A NATION THAT WASN'T:
THE WHISKEY REBELLION AND A FRACTURED EARLY REPUBLIC

by

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Scholars often present nationalism as a cohesive social construction, modeled on Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities.[1] The strength and popularity of Anderson's immensely useful paradigm of nationalism, however, perhaps leads to excited scholars over-extending his theory or seeing imagined communities that are little more than imaginary. The early Republic forms one such historical time period where, evidence suggests, historians have conjured nationalism where only a fractured nation existed. The various riots and rebellions during the early Republic strikingly expose a severely fractured nation. This paper will examine and critique some theoretical frameworks of nationalism and mobs in order to contextualize some prominent contemporary views on the Whiskey Rebellion. Ultimately, this paper marshals historical evidence to question the concept of nationalism in what was a fractured, and violently divided nation.

The first question this paper will address is the question of defining nationalism. Following a consideration of how different scholars of nationalism theory define nationalism, this paper will look at how historians appropriated definitions and theories of nationalism to analyze the Early Republic. In order to test these analyses, this paper will then explore differing narratives of the Whiskey Rebellion and its place in the Early Republic. Finally, this paper concludes from the evidence that the Whiskey Rebellion strongly suggests that any form of cohesive nation or nationalism during the Early Republic was severely restricted to coastal urban areas or even non-existent.

At a basic level, investigations of nationalism start with some seemingly simple questions that become more complicated when one searches for answers: What is

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1   Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* (New York: Verso, 2006), 6.

nationalism? What is a nation? Is a nation simply a people united by a common language, a common race, or a common culture? If so, the United States and Britain would never have become separate nations in the late eighteenth century. Is it people living within a prescribed, legal geographical boundary? If so, then would we accept early New Englanders as part of the Iroquois nation? Or did Great Plains Indians become part of the United States after the Louisiana purchase?

Scholars regularly disagree over the concepts and definitions of nation and nationalism. Ernest Gellner's definition of nationalism, though, as a belief "that the political and national unit should be congruent," which corresponds with similar scholarship by Eric Hobsbawm, functions usefully for this study.[2] To define a nation, some ascribe to more objective criteria such as language, common history, or common cultural traits.[3] Others, such as Benedict Anderson, employ a more subjective criteria where individuals become part of a nation by their involvement with others in the national project. For Anderson, a nation "is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign".[4] For the purposes of this study, Anderson's definition of nation will be used in conjunction with Gellner's definition of nationalism—an imagined political community with a common cultural political unit where the participants believe that the political and national unit should be congruent.

Thomas Slaughter, chief scholar of the Whiskey Rebellion, describes the 1791

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2   Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism (*Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 1.
     Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780:Prorgramme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 9.
3   Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism,* 5.
         While Hobsbawm lists these criteria as ways some scholars arrive at a definition of a nation, he ultimately rejects them.
4   Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* 6.

whiskey excise tax as "one of the earliest fiscal measures of" the recently formed

Constitutional Congress.[5] Farmers and settlers West of the Appalachian mountains deeply

resented this new tax. The people of Western Pennsylvania proved especially irksome to

the new administration. As the actions of Western frontiersman escalated and exposed the

complete weakness of the national project, George Washington declared:

> That many persons in the...western parts of Pennsylvania have at length been
> hardy enough to perpetrate acts, which I am advised amount to treason, being
> overt acts of levying war against the United States, the said persons having on the
> 16th and 17th of July last past proceeded in arms (on the second day amounting to
> several hundreds) to the house of John Neville.[6]

Washington's statement, and the various other acts of rioting carried out by rural

western Pennsylvanians that Washington outlines, describes some of the actions that we

now refer to as "The Whiskey Rebellion." On the surface, rioting by backwoods

hooligans who appear rather fond of whiskey may seem like an inconsequential non-

event in American history. After all, no battle actually occurred as part of the Whiskey

Rebellion and not one person's jail sentence related to the Whiskey Rebellion was fully

carried out. However, when considered in the context of nationalism, the Whiskey

Rebellion provides a rich case study that emphasizes the lack of nationalism in the Early

Republic. The Whiskey Rebellion takes place during what many contemporaries, such as

Alexander Hamilton, hoped would be the golden age of American nation building. Rather

than focusing on the urban, coastal areas—of elites like Alexander Hamilton—that figure

so prominently in Early Republic historiography, this paper will seek to bring the people

who lived west of the Appalachians into the historical discussion.

