

TABLE VI - (Continued)

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PART III
THE PARTY SYSTEM

CHAPTER LIII

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THEIR HISTORY

In the preceding chapters I have endeavoured to describe the legal framework of American government as it exists both in the nation and in the States. Beginning from the Federal and State Constitutions we have seen what sort of a structure has been erected upon them as a foundation, what methods of legislation and administration have been developed, what results these methods have produced. It is only occasionally and incidentally that we have had to consider the influence upon political bodies and methods of those extra-legal groupings of men called political parties. But the spirit and force of party has in America been as essential to the action of the machinery of government as steam is to a locomotive engine; or, to vary the simile, party association and organization are to the organs of government almost what the motor nerves are to the muscles, sinews, and bones of the human body. They transmit the motive power, they determine the directions in which the organs act. A description of them is therefore a necessary complement to an account of the Constitution and government; for it is into the hands of the parties that the working of the government has fallen. Their ingenuity, stimulated by incessant rivalry, has turned many provisions of the Constitution to unforeseen uses, and given to the legal institutions of the country no small part of their present colour.

To describe the party system is, however, much harder than it has been to describe those legal institutions. Hitherto we have been on comparatively firm ground, for we have had definite data to rely upon, and the facts set forth have been mostly patent facts which can be established from books and documents. But now we come to phenomena for a knowledge of which one must trust to a variety of flying and floating

sources, to newspaper paragraphs, to the conversation of American acquaintances, to impressions formed on the spot from seeing incidents and hearing stories and anecdotes, the authority for which, though it seemed sufficient at the time, cannot always be remembered. Nor have I the advantage of being able to cite any previous treatise on the subject; for though the books and articles dealing with the public life of the United States may be counted by hundreds, I know of no author who has set himself to describe impartially the actual daily working of that part of the vast and intricate political machine which lies outside the Constitution, nor, what is more important still, the influences which sway the men by whom this machine has been constructed and is daily manipulated. The task, however, cannot be declined; for it is that very part of my undertaking which, even though imperfectly performed, may be most serviceable to the student of modern politics. A philosopher in Germany, who had mastered all the treatises on the British Constitution, perused every statute of recent years, and even followed through the newspapers the debates in Parliament, would know far less about the government and politics of England than he might learn by spending a month there conversing with practical politicians, and watching the daily changes of sentiment during a parliamentary crisis or a general election.

So, too, in the United States, the actual working of party government is not only full of interest and instruction, but is so unlike what a student of the Federal Constitution could have expected or foreseen, that it is the thing of all others which any one writing about America ought to try to portray. In the knowledge of a stranger there must, of course, be serious gaps. But since no native American has yet essayed the task of describing the party system of his country, it is better that a stranger should address himself to it, than that the inquiring European should have no means of satisfying his curiosity. And a native American writer, even if he steered clear of partisanship, which I think he might, for in no country does one find a larger number of philosophically judicial observers of politics, would suffer from his own familiarity with many of those very things which a stranger finds perplexing. Thus European and even American readers may find in the sort of

perspective which a stranger gets of transatlantic phenomena, some compensation for his necessarily inferior knowledge of details.

In America the great moving forces are the parties. The government counts for less than in Europe, the parties count for more; and the fewer have become their principles and the fainter their interest in those principles, the more perfect has become their organization. The less of nature the more of art; the less spontaneity the more mechanism. But before I attempt to describe this organization, something must be said of the doctrines which the parties respectively profess, and the explanation of the doctrines involves a few preliminary words upon the history of party in America.

Although the early colonists carried with them across the sea some of the habits of English political life, and others may have been subsequently imitated from the old country, the parties of the United States are pure home growths, developed by the circumstances of the nation. The English reader who attempts, as Englishmen are apt to do, to identify the great American parties with his own familiar Whigs and Tories, or even to discover a general similarity between them, had better give up the attempt, for it will lead him hopelessly astray. Here and there we find points of analogy rather than of resemblance, but the moment we try to follow out the analogy it breaks down, so different are the issues on which English and American politics have turned.

In the United States, the history of party begins with the Constitutional Convention of 1787 at Philadelphia. In its debates and discussions on the drafting of the Constitution there were revealed two opposite tendencies, which soon afterwards appeared on a larger scale in the State Conventions, to which the new instrument was submitted for acceptance. These were the centrifugal and centripetal tendencies — a tendency to maintain both the freedom of the individual citizen and the independence in legislation, in administration, in jurisdiction, indeed in everything except foreign policy and national defence, of the several States; an opposite tendency to subordinate the States to the nation and vest large powers in the central Federal authority.

