposition to authority, chaos and ultimately anarchy. Misunderstanding of the words "free and equal" led "the more ignorant and turbulent part of the community" to become "emboldened" and to "take the law into their own hands, or to trample both constitution and law under their feet."⁴⁷ The very concept of equality of condition could lead only to disaster:

...it is not for the interest and safety of society that all men should be equal. Perfect equality, if such a state could be supposed practicable, would render due subordination impossible, and dissolve society. All men in a community are equally entitled to protection, and the secure enjoyment of their rights....Superiority in natural and acquired endowments, and in authority derived from the laws, is essential to the existence of social order, and of personal safety.⁴⁸

In this dictionary Webster listed nineteen definitions of the words "equal" and "equality." He conspicuously did not

⁴⁵Commercial Advertiser, January 20, 1835.

⁴⁶Webster, "Discourse," p. 30

⁴⁷Middletown Constitution, December 5, 1838.

⁴⁸Ibid.

celebrate equality among men.

The emphasis on passivity and submission to civil and religious authority in Webster's work has not gone entirely unrecognized. In 1967 the Foundation for American Christian Education, located in Orange County, California issued a facsimile of the 1828 edition of the American Dictionary.⁴⁹ Rosalie Slater, the editor in charge of the foundation's American Christian History Education Series, of which the dictionary was a part, noted Webster's emphasis on what I have called the Quiet Christian. She celebrated the dictionary because it "contained the greatest number of Biblical definitions given in any secular volume." She quoted Webster on the need for religion as a basis of civil government:

In my view, the Christian religion is the most important and one of the first things in which all children, under a free government, ought to be instructed....No truth is more evident to my mind than that the Christian religion must be the basis of any government intended to secure the rights and privileges of a free people....⁵⁰

Slater applauded Webster for teaching the "defects of democracy." She especially approved his statement that he considered "the cautious admission of foreigners to the rights of citizenship" a matter of infinite consequence. His warnings about the "secret influence of Jacobinism" were reprinted

⁴⁹Noah Webster's First Edition of An American Dictionary of the English Language (Anaheim, California: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1967).

⁵⁰Quoted in Rosalie Slater, "Noah Webster: Founding Father of American Scholarship and Education," Ibid., p. [iv].

in her essay, and she was careful to point out the secret influence of foreign ideologies in her own time. Most importantly, she noted that his books were "written from a Christian, Biblical position" and that they "taught pupils the ingredients of Christian character needed to maintain our American republic."⁵¹

Like Webster, she sought to create Quiet Christians blindly obedient to order and authority under the guise of Americanism. Contemporary Americans would benefit from reading Webster, who "recognized that the only defense against the alien philosophies of government or education was to construct permanent foundations based on the Word of God...." The 139-year-old dictionary would again be useful in protecting Americans against "the alien seeds of foreign ideologies and philosophies of education" and prohibit them from becoming "implanted in American soil."⁵²

Webster's belief in Quiet Christian behavior appears throughout the work. The reader is constantly reminded of his divinely-directed role in life and the values by which he lived. The fear of God, absolute and rigid controller of all things, the depravity of man and the character traits of meekness, humility, passivity and whole-hearted submission to

⁵¹Ibid., pp. [v], [xvii].

⁵²Ibid., p. [xvii]. Slater included another essay, "Noah Webster's 1828 Dictionary Needed to Restore An American Christian Education in the Home, the Church and the School."

proper authority are consistently celebrated in the definitions of hundreds and perhaps thousands of words. This was done in two basic ways; either through specific definitions of words indicating correct behavior, or through biblical quotes illustrating the meaning of the word. "Author," for instance, was defined as "One who produces, creates, or brings into being....." Webster could have stopped there, with an objective statement, as other lexicographers did. Instead he added "as, God is the author of the Universe," thus reminding the reader of his relative meaninglessness.⁵³

Ironically, Webster managed to inject his authoritarian desires into even the most anti-authoritarian of all ideas. The verb form of "love" was "a sense to be pleased with," to which he added a significant set of examples of its usage, again designed to instruct the Quiet Christian:

The Christian loves his Bible. In short, we love whatever gives us pleasure and delight, whether animal or intellectual; and if our hearts are right, we love God above all things, as the sum of all excellence and all the attributes which can communicate happiness to intelligent beings. In other words, the Christian loves God with the love of complacency in his attributes, the love of benevolence towards the interests of his kingdom, and the love of gratitude for favors received.