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5   Thomas P Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (Oxford:
    Oxford University Press, 1986), 27.
6   H.M. Brackenridge, *The Western Insurrection* (Carlisle: Applewood Books, 1859), 183.

As part of the historical discussion, writers and scholars of the early United States often find themselves grappling with questions of nation and nationalism. For David Waldstreicher nationalism is not something that is or is not, rather nationalism is a process that lies along a continuum. Nationalism is not necessarily unity; it arises—counter-intuitively—out of a process of "conflict" that "produced 'the nation' as contestants tried to claim true American nationality and the legacy of the revolution". This view of nationalism, while certainly useful and accurate to some degree, seems *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. In other words, Waldstreicher started with a nation and went searching its fractured origins for nationalism. This does not necessarily mean his conclusions are inaccurate, for, in many ways, this is the nature of history. As Waldstreicher rightly acknowledges, conceptions of nationalism (or the nation) may differ among groups, over time, and, importantly, that "nationalism is always one of several ideologies in a larger cultural field.[7]

Despite the many difficulties surmounted and the unquestionable virtues of Waldstreicher's work, his argument that the various differences displayed by the contestants of nationalism created a nation leave much to be desired. He approaches nationalism through the physical practices of local events such as parades, fetes, and celebrations. Waldstreicher, as one example, sees local militias as a vehicle for Americans (white men) to express their nationalism. However, as he points out, "during the middle years of the decade [1790s], competing militia groups filled the streets, taverns, and newspaper columns on celebratory occasions."[8] Perhaps one could more accurately

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7   David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Creation of American Nationalism 1776-1820,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 6-9.
8   Ibid., 158.

describe Waldstreicher's study of nationalism as a study of nationalisms, which would in effect mean a fractured nation. So how does Waldstreicher bridge the cavernous canyon between nationalisms and nationalism? Somehow these local events, which often showcase *competing* conceptions of the nation, contribute to an abstract national average of competition that Waldstreicher labels nationalism.

Waldstriecher does attempt to explain how the grounded, local expressions of nationalisms become abstract and national. He asserts that "the local uses of the streets reverberated nationally" via print culture.[9] He emphasizes that "from the beginning, celebrants of the nation took their cues from printed sources. They improvised upon events they read about and then publicized their own interventions in public life."[10]. Thus, print and celebrations mutually reinforced each other and helped spread nationalism throughout the various locales, states, and regions to create an imagined national community.

Waldstreicher's assumptions of a nationally connected print culture, though, implicitly rely upon studies that assume a national public sphere of print culture in the early republic. However, in *Letters of the Republic*, Michael Warner contends that as early as the revolution "writing was the dominant mode of the political" and "could blanket the colonies."[11] In a similar vein to Anderson, Warner argues that "an awareness of the potentially limitless others who may also be reading" constitutes a primary difference between "the traditional culture of print and the republican one."[12] Awareness

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9 Ibid., 10.
10 Ibid., 11.
11 Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 67, 68.
12 Ibid., xiii.

of the possible numbers who may be reading gives both the writer and the readers power. The writer knows print allows him access to a large audience, while readers recognize that as part of a potentially limitless audience they are meta-connected to others participating in the imagined public conversation. The importance and seeming ubiquity of print "acquired a social meaning, allowing it to represent the generality in a way that was normative as well as convenient."[13]

Indeed, Warner begins his book with a discussion on one meaning of print culture by examining a series of newspaper articles, written by John Adams, that argue for "publication as a natural resistance" to tyranny.[14] At the time of the Revolution, this meant that spreading literacy and literature as widely as possible contributed to the cause. After the Revolution, Adams's analysis of print "became a pillar of American nationalism, and has remained so to the present."[15] Warner insists, however, that print functions not only as a normative pillar of American nationalism, but as a literal pillar of the American nation-state. He writes that "the national state grounded its legitimacy not just in the people or the rule of law, as we usually suppose, but in the very special cultural formation of print discourse."[16] In short, the *printedness* of the nation-state's charter document, the Constitution, gave the national government legitimacy and power.