The charge against the Constitution that it endangered

State rights evoked so much alarm that some States were induced to ratify only by the promise that certain amendments should be added, which were accordingly accepted in the course of the next three years. When the machinery had been set in motion by the choice of George Washington as president, and with him of a Senate and a House of Representatives, the tendencies which had opposed or supported the adoption of the Constitution reappeared not only in Congress but in the President's cabinet, where Alexander Hamilton, secretary of the treasury, counselled a line of action which assumed and required the exercise of large powers by the Federal government, while Jefferson, the secretary of state, desired to practically restrict its action to foreign affairs. The advocates of a central national authority had begun to receive the name of Federalists, and to act pretty constantly together, when an event happened which, while it tightened their union, finally consolidated their opponents also into a party. This was the creation of the French Republic and its declaration of war against England. The Federalists, who were shocked by the excesses of the Terror of 1793, counselled neutrality, and were more than ever inclined to value the principle of authority, and to allow the Federal power a wide sphere of action. The party of Jefferson, who had now retired from the administration, were pervaded by sympathy with French ideas, were hostile to England whose attitude continued to be discourteous, and sought to restrict the interference of the central government with the States, and to allow the fullest play to the sentiment of State independence, of local independence, of personal independence. This party took the name of Republicans or Democratic Republicans, and they are the predecessors of the present Democrats. Both parties were, of course, attached to Republican government — that is to say, were alike hostile to a monarchy. But the Jeffersonians had more faith in the masses and in leaving things alone, together with less respect for authority, so that in a sort of general way one may say that while one party claimed to be the apostles of Liberty, the other represented the principle of Order.

These tendencies found occasions for combating one another, not only in foreign policy and in current legislation, but also in the construction and application of the Constitution. Like

all documents, and especially documents which have been formed by a series of compromises between opposite views, it was and is susceptible of various interpretations, which the acuteness of both sets of partisans was busy in discovering and expounding. While the piercing intellect of Hamilton developed all those of its provisions which invested the Federal Congress and President with far-reaching powers, and sought to build up a system of institutions which should give to these provisions their full effect, Jefferson and his coadjutors appealed to the sentiment of individualism, strong in the masses of the people, and, without venturing to propose alterations in the text of the Constitution, protested against all extensions of its letter, and against all the assumptions of Federal authority which such extensions could be made to justify. Thus two parties grew up with tenets, leaders, impulses, sympathies, and hatreds, hatreds which soon became so bitter as not to spare the noble and dignified figure of Washington himself, whom the angry Republicans assailed with invectives the more unbecoming because his official position forbade him to reply.¹

At first the Federalists had the best of it, for the reaction against the weakness of the old Confederation which the Union had superseded disposed sensible men to tolerate a strong central power. The President, though not a member of either party, was, by force of circumstances, as well as owing to the influence of Hamilton, practically with the Federalists. But during the presidency of John Adams, who succeeded Washington, they committed grave errors. When the presidential election of 1800 arrived, it was seen that the logical and oratorical force of Hamilton's appeals to the reason of the nation told far less than the skill and energy with which Jefferson played on their feelings and prejudices. The Republicans triumphed in the choice of their chief, who retained power for eight years (he was re-elected in 1804), to be peaceably succeeded by his friend Madison for another eight years (elected in 1808, re-elected in 1812), and his disciple Monroe for eight years more (elected in 1816, re-elected in 1820). Their long-continued tenure of office was due not so much to their own

¹ In mockery of the title he had won from public gratitude a few years before, he was commonly called by them "The stepfather of his country."

merits, for neither Jefferson nor Madison conducted foreign affairs with success, as to the collapse of their antagonists. The Federalists never recovered from the blow given in the election of 1800. They lost Hamilton by death in 1804. No other leader of equal gifts appeared, and the party, which had shown little judgment in the critical years 1810-14, finally disappears from sight after the second peace with England in 1815.

One cannot note the disappearance of this brilliant figure, to Europeans the most interesting in the earlier history of the Republic, without the remark that his countrymen seem to have never, either in his lifetime or afterwards, duly recognized his splendid gifts. Washington is, indeed, a far more perfect character. Washington stands alone and unapproachable, like a snow-peak rising above its fellows into the clear air of morning, with a dignity, constancy, and purity which have made him the ideal type of civic virtue to succeeding generations. No greater benefit could have befallen the Republic than to have such a type set from the first before the eye and mind of the people. But Hamilton, of a virtue not so flawless, touches us more nearly, not only by the romance of his early life and his tragic death, but by a certain ardour and impulsiveness, and even tenderness of soul, joined to a courage equal to that of Washington himself. Equally apt for war and for civil government, with a profundity and amplitude of view rare in practical soldiers or statesmen, he stands in the front rank of a generation never surpassed in history, a generation which includes Burke and Fox and Pitt and Grattan, Stein and Hardenberg and William von Humboldt, Wellington and Napoleon. Talleyrand, who seems to have felt for him something as near affection as that cold heart could feel, said, after knowing all the famous men of the time, that only Fox and Napoleon were Hamilton's equals, and that he had divined Europe, having never seen it.