The noun form of "love" was used in a similar way. Webster gave another example of the role of religion in forming deferential, Quiet Christian personalities and behavior:

⁵³The American Dictionary was unpaginated, but definitions can be found in their correct alphabetical order.

The love of God is the first duty of man, and this springs from just views of his attributes or excellencies of character, which afford the highest delight to the sanctified heart. Esteem and reverence constitute ingredients in this affection, and a fear of offending him is the inseparable effect.

Webster's disgust with politicians is evident in his dictionary. He defined them as men "of artifice or deep contrivance" rather than people engaged in government or management of affairs. The adjective form of "politician" meant "Cunning; using artifice." His own longing for a return to some former time before the rise of democratic politics was indicated in his definition of "polity." He quoted Ezra Stiles who said "were the whole Christian world to revert back to the original model, how far more simple, uniform and beautiful would the church appear, and how far more agreeable to the ecclesiastical polity instituted by the holy apostles."

Under "reason," Webster quotes an author who said "God brings good out of evil, and therefore it were but reason we should trust God to govern his own world." Implicit is that man should follow God's laws, not his own reason. Thus reason was used to advocate its opposites. "Laws" were "the laws which enjoin the duties of piety and morality, and prescribed by God and found in the Scriptures." Under "submission" Webster again indicates that the Quiet Christian should be full of "resignation," meaning "entire and cheerful submission to the will of God [which] is a christian duty of prime excellence." The only individual who could be "esteemed really

and permanently happy" is the one "who enjoys a peace of mind in the favor of God," not unlike the mental tranquillity he had found in 1808. Defining "improve," he commands that "it is the duty...of a good man to improve in grace and piety." He tells us that "the distribution of the Scriptures may be the instrument of a vastly extensive reformation in morals and religion." Webster's view of the family appears in his definition of "marriage" as "instituted by God himself, for the sexes, for promoting domestic felicity and for securing the maintenance and education of children." The helplessness of a man is indicated when he tells us under "meritorious" that "we rely for salvation on the meritorious obedience and suffering of Christ."

The dictionary is saturated with commands to be meek and passive. Only a few examples will suffice as a general indication of the flavor of the work. "Good breeding forbids us to use offensive words." "A man is profane when he takes the name of God in vain, or treats sacred things with abuse and irreverence." "Perfect rectitude belongs only to the Supreme Being. The more nearly the "rectitude of men approaches to the standard of divine law, the more exalted and dignified is their character. Want of rectitude is not only sinful, but debasing." "Freedom" is defined in one sense as "violation of the rules of decorum," while Webster warns us to "beware of what are called innocent freedoms." Webster's denial of freedom and advocacy of submission to authority is consistent. "Freedom" in another sense is defined as "license."

"Duty" is a key concept, and in defining it Webster commands us to obey virtually any authority:

That which a person owes to another; that which a person is bound, by any natural, moral or legal obligation, to pay, do or perform. Obedience to princes, magistrates and the laws is the duty of every citizen and subject; obedience, respect and kindness to parents are the duties of children; fidelity to friends is a duty; reverence, obedience and prayer to God are indisputable duties; the government and religious instruction of children are duties of parents which they cannot neglect without guilt.

"Submission" was synonymous with "obedience," and "submission of children to their parents is an indispensable duty."

"Government" meant "control; restraint." In this definition he added that "Children are often ruined by a neglect of government in parents." Under "inferior" Webster commands us to "Pay due respect to those who are superior in station, and due civility to those who are inferior."

"Liberty" is one of the most revealing terms in the American Dictionary. His first definition was simply "freedom from restraint...." To this, however, he added some significant distinctions. Most important were the two types of liberty that John Winthrop had spoken of in 1645. "Natural liberty" meant the "power of acting as one thinks fit, without any restraint or control, except from the laws of nature." Like Winthrop, he emphasized that this condition was impractical and was always "abridged by the establishment of government." He was not speaking of the Lockean notion of a government as liberty. "Civil Liberty," on the other hand, was the

liberty "of men in a state of society" in which natural liberty was "abridged and restrained" not to enhance cooperation or the distribution of goods, but for "the safety and interest of the society, state or nation." Civil liberty, he believed, was "secured by established laws, which restrain every man from injuring or controlling others." He was undoubtedly thinking of the turmoil since the 1780's when he noted that "the restraints of law are essential to civil liberty."