Similarly, despite the fact that fighting had already been going on by the time of its publication, for Warner, the *printedness* of the Declaration of Independence gave the Revolution legitimacy and power. A printed declaration provided the colonists a common banner to rally around and transformed them from rebels into patriots (a word that itself

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13 Ibid., 68.
14 Ibid., 2, 71.
15 Ibid., 2.
16 Ibid., xiv.

begins to suggest nation). Warner even goes so far as to say that print culture "was arguably more integral to the American resistance than to any other revolution."[17] If we accept the strength of Anderson's and Warner's argument locating print culture as central to nation building, then the subtle absence of these three qualities of print—as a natural resistance to tyranny, as a pillar of American nationalism, and as a method of legitimizing dissent—become important factors when considering the Whiskey Rebellion against the scholarly backdrop of nationalism in the early Republic.

Although Waldstreicher's analysis of nationalism includes the physical actions of street theater, both Waldstreicher and Warner drift away from the material world into an imagined nation connected by the simultaneity of print.[18] The street theater and celebrations of Waldstreicher's nationalism would remain local without print. The colonies would likely have lost the Revolution (if a revolution would have started at all) without print according to Warner. In fact, Warner sees the new, Constitutional nation as literally legitimized by print and nationalized by simultaneity enabled through print culture. Did revolutionary America and the subsequent early Republic have the material infrastructure to distribute print in anything approaching a simultaneous manner? Were there roads? If so, to where exactly? How well were they maintained? Were there printing presses in every community that allowed each community to participate in the nationalist cycle of reading about national celebrations from elsewhere and repeating them locally? Printing itself in the late eighteenth century was a grueling and physically demanding task; did printers devote their energy to printing domestic, national content or to printing

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17 Ibid., 3.
18 David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes,* 121.

other items of interest? In other words, did the entire process of acquiring information, printing, and distributing print—a process largely ignored by the apostles of nationalism —affect the imagined nation and its required simultaneity? Such questions may seem rhetorical, which may be why Warner and Waldstreicher fail to give this side of the material world sufficient attention. In *The Republic in Print*, however, Trish Laughran carefully considers these questions and what their answers mean for nationalism. Loughran's detailed review of the physical limitations on print in the early republic carry important implications when applied to the Whiskey Rebellion.

Loughran boldly asserts her approach to nationalism: "[print culture is] the factory that produced the nation-fragments called regions and sections rather than as the great unionizer and unifier it is so often remembered as."[19] Loughran frontally assaults print's imagined connective power in late eighteenth century America. Suspicious of Warner's casual disregard for the material's influence on the imagined, Laughran seeks to "retheorize the relation of the 'imagined' to the 'material'."[20].

Loughran uses the journal of Hugh Finlay, a British postal employee appointed in 1772, to "inspect the King's Post Road in North America," as a case study.[21] At nearly every turn Finlay's journal reveals the consistent difficulty in the distribution of the post —and by extension, Loughran argues, distribution of printed matter itself. Finlay discovers, "not only are the roads bad and the postal riders cunningly resistant to regulation, but there are no inns...and often no horses to transport him."[22] Loughran

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19 Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), xx.
20 Ibid., 6.
21 Ibid., 6.
22 Ibid., 7.

concludes that Finlay's journal, "documents in painstaking detail the restrictive material contexts in which early American textual circulation took place."[23] Loughran's version of severely limited print culture creates obstacles for the imagined connections and the possibilities of national identity itself held up by Warner and Waldstreicher.

In her analysis of the late eighteenth century, Loughran finds a "world of profound non-correspondence and nonsimultaneity."[24] She asserts that "recognizing the material conditions under which a national print culture can and cannot function requires that we revisit and revise existing accounts of the relationship between print culture and nation formation."[25] In post-revolutionary America, example after example testify to the lack of national connectivity and lack of national cohesion. States squabbled about funding roads that might have advanced the possibility of a connected nation and a national print culture, because they worried that unbounding the local and the regional might economically benefit other states at their expense.[26] Printers and entrepreneurs caught up in the fiction of a nationalism discovered the harsh reality of a fractured nation. Matthew Carey and his briefly published "national" publication *The American Museum* provides one such example. Financially, *The American Museum* utterly failed. Only later, when Carey began focusing on local markets and local needs, did he find success.[27]