This period (1788-1824) may be said to constitute the first act in the drama of American party history. The people, accustomed hitherto to care only for their several commonwealths, learn to value and to work their new national institutions. They become familiar with the Constitution itself, as partners get to know, when disputes arise among them, the provisions of the partnership deed under which their business

has to be carried on. It is found that the existence of a central Federal power does not annihilate the States, so the apprehensions on that score are allayed. It is also discovered that there are unforeseen directions, such for instance as questions relating to banking and currency and internal communications, through which the Federal power can strengthen its hold on the nation. Differences of view and feeling give rise to parties, yet parties are formed by no means solely on the basis of general principles, but owe much to the influence of prominent personalities, of transient issues, of local interests or prejudices. The small farmers and the Southern men generally follow the Republican standard borne aloft by the great State of Virginia, while the strength of the Federalists lies in New England and the middle States, led sometimes by Massachusetts, sometimes by Pennsylvania. The commercial interest was with the Federalists, and the staid solid Puritanism of all classes, headed by the clergy. Some one indeed has described the struggle from 1796 to 1808 as one between Jefferson, who was an avowed free-thinker, and the New England ministers; and no doubt the ministers of religion did in the Puritan States exert a political influence approaching that of the Presbyterian clergy in Scotland during the seventeenth century. Jefferson's importance lies in the fact that he became the representative not merely of democracy, but of local democracy, of the notion that government is hardly wanted at all, that the people are sure to go right if they are left alone, that he who resists authority is *prima facie* justified in doing so, because authority is *prima facie* tyrannical, that a country where each local body in its own local area looks after the objects of common concern, raising and administering any such funds as are needed, and is interfered with as little as possible by any external power, comes nearest to the ideal of a truly free people. Some intervention on the part of the State there must be, for the State makes the law and appoints the judges of appeal; but the less one has to do with the State, and *a fortiori* the less one has to do with the still less popular and more encroaching Federal authority, so much the better. Jefferson impressed this view on his countrymen with so much force and such personal faith that he became a sort of patron saint of freedom in the eyes of the next generation, who used to name

their children after him,¹ and to give dinners and deliver high-flown speeches on his birthday, a festival only second in importance to the immortal Fourth of July. He had borrowed from the Revolutionists of France even their theatrical ostentation of simplicity. He rejected the ceremonial with which Washington had sustained the chief magistracy of the nation, declaring that to him there was no majesty but that of the people.

As New England was, by its system of local self-government through the town meeting, as well as by the absence of slavery, in some respects the most democratic part of the United States, it may seem surprising that it should have been a stronghold of the Federalists. The reason is to be found partly in its Puritanism, which revolted at the deism or atheism of the French revolutionists, partly in the interests of its shipowners and merchants, who desired above all things a central government which, while strong enough to make and carry out treaties with England and so secure the development of American commerce, should be able also to reform the currency of the country and institute a national banking system. Industrial as well as territorial interests were already beginning to influence politics. That the mercantile and manufacturing classes, with all the advantages given them by their wealth, their intelligence, and their habits of co-operation, should have been vanquished by the agricultural masses, may be ascribed partly to the fact that the democratic impulse of the War of Independence was strong among the citizens who had grown to manhood between 1780 and 1800, partly to the tactical errors of the Federalist leaders, but largely also to the skill which Jefferson showed in organizing the hitherto undisciplined battalions of Republican voters. Thus early in American history was the secret revealed, which Europe is only now discovering, that in free countries with an extended suffrage, numbers without organization are helpless and with it omnipotent.

I have ventured to dwell on this first period, because being the first it shows the origin of tendencies which were to gov-

¹ It is related of a New England clergyman that when, being about to baptize a child, he asked the father the child's name, and the father replied, "Thomas Jefferson," he answered in a loud voice, "No such unchristian name: John Adams, I baptize thee," with the other sacramental words of the rite.

ern the subsequent course of party strife. But as I am not writing a history of the United States I pass by the particular issues over which the two parties wrangled, most of them long since extinct. One remark is however needed as to the view which each took of the Constitution. Although the Federalists were in general the advocates of a loose and liberal construction of the fundamental instrument, because such a construction opened a wider sphere to Federal power, they were ready, whenever their local interests stood in the way, to resist Congress and the executive, alleging that the latter were overstepping their jurisdiction. In 1814 several of the New England States, where the opposition to the war then being waged with England was strongest, sent delegates to a convention at Hartford, which, while discussing the best means for putting an end to the war and restricting the powers of Congress in commercial legislation, was suspected of meditating a secession of the trading States from the Union. On the other hand, the Republicans did not hesitate to stretch to their utmost, when they were themselves in power, all the authority which the Constitution could be construed to allow to the executive and the Federal government generally. The boldest step which a president has ever taken, the purchase from Napoleon of the vast territories of France west of the Mississippi which went by the name of Louisiana, was taken by Jefferson without the authority of Congress. Congress subsequently gave its sanction. But Jefferson and many of his friends held that under the Constitution even Congress had not the power to acquire new territories to be formed into States. They were therefore in the dilemma of either violating the Constitution or losing a golden opportunity of securing the Republic against the growth on its western frontier of a powerful and possibly hostile foreign State. Some of them tried to refute their former arguments against a lax construction of the Constitution, but many others avowed the dangerous doctrine that if Louisiana could be brought in only by breaking down the walls of the Constitution, broken they must be.¹

¹ The best authorities now hold that the Constitution does permit the Federal government to acquire the new territory, and Congress to form States out of it. Many of the Federalist leaders warmly opposed the purchase, but the far-seeing patriotism of Hamilton defended it.