That Christianity was the only basis for civilization was clear in Webster's mind. "Moral law" prescribed to men "their religious and social duties...." The most important were "their duties to God" which were to be realized before their duties "to each other." In addition, "the moral law is summarily contained in the decalogue or ten commandments," and was written by the finger of God on two tablets of stone, and delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai."

Perhaps the most revealing and significant definition in the entire two-volume work was that of "education." This small paragraph in many ways summed up much of Webster's life. Education had always been of major concern to him, not only for its own value, but as a means of social change of one sort or another. In the early 1780's it had been an instrument of increasing both cultural independence from England and progressive social change. Indeed, these two motivations were behind his first attempt to systematically Americanize the schools. After 1808 Noah Webster had seen schools as institutions for producing Quiet Christians, as a means of insuring

social tranquillity by teaching a Specific form of behavior. Through them discipline could be instilled and the unruly passions of men checked and limited. His definition of education did not stress the increase of learning, of understanding or comprehending the world. Value-laden words emphasizing this side of education appear only twice: "enlighten the understanding," and "arts and science." The second occurrence is almost thrown in as if an after thought. On the other hand, terms emphasizing authoritarian control appear nine times in the space of three sentences: "formation of manners," "discipline," "correct the temper," "form the manners and habits of youth," "fit them for usefulness in their future stations," "manners," "religious education" "Immense responsibility," "duties." And this is not counting the use of "instruction," a term he chose instead of "learning" or other less authority-laden terms:

The bringing up, as of a child: instruction; formation of manners. Education comprehends all that series of instruction and discipline which is intended to enlighten the understanding, correct the temper, and form the manners and habits of youth, and fit them for usefulness in their future stations, to give children a good education in manners, arts and sciences, is important; to give them a religious education is indispensable; and an immense responsibility rests on parents and guardians who neglect their duties.

Finally, notice that an education in manners, arts and science is merely "important." A religious education, with all its overtones of the Quiet Christian, is "indispensable."

Another significant indication of the framework within which Webster wrote was his work in etymology. The pronunciation and spelling of words, as well as his criticism of Samuel Johnson and other lexicographers, is not central to an understanding of his work, and has been dealt with adequately elsewhere.⁵⁴ His etymology has been analyzed by others, but never accounted for within the context of his larger concerns. Yet it was, in Webster's own mind, an integral and very important part of his work. In relationship to the rest of his life it reveals much about how he operated.

Noah Webster's etymological work has been heavily criticized by nearly all students of the subject. His method was quite simple: walking around his circular table he examined each of the dictionaries of twenty languages for external similarities. If the number of letters and basic structure of a word in one language was similar to that of another, he assumed that they carried the same meaning or meant something quite similar. One entymologist, Mitford Mathews,⁵⁵ has lamented that this severely limited the usefulness of his work; others have been less kind. The most recent and thorough student of lexicography, Joseph Friend, said Webster was

⁵⁴ See especially Joseph H. Friend, The Development of American Lexicography, 1798-1864 (Paris: Mouton, 1967) and Albert C. Baugh, A History of the English Language Second Edition (New York: Appleton-Century, 1957).

⁵⁵ Mitford Mathews, A Survey of English Dictionaries (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 442.

"confused [in] the jungle of historical and comparative linguistics," and called his etymology "wild."⁵⁶ His derivations were "often as ingenious as they were wildly wrong."⁵⁷ Charlton Laird studied Webster's use of Anglo-Saxon as a test of his knowledge of languages and concluded that the lexicographer had no detailed understanding of it. He also believed that Webster's etymology was quite inferior to that of his contemporary, Thomas Jefferson. Laird pointed out that those who revised Webster's work shortly after his death "felt obliged quietly to remove great numbers of [his] etymological surmises."⁵⁸ One of the most famous modern students of the language, George Philip Krapp, believed that the dictionary was "only partially successful," and that it was "in parts executed with an inadequate scholarship and with a stubbornness of personal conviction that seriously impaired the noble design." Specifically, Krapp said that "in etymology Webster was least successful and most ambitious."⁵⁹ Sir James Murray believed that Webster "had the notion that derivations can be elaborated from one's own consciousness."⁶⁰

⁵⁶Friend, Development, p. 17.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 77.