Of course, questioning the nation and nationalism naturally leads to the problem of the existence of national institutions. To put it another way, the Constitution ostensibly created a national government where representatives acted for (presumably) national

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23 Ibid., 9.
24 Ibid., 9.
25 Ibid., 3.
26 Ibid., 13.
27 Ibid., 18.

interests. Obviously, documents, buildings, and representatives were not fictions. The

extent to which these things constituted a cohesive nation and connected to a broad

national imagined community, however, might have been fictitious. Indeed, Loughran

suggests that the ratification of the Constitution and formation of the institutions of

national government succeeded not because of any sense of nation but, ironically,

because of "the very localness of U.S. print cultures."[28] Materially and locally constrained

print cultures created gaps in communication and simultaneity "from site to site and state

to state."[29] Using *The Federalist* as an example, Loughran points out that "there never

was...a truly national discussion of what a ratified Constitution would mean for everyone

involved—even if today we routinely imagine *The Federalist* to stand in for such a

discussion."[30]

What would a ratified Constitution that claimed to represent a national "we the

people," but failed to involve those people mean for everyone involved? For those who

created it and for those who were able to participate in the discussion of its ratification,

the Constitution apparently meant a new nation. Most of these men, however, came from

only a small portion of the population. As Loughran asserts, "print was central to men

like Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams—and to every member of those privileged elites that

controlled the formal creation of the new state apparatus."[31] Representing the

Constitution and its created government as "national," though, disproportionately

foregrounds these elites and the urban centers where print might circulate. Where does

such a narrative of nation situate frontiersmen from Western Pennsylvania? Perhaps if

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28 Ibid., xx.
29 Ibid., 111.
30 Ibid., 112.
31 Ibid., 22.

there were a national print culture that enabled these frontiersmen to more fully

participate in the ratification of the Constitution, and perhaps if there was a national

imagined community, there would never have been a Whiskey Rebellion.

Geography, or place, matters enormously in considering questions of nation.

Loughran explains that:

> Only when we begin to think about what print meant outside of the coastal urban loop that dominates this country's official history that we will finally be able to scrutinize in new ways the more limited meaning of printed texts from inside the urban loop, breaking up the fiction of their nation-making embrace from within.[32]

How do we get outside that urban loop? If the newspapers, broadsides, books, and

other letters of the republic concentrated around coastal, urban areas, how can historians

find the voices of people beyond those areas? Although, as Loughran suggests, many

possible locations, people, and events outside the urban loop could demonstrate the

fragmented nation, the Whiskey Rebellion unavoidably brings non-elite and non-urban

actors to the foreground.

Western Pennsylvania certainly qualifies as outside the coastal, urban loop of the

Early Republic. Furthermore, the frontiersmen living there had only a limited access to

print and, with few exceptions, were not the elite kind of men for whose lives print was

central. In fact, Warner admits that the distance from commercial centers correlates with

literacy levels.[33] The further West one travelled, the fewer readers one found. In 1795, the

year after the rebellion's conclusion, all of Western Pennsylvania could claim only one

newspaper.[34] Clearly, for the frontiersmen in Western Pennsylvania, any participation in

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32 Ibid., 23.
33 Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic*, 16.
34 Jeffrey L Pasley, *"The Tyranny of the Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 107.

the ratification debate and the national imagined community enabled by print could only have occurred by overcoming many difficulties and barriers—and even if these problems were occasionally overcome, would Western Pennsylvania be in any way simultaneous with other parts of the nation? These qualities of 1790s Western Pennsylvania and its inhabitants beg Lougran's question, what did the nation mean to these people outside of the coastal urban loop?

The Whiskey Rebellion highlighted major fractures within the fledgling nation. Even before congress passed an excise tax on whiskey in 1791, as part of Alexander Hamilton's policy of centralizing and funding the national debt, many Pennsylvanians questioned the idea of nation. In early 1791 Pennsylvania's legislature resolved that there is no reason to "warrant the adoption of any species of taxation which shall violate those rights which are the basis of our government, and which would exhibit the singular spectacle of a nation resolutely oppressing the oppressed of others, in order to enslave itself."[35] Apparently, only a few short years after the formation of a national government under the Constitution, the Pennsylvania legislature vacillated on whether the new national government deserved loyalty. Indeed, they paint the national government much more as an outside force than as part of their own identities.

When Congress passed the excise tax on whiskey, frontiersmen immediately reacted. They labeled the tax an unequal burden on the West, where cash was scarce and whiskey functioned as a form of currency. To many frontiersmen, "the issues raised by the excise seemed precisely analogous to those of the Stamp Act".[36] Frontiersmen

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35 "Papers Relating to What is Known as the Whiskey Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania. 1794," *Pennsylvania Archives Vol IV,* Eds. John B Lynn and Wm. H. Egle, MD (Harrisburg: B.F. Meyers, State Printer, 1876), 19.
36 Thomas P Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, 111.

attempted various forms of non-violent resistance, such as petitions to the national government or mobbing the homes of settlers who housed a tax collector. Although frontiersmen clearly disagreed, Alexander Hamilton believed he had been extremely flexible in listening to complaints about the excise tax. To him, "he had defended the interests of rural distillers against the arguments of eastern petitioners."[37] Indeed, Congress accepted all of Hamilton's recommendations for amending the tax in 1792. According to Hamilton's view, the government "had made every compromise possible within the best interests *of the nation*."[38] Although possibly the national government compromised as a gesture of good will, the fact that tax collectors had utterly failed to to collect excises from the frontiersmen may also have influenced Congress's motivations. In spite of the 1792 revisions to the excise, and to the confusion of men like Alexander Hamilton and George Washington who thought of the whiskey excise as a price to pay for being part of the nation (and one which had been flexible, in their view), frontier opposition to the excise continued to increase.

Although the national government initially sent out peace commissioners, national government officials believed that only a show of force could persuade the rebels to bury their differences with the central government. In mid-1794 the Washington administration raised an army of nearly 13,000 soldiers to crush the rebellion. Although the army constantly passed "whiskey poles," modeled after the liberty poles of the Revolution and symbolizing the opposition to the tax and enmity between the frontiersmen and the national government, on its march to western Pennsylvania no rebel army ever took the

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37 Ibid., 149.
38 Ibid., 150. (Emphasis Mine)

field.[39] Even attempts to ferret out individuals to pay the penalty of law proved difficult. In fact, partly due to difficulties the national government faced in building specific cases and probably also because the national government hoped to try to preserve the uneasy peace, few people were ever brought to trial and only two were convicted (though pardoned soon after).[40]

The acts of the Whiskey Rebellion took place during a transitional period in mob violence and rioting. Ironically, the very print culture that allowed for the possibility of modern nation-state nationalism was likely also responsible for the shift in mob violence culture away from protection of communal morals into the politically radical mob violence used to display a group's self-distinction *from* the nation. In his thought provoking "The Transformation of Urban Politics 1700-1765," Gary Nash argues that the development of the "radical" politics often associated with the American Revolution—the same kind employed by the Whiskey Rebellion—can be traced back to at least six decades before 1776.[41] To support his argument, Nash closely examines the political machinations in three important colonial cities: Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Though he acknowledges elites were often the engines driving this transformation into mob politics, he also points out that the ever widening arena of political participation increasingly led to anti-authoritarianism, violence, and a destruction of deference shown by more common citizens to elites.

In all three cities Nash discovers common political development. Ironically, elites sparked the beginning of the flame of radical urban politics in America. In the early

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39 Ibid., 217.
40 Ibid., 219-220.
41 Gary Nash, "*The Transformation of Urban Politics 1700-1765,*" Journal of American History Vol. 60, No 3 (Dec., 1973), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 606.