⁵⁸Charlton Laird, "Etymology, Anglo-Saxon, and Noah Webster," American Speech, February, 1946, pp. 3-15. Also Thomas Pyles, The Origins and Development of the English Language (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1964), p. 68.

⁵⁹Krapp, Language, pp. 362-363.

⁶⁰James A. H. Murray, The Evolution of English Lexicography (London: Oxford University Press, 1900), p. 43.

Etymologists have noted that the framework within which Webster tried to work was simply incorrect. Friend said that his basic understanding of the principles of comparative and historical linguistics was "gravely defective" and "insufficient,"⁶¹ while others have called his work in this area "simple fantasy."⁶² H. L. Mencken remarked that Webster showed little understanding "of the basic 'direction and genius' of the English language:"

One always sees in him...the teacher rather than the scientific inquirer; the ardor of his desire to expound and instruct was only matched by his infinite capacity for observing inaccurately, and his profound ignorance of elementary principles.⁶³

Krapp agreed with Mencken's portrait of Webster as basically incompetent in the field of etymology:

Writing, or at least publishing, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Webster can scarcely be excused for not knowing that Grimm's Deutsche Grammatik was in existence, that the comparative relations of words in languages of the same group are to be determined by the tests of regular phonetic rules of laws, not by casual external similarities or by subtle spiritual interpretations.⁶⁴

Yet Noah Webster believed that his etymology was new, scholarly, and in fact the most important part of his work.

⁶¹Friend, Development, p. 76.

⁶²James A. Sledd and Gwin J. Kolb, Dr. Johnson's Dictionary: Essays in the Biography of a Book (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 197.

⁶³H. L. Mencken, Language, p. 7.

⁶⁴Krapp, Language, p. 365.

As Laird correctly notes, of all the causes he supported over his long life, and they were legion, "none was dearer to him than was the pursuit of etymologies, and in nothing so much as in his vast synopsis of 'language affinities'.... did he repose his hopes for the gratitude and admiration of society."⁶⁵ His failure is symbolized by his huge handwritten manuscript study of the relationships of languages, still unpublished and totally ignored by modern etymologists, now obscurely locked away in the New York Public Library.⁶⁶

As early as 1806 Webster had vowed to "make one effort to dissolve the chains of illusions" surrounding the development of language.⁶⁷ A year later he reported that he had begun compilation of the dictionary by concentrating merely on definitions and correcting errors in orthography. This had led him "gradually and almost insensibly" to investigate the origin of the English language. He had been surprised to learn that the path of development of all European languages was a subject virtually unexplored. All other etymologists had "wandered into the field of conjecture, venturing to substitute opinions for evidence...."⁶⁸ By 1809 he had concluded that language had begun in Asia and migrated outward.⁶⁹

⁶⁵Laird, "Etymology," p. 3.

⁶⁶The Papers of Noah Webster, Manuscripts and Archives, New York Public Library.

⁶⁷Webster, Compendious Dictionary p. xxiii.

⁶⁸"To the Friends of Literature in the United States," Warfel, Letters, p. 272.

⁶⁹To Thomas Dawes, July 25, 1809, Ibid., p. 343.

At about this time, Webster stopped working on definitions and orthography and spent ten years compiling his synopsis of the affinities of languages.⁷⁰ Four years before his death he still believed that his work was superior to any others and that all other etymologists, "even the German scholars, the most accurate philologists in Europe, appears to be wholly deficient."⁷¹

In the course of his work, Webster rejected not only the studies of European etymologists, but his own previous theories as well. In his Dissertations on the English Language, written in 1789, he had believed that northern Europe had developed two basic languages, Gothic and Celtic. English had been a descendant of the ancient Gothic as had German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish and Swiss.⁷² Mallet and Pelletier, two leading European etymologists, had concluded that the original stock had been Hebrew, and Webster agreed.⁷³ His theories in 1828 hardly resembled what he had said in 1789.