1700s, elites discovered that by widening the political participation in their respective cities they could give themselves an edge over their opponents on election day. Naturally, neither side would willingly give up easily so, without much delay, opposing political sides pandered for votes to people and groups who otherwise would have been excluded from politics. In addition to seeking votes from immigrant groups such as the Germans in Philadelphia or the Dutch in New York, many politicians found it "all but impossible to win electoral contests without the support" of the laboring class.[42]

Extending politics beyond its original bounds required new methods of political communication and distribution of writings about current issues. During the transformation of urban politics in America, print culture became increasingly important as a means for reaching and influencing greater numbers of people. The number of political pamphlets increased several times over during this period as "the new political literature was distributed without reference to social standing or economic position."[43] Furthermore, the "quality of language and the modes of argumentation changed markedly" from legalistic, conservative arguments to character assassinations and questioning morality.[44] But, in contrast to Warner and Waldstreicher, print had a splintering rather than a unifying effect.

Unsurprisingly, extending the political arena ever deeper into society and escalating the intensity of political language led to mob violence and revealed to at least some of the new political participants their own importance. By 1742, "the elite's willingness to employ the mob" for political purposes led to a "bloody election day

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42 Ibid., 610.
43 Ibid., 617.
44 Ibid., 619.

riot."[45] Even some otherwise pacifist Quakers were drawn into the fighting. However, Nash points out, "it would be a mistake to believe that political mobs were passive instruments manipulated by the elite."[46] As elites constantly vied for influence over the mob, many common people, especially printers, grew conscious of their own political power. This transformation of urban politics, of non-elites self-consciousness of their own mob power, was so powerful that by the 1790s the very non-urban Whiskey Rebels were already making themselves part of this new, violent tradition.

As with any consideration of the Whiskey Rebellion, Hamilton and Washington played important roles. However, while the perspectives of nationalists in the national government remain important when examining how Eastern elites thought of the nation in relation to the excise crisis, their involvement with the American national project is already well known and necessarily intertwined with the story leading to, during, and after the rebellion. Many others also supported the American national project, though. The constant support men of letters, editors, and printers showed for the American national project perhaps contributes to why "print culture lies at the center...of American nationalism's preferred techno-mythology."[47] How did nationalists outside the government but within the coastal, urban loop think of nationalism and the nation?

Like Matthew Carey with *The American Museum* magazine, Charles Brockden Brown also attempted to do his part in building the nation by creating a national literature. Brown lived his life primarily among the intelligentsia of Philadelphia and New York City. Often considered one of the central figures in early American literature

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45 Ibid., 623.
46 Ibid., 623.
47 Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print*, 3.

many of Brown's best known works are novels such as *Edgar Huntly, Wieland*, and

Arthur Mervyn. However, Brown also published pamphlets and contributed to magazines.

In 1799 Brown founded and edited the nationally named *Monthly Magazine and*

American Review. In the very first edition an article appeared titled "On the State of

American Literature."[48] The author who only signed "M." may not have been Brown, but

one authority of American magazine notes that "there can be little doubt he [Brown]

wrote a very large part of the contents himself."[49] M proudly declares with his first

sentence, "I am an American."[50] M then amply praises the United States before pausing to

acknowledge his "pleasure in contemplating our national character."[51] Although the bulk

of the article constructively considers American defects, such as the need to construct a

more authentic national literature, clearly Brown invested his magazine with the

American national project.

One of the short stories in *Monthly Magazine* addresses the issues of mob action

and rebellion. On the surface, the story "Thessalonica" engages mob action and rebellion

in ancient Rome long before the United States. However, in writing it, Brown no doubt

considered the various instances of violence, discord, and rebellion in the 1790s.

Furthermore, it is no secret that early Americans often compared their nation to ancient

Rome and that many who published anonymously in print signed their writing with

Roman pseudonyms (most famously, Publius and *The Federalist*). In short, by putting it

in conversation with recent scholarly work on the Whiskey Rebellion, "Thessalonica"

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48 M, "On the State of American Literature," *The Monthly Magazine, and American Review 1799-1800,* 1
     Apr 1799: American Periodicals Series Online, 15-20.
49 Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines 1731-1850* (Boston: Harvard University Press,
     1930), 219.
50 M, "On the State of American Literature", 15.
51 Ibid., 15.

offers a way outside of the traditional avenues to scrutinize how a member of the Eastern

elite (and presumably much of his audience) thought about violence, rebellion, and the

nation. Brown and "Thessalonica" provide an invaluable window into the perspectives of

urban elites who were not politicians.

As the story of "Thessalonica" begins, Brown tells the reader that for some time

the "empire of order" had been maintained by the leadership of elites and the "long since

established distinctions" between classes.[52] Ominously foreshadowing the coming

violence in Thessalonica, however, Brown asserts that "no diligence or moderation can

fully restrain the passions of the multitude."[53] This casting of Thessalonica and the

Roman empire parallels beliefs held by Eastern nationalists. The self-styled "friends of

order" believed that deference to superiors held an integral place in maintaining social

order and that obedience to the government qualified as the highest form of liberty. [54]

Indeed, as Brown alludes to in "Thessalonica," Eastern nationalists feared violence more

than almost any other potential threat to the nation and its social order. They advocated a

strong national government as the best way to "secure the public good against"

violence.[55]

Like other Eastern nationalists, Brown assumed that in the pre-rebellious stages,

when little to no violence had broken out, citizens of the nation "were governed by

pacific intentions" in their quests to seek redress of their grievances "in a lawful

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52 Charles Brockden Brown, "Thessalonica: A Roman Story," in *The Life of Charles Brockden Brown together with selections from his rarest printed works from his original letters and from his manuscripts before unpublished vol II,* William Dunlap (Philadelphia: James P Parke, 1815), 171.
53 Ibid., 171.
54 Rachel Hope Cleves, *The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobism to Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 48.
55 Ibid., 38.

manner."[56] The Washington administration and the national government conceded early in the excise crisis that frontiersmen lodged some legitimate complaints about the original excise law and the law adjusted accordingly.[57] From the nationalists' perspective, citizens of the nation had voiced their concern and the nation had reacted fairly (albeit still in the interests of the nation) to those concerns and thus the nation warranted continued loyalty.

In addition to expressing the Eastern nationalist belief that rebellions against the nation could only begin by a misunderstanding of the national government's good will and justice, "Thessalonica" contains several other common tropes for how nationalists explained violence and rebellions. For example, the mob (of course composed of the lower orders) always, and unnecessarily, starts the violence despite the nation's best efforts at preventing bloodshed, and always brings the just retributions of the nation upon itself.[58] Here, Brown's theory paralleled that of the political elite. Hamilton, for instance, believed a 1791 meeting of frontiersmen in Pittsburgh aimed to intentionally subvert the government and incite the the assault of an excise collector a few days later despite the more likely scenario that "the meetings were 'intended to promote submission, and not opposition, to the law'."[59]

Much like a military leader stationed at Thessalonica who believed "secret enemies, by whom he vaguely suspected that this tumult has been excited, would seize" the crowd's passions as an opportunity for inciting violence, the Washington administration saw its own secret enemies inciting the frontiersmen to rebellion.[60]

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56 Charles Brockden Brown, "Thessalonica: A Roman Story," in *The Life of Charles Brockden Brown*,172.
57 Thomas P Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, 149-150.
58 Charles Brockden Brown, "Thessalonica: A Roman Story," in *The Life of Charles Brockden Brown*,175.
59 Thomas P Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, 112-113.
60 Charles Brockden Brown, "Thessalonica: A Roman Story," in *The Life of Charles Brockden Brown*,174.

Washington claimed that the Whiskey Rebellion "was the 'first ripe fruit' of the democratic societies," which he portrayed as "incendiaries of public peace and order."[61] Other nationalists also believed the democratic societies urged the frontiersmen on in a "quest to dethrone the Constitution" and destroy the Union.[62] Certainly, in the hierarchical world inhabited by the "friends of order," American yeoman farmers would never consider rebellion against the national government without the influence and urgings of nefarious outsiders seeking to install themselves as rulers. Brown emphasizes this sentiment when he writes of the Thessalonian mob that "few were acquainted with the cause of the tumult. Still fewer were acquainted with the deplorable issue to which it had led."[63]

The insights into how Eastern elites thought of the social order and the nation Brown provides in "Thessalonica" hint at the fractured nation during the 1790s. Access to print in the coastal, urban loop helped nationalists participate in an imagined community—albeit a much more limited and fractured imagined community than they thought. To Eastern nationalists, their values of deference, government monopoly of violence, and government legitimately ruled by a natural aristocracy had been established and generally accepted as pillars of the nation. As the Whiskey Rebellion shows, however, the nation of Eastern nationalists was not the nation of Western frontiersmen. Throughout the early 1790s, the rhetoric and actions of the contest between Western frontiersmen and Eastern nationalists over the meaning of the revolution and the meaning of the Constitution reveal a violently and materially fractured nation.