Most commentators on Webster's etymology have not attempted to explain why he did what he did, but have merely condemned it. Edgerton pointed out that even the relative isolation of American scholarship "hardly excuses such

⁷⁰To John Jay, November 1821, Ford, Notes, II, pp. 160-161.

⁷¹Webster, Observations, p. 5.

⁷²Webster, Dissertations, p. 54.

⁷³Ibid., pp. 315-316.

astounding ignorance in Webster."⁷⁴ Sledd and Kolb remarked that "for such invincible ignorance, it is best to attempt no excuse."⁷⁵ Friend noted that Webster proposed absurd derivations forty years after he should have known better, twenty years after the work of Schlegel had been published, and a dozen years after the works of Jacob Grimm had appeared.⁷⁶

On the surface at least, all of this adds up to a puzzling problem. Given his remark about the inaccuracy of the Germans, it is safe to say that Webster knew of their existence. He either read their work and rejected it, or simply chose to ignore it, believing that they were wrong. Webster was clearly not ignorant, nor was he incompetent. He was aware of the work of others, but chose to follow his own beliefs instead. Why, then, did he spend ten years spinning out fantasy after fantasy based on what he believed was solid concrete evidence?

George Krapp has come close to explaining this situation. In short, it was really spiritual, not phonological truth in which Webster was primarily interested. He seems to have thought "that the truth of a word, that is the primitive

⁷⁴Franklin Edgerton, "Notes on Early American Work in Linguistics, Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, LXXXVII (1944), Quoted in Friend, Development, p. 77.

⁷⁵Sledd and Kolb, Dictionary, p. 197.

⁷⁶Friend, Development, p. 76.

and original radical value of the word, was equivalent to the truth of the idea."⁷⁷

Webster's etymology was simply a literal extrapolation of scriptural truth into another field. Since 1808 he had believed that the Bible was factually correct, and that it must be accepted as such. Without it, there was no basis for civilization itself. Thus his rejection of European etymologists is no mystery. Their scientific attempts to unravel the development of language led away from the story of the Tower of Babel. They were directly challenging the validity of the Bible, the only rock upon which peace and tranquillity could be secured.

In 1806, as he began his etymological studies, Webster commented specifically on this subject. He believed that etymology illuminated not just on the origins of words, but on the development of human history as well. The etymology of European languages "will throw no inconsiderable light on the origin and history of the several nations who people it, and confirm in no small degree, the scriptures account of the dispersion of men."⁷⁸

In the final analysis, Webster had no choice but to write Christian etymology, regardless of the methodology and insights of all other authors. The only ultimate truth, as

⁷⁷Krapp, Language, p. 365.

⁷⁸Webster, Compendious Dictionary, p. xix.

Krapp might say, was contained in the Scriptures, and it dictated the mere truth of words. Beside Christ, Schlegel and Grimm were insignificant. They challenged the validity of Christianity, and if the authority of the scriptures was demolished, there was simply no hope for mankind. Without literal belief in biblical truth, he said in 1823 "we are cast on the ocean of life, without chart, or compass, or rudder." The "tempestuous sea," Webster's metaphor for the society in which he lived, could only end in "annihilation and despair" if the scriptures were found invalid in any area.⁷⁹ Given this mental context, Webster was obviously incapable of seeing the development of language in any framework of explanation other than that set forth in the Bible.

Webster introduced his work with a literal belief in the origin of language according to Genesis. Vocal sounds, he noted, were used to communicate between Adam and Eve. "Hence we may infer that language was bestowed on Adam, in the same manner as all his other faculties and knowledge, by supernatural power; or in other words was of divine origin...." "It is therefore probable that language as well as the faculty of speech, was the immediate gift of God."⁸⁰ Webster then traced the biblical story of the development of man, which was

⁷⁹ Webster, "Young Gentleman," p. 86.

⁸⁰ To David McClure, October 25 1836, Warfel, Letters, p. 454.

the basis for all the derivations of the words in the two volumes.⁸¹ As Joseph Friend notes, no amount of hard work, not even the labor of a quarter of a century, could overcome the limitations imposed by this naive scriptural literalism.⁸² He accepted without question the story of the Tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues. Before that time all mankind had spoken a common language, which Webster called "Chaldee," and which all modern etymologists agree was a fantasy. When those in Babel were dispursed, they divided into three groups, each led by a son of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japeth. The latter had eventually migrated to Northern Europe, and thus all the languages of that area were labeled "Japethic." This development, believed Webster, could be traced through the existence of certain words that reappeared in several languages, as well as through the existence of words with similar construction and meaning in various languages. But above all else, the Holy Bible, the basis for all man's knowledge in other fields, was also the key to etymology.

Webster's social and religious views permeated every area of his dictionary, including the dedication. One might expect a man who labored for twenty-five years on a single book to acknowledge the role played by those who surrounded him. Webster did not do so in his long introduction to his dictionary. Modern scholars usually mention the work of those

⁸¹A. D., p. [vii].

⁸²Friend, Development, p. 76.

who came before them or others in the field. But, of course, Noah Webster could not do that. No one else had followed, and in fact others working in the field directly challenged the assumptions that he built his work on. If Webster had been a strong nationalist, as most historians have said, one might expect long paeans to American freedom celebrations of the heroes of the Revolution, or perhaps a smattering of other spread-eagle statements. None appeared. Instead, the completion of this lifetime effort was ascribed to the Supreme Power who controlled all things. The American Dictionary was a product of the religious benevolence movement of the early nineteenth century whose major concern was social control, not of the nationalistic fervor of the late eighteenth century. It was dedicated to God:

To the great and benevolent Being, who during the preparation of this work, has sustained a feeble constitution, amidst obstacles and toils, disappointments, infirmities and depression; who has twice born me and my manuscripts in safety across the Atlantic, and given me strength and resolution to bring the work to a close, I would present the tribute of my most grateful acknowledgments.⁸³

⁸³A. D., p. [v].

CHAPTER IX

RESIGNATION

I would, if necessary, become a troglodyte and live in a cave in winter, rather than be under the tyranny of our desperate rulers.

N. W., 1836

By the end of his life Noah Webster was aware that he had experienced much and that his beliefs and values had endured enormous alterations. "Sir, I have been all my life changing my opinions," he quoted his old friend Benjamin Franklin as saying. "Now at seventy-six years of age," added Webster, "I can say the same thing...." The young Noah Webster had believed in a rosy future for America. Her people were bound for utopia, to build a temple of freedom on a divinely-favored continent. His efforts in behalf of the improvement of the human condition on all levels reflected the general optimism of the revolutionary era. Moral reform, complete religious toleration, equal distribution of property and the abolition of slavery were the ideals he had espoused. Yet his positive belief in the perfectability of mankind had been shattered by a long series of events. The central change in his life was his acceptance of a profoundly negative view of human nature which dominated his analysis of every subject.

The famous lexicographer died a pessimistic authoritarian, concerned only with limiting human freedom, not expanding it. "I began life, as other young men do, full of confidence in my own opinions, many of which I afterwards found to be visionary and deceptive.... To err is the lot of humanity."¹ Noah Webster's long journey ended in disillusionment, bitterness and despair.

Anxiety over the course of American society in the early nineteenth-century was not limited to Noah Webster. As several historians have pointed out, it was in fact widespread. Webster's authoritarian God was worshipped by hundreds of thousands of those who followed the teachings of conservative evangelicals like Lyman Beecher. More interestingly, many of the revolutionary generation experienced changes quite similar to Websters. John Adams, one of the foremost advocates of the Declaration of Independence, spent much of his correspondence after 1812 explaining to the aging Jefferson that democracy could not work and that religion was the only possible grounds for civilization.² Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration, became one of the most zealous supporters of evangelical Christianity.³ John Jay drafted the resolutions by which New

¹"To the Editor of the Palladium," February 17, 1835, Warfel, Letters, p. 446.

²Lester Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters Two Volumes (Chapel Hill; The University of North Carolina Press, 1959).

³Donald J. D'Elia, Benjamin Rush: Philosopher of the American Revolution (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1974).

York ratified the Declaration; in 1837 he was elected president of the American Bible Society.⁴ Alexander Hamilton wrote revolutionary pamphlets as early as 1774, yet before his death attempted to save the country by founding a Christian-constitutional party.⁵ Timothy Dwight, an officer in the Continental army, became a severe critic of democracy and leader of the second Great Awakening.⁶ Rufus King, Timothy Pickering, John Quincy Adams and numerous others followed similar patterns.

There were other signs of profound fear of American society as well. The American Temperance Society, founded in 1826 during the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration, believed that the widespread use of alcohol, especially by the lower classes, undermined the order of both church and state.⁷ Political rhetoric during this period was saturated with stark contrasts between the morality of the past and the iniquity of the present and thus politicians turned anxiety into votes.⁸ Like Webster, Horace Mann, Edward Everett and others attempted

⁴Griffin, "Control."

⁵John C. Miller, Alexander Hamilton and the Growth of the New Nation (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959).

⁶Berk, Calvinism.

⁷Joseph R. Gusfield, Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

⁸Marvin Meyers, The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957).

to use education as a means of controlling social and political behavior.⁹ The return of Lafayette in 1825 after a forty year absence gave rise to a torrential outpouring over an alleged retreat from the grandeur and honor of the revolutionary era.¹⁰ Nostalgia for the past and fear of the present and future found its way into art and popular music. The values of home, family and nature, highly characteristic of songs like "Woodman, Spare That Tree," were clearly reactions to rapid change, as were the cataclysmic paintings of Benjamin West, Asher B. Durand, Washington Allston and others.¹¹ Indeed, Webster's cries for social control were echoed in various ways across the entire country.

Almost until the end, Webster tried to make his opinions well known in hopes of changing the general trend of events. His last important essay on national affairs, published in 1837, was one of his most controversial. It was a cynical attack on democracy, the Constitution and on the American people in general. Reprinted by Democratic newspapers, "The Voice of Wisdom" was labeled the last gasp of Federalism. "Since I have taken pains to write," he said unashamedly, "I wish to have my views...left to the world as a

⁹ Douglas T. Miller, The Birth of Modern America, 1820-1850 (New York: Pegasus, 1970), p. 59.

¹⁰ Fred Somkin, Unquiet Eagle: Memory and Desire in the Idea of American Freedom, 1815-1860 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

¹¹ Miller, Birth, chapter 2.

memorial of my efforts to serve my country; an enduring testimony of my abhorrence to corrupt principles."¹²

The last few years of Webster's life were among his most productive. He not only issued a slightly revised American Dictionary, which took several years to re-edit, but at the age of seventy-seven he published his version of the Holy Bible and an explanation of his reasons for changing the King James version. Webster's correspondence was voluminous, as were the many articles and letters to the newspaper editors he wrote covering a wide variety of topics. In 1834 he published his main contribution to the evangelical Protestant movement, Value of the Bible. Three years later he summarized his entire life's study in linguistics under the title Observations on Language.... A few weeks before his death in May of 1842, he issued a Collection of Essays, including some recently written pieces and some essays from the turn of the century.¹³

The views Webster expressed during his last decade were diametrically opposed to those he had held in his youth. He was convinced that mankind was innately evil, depraved, and incapable of governing himself.¹⁴ Reason was an imperfect guide on any issue; man must look to God and his revelations

¹²Letter to Charles Chauncey, February 28, 1837, Chauncey Family Papers, Box 7, Yale University Library.

¹³Webster, Collection.

¹⁴Noah Webster, The Teacher: A Supplement to the Elementary Spelling Book (New Haven; S. Babcock, 1836), p. 59; "A Voice of Wisdom," by "Sidney," C. A., November 20, 1837,

for answers to any and all questions.¹⁵ It followed that popular sovereignty and other democratic ideals were absurd.¹⁶ The people must be saved from themselves,¹⁷ for attempts at self-control could lead only to "furious and implacable despotisms."¹⁸

All of these beliefs added up to a profound pessimism. "We are indeed an erring nation," he stated.¹⁹ The obsession with physical comforts, social status, and the overall worship of prosperity and wealth had destroyed the utopian possibilities of the American experiment. Morality and religion were completely neglected in the world symbolized by what Marvin Meyers has called the "venturous conservative."²⁰ This was the cause of all the nation's ills. Americans had "forsaken God, and he has foresaken us."²¹ The natural order of things had been destroyed by the total revolutions of the previous century and could not be reestablished. Political

reprinted as [Noah Webster], Appeal to Americans (New York: 1838), pp. 7-8; To William Leete Stone, August 29, 1837, Warfel, Letters, pp. 505-506; C. A., January 20, 1835.

¹⁵ [Webster], "Voice," pp. 3-4, 8; Middletown Constitution, April 18, 1838; Noah Webster, A Manual of Useful Studies (New Haven: S. Babcock, 1839), p. 70; Webster, Teacher, p. 59; Connecticut Observer, November 11, 1837.

¹⁶ Gazette, April 11, 1838.

¹⁷ C. A., January 20, 1835; To Daniel Webster, 1837, Warfel, Letters, pp. 491-492, 486; Gazette, March 21, 1838.

¹⁸ To W. L. Stone, p. 505.

¹⁹ Gazette, May 23, 1838.

²⁰ Meyers, Persuasion.

²¹ Gazette, May 23, 1838.

and social disorders, symbolized by the agitation of the abolitionists and of those who opposed them, added to the general turmoil. "It is questionable whether all the wisdom and talents which can be brought to counteract their influence, will be sufficient to arrest the progress of our political disorders," he said.²² "I now give up all expectation or hope."²³

Webster's rejection of democracy was total. "If I could be certain, that Vermont would remain firm to the old Federalist principles, I should be tempted to remove into that state, to be freed from our democracy," he wrote at the age of seventy-eight. "As to the cold of winters, I would, if necessary, become a troglodyte and live in a cave in winter, rather than be under the tyranny of our desperate rulers.... We deserve all our public evils. We are a degenerate and wicked people."²⁴

"And I quit the contest forever." With these words, written to his daughter in 1840, the eighty-one year old Noah Webster finally gave up his attempt to guide the American

²²Connecticut Observer, November 11, 1837. See also Letter to William Webster, February 23, 1838, Webster Family Papers, Box 1, Yale University Library; Webster, Observations, pp. 38-39; Letter to Emily, December 6, 1839, Connecticut Historical Society; Letters to Emily, June 28, 1837 and April 13, 1842, Amherst College Library, Special Collections.

²³Connecticut Observer, November 11, 1837; To Thomas Dawes, 1838, Connecticut Historical Society.

²⁴April 29, 1836, quoted in Warfel, Webster, p. 423.

people toward the path of righteousness. For six decades he had observed closely the flow of national events and voiced his opinions on virtually every subject of importance. The final step in his long journey was the presidential campaign of 1840. Both Whig and Democratic candidates portrayed themselves as common men, espousing every idea that the old lexicographer found frightening. To Webster it was final proof that Americans would never realize their need for dependence on God and his apostles:

But the Log Cabin--oh how our country is degraded, when even men of respectability resort to such means to secure an election! I struggled, in the days of Washington, to sustain good principles--but since Jefferson's principles have prostrated the popular respect for sound principles, further efforts would be useless.²⁵

The last three years were spent with his family in New Haven. In 1842 the entire family celebrated the golden wedding anniversary of Noah and Rebecca Webster. For the occasion thirty-five children, grand-children and great grand-children gathered to sing songs and pray. In keeping with his long-held piety, Webster presented them all with a handsomely bound, autographed copy of his edition of the Holy Bible.²⁶

In May of the following year Noah Webster contracted a case of pleurisy. As he lay slowly dying in his study, many

²⁵Letter to Emily, July 3, 1840, Connecticut Historical Society.

²⁶Eliza Webster Jones, "An account of the Festival of the Golden Wedding," May, 1842, Ford, Notes, II, pp. 359-361.

who thought highly of the old revolutionary and who shared his belief in evangelical Protestantism came to pay their last respects. Moses Stuart, now a famous Professor of Sacred Literature, came from Massachusetts. The President of Yale and numerous faculty visited him often. According to his daughter, Webster's thoughts turned mostly towards his family and God. "I'm ready to go; my work is all done, I know in whom I have believed," he said just before he died. "I am entirely submissive to the will of heaven."²⁷

²⁷Quoted in Eliza Webster Jones, "Account by Eliza Webster Jones," Ford, Notes, II, pp. 362-371.

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