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61 Thomas P Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, 194.
62 Ibid., 194.
63 Charles Brockden Brown, "Thessalonica: A Roman Story," in *The Life of Charles Brockden Brown*,176.

Hugh Henry Brackenridge published *Incidents of the Insurrection* shortly after the national government put down the Whiskey Rebellion. Brackenridge, a fair-weather sympathizer of the Western rebels, admitted that he wrote it "with a view to explain my own conduct." *Incidents,* however, contains valuable descriptions of the actions and voices of the frontiersmen as mediated through Brackenridge. Contrary to the hopes of early nationalists and the more recent analysis of some historians, *Incidents* describes an intensely fractured nation. In Western Pennsylvania, the nation does not manifest itself through an imagined community of print, for print hardly circulates among the frontiersmen who live there. Nor are there the material or industrial networks of a physically cohesive nation. As Brackenridge describes, for many frontiersmen, their primary thoughts about the nation revolved around resentment.[64]

In the summer of 1794 rebel leaders sent letters to the nearby militias calling upon each frontiersman, "as a citizen of the western country," to join the cause against the national government "not by his words, but by his actions."[65] The letter did not disguise the actions it called frontiersmen to take: "if any volunteer should want arms and ammunition...they shall be supplied as well as possible."[66] Brackenridge observed that when a commanding officer of one of the militias hesitated after receiving these instructions the people declared "call us out, or we will take vengeance on you, as a traitor to your country."[67] Clearly, the people behind such a statement did consider not themselves part of the same nation as Alexander Hamilton and George Washington. In

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64 Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection in the Western Parts of Pennsylvania in the Year 1794* (Philadelphia, 1795), 40.
65 Ibid., 40.
66 Ibid., 40.
67 Ibid., 41.

fact, failing to fight against such nationalists rendered one a traitor.

Sentiments against the federal government ran rampant. Brackenridge remarked that:

> The whole country was one inflammable mass...I had seen the spirit which prevailed, at the time of the stamp act, and at the commencement of the revolution from the government of Great Britain; but it was by no means so general and so vigorous, amongst the common people , as the spirit which now existed in this country.[68]

Eastern nationalists associated the democratic societies, that they believed influenced the Whiskey rebels, with the French Revolution and its spiraling violence and mob rule. Eastern nationalists, therefore, could not accept that the kind of liberty brewing in Western Pennsylvania exhibited the "same humanity, the same decorum, the same gravity, the same order," and the same dignity as "American liberty" that had been fought for in the American revolution.[69]

Unlike Eastern nationalists' imagination of them, though, the frontiersmen made great efforts to reason about their actions, to organize themselves, and to revitalize the ideals and forms of the original American Revolution. Frontiersmen made efforts to organize and mobilize militias with proper chains of command even if, as shown earlier, the commanding officers were sometimes compelled to lead. Committees created petitions that outlined grievances and legal precedent, such as the tradition of central governments not enacting "internal" taxes.[70] Thomas Slaughter judged that "committees of correspondence modeled on their Revolutionary predecessors were established" to coordinate among the various counties and committees and to act as liaison between the

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68 Ibid., 41.
69 Rachel Hope Cleves, *The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobism to Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 79.
70 Thomas P Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, 27.

frontiersmen and the United States.[71] If some kind of agreement upon common history or common historical experience helps to form a nation, the diverging ways frontiersmen and Eastern nationalists thought about the American revolutionary experience and its meaning suggest serious national fractures.

Even the symbols of nations, banners and flags flown in Western Pennsylvania did not at all mirror the national banners and flags flown in the coastal, urban loop. Symbolically representing the deep fissures separating the frontiersmen from Eastern nationalists, the frontiersmen flew a flag with six stripes, "representing four Pennsylvania and two Virginia counties."[72] Some frontiersmen wanted to, and, no doubt, many more seriously considered, completely separating from the United States and creating an independent nation or joining one of the major colonial powers in the western hemisphere. Often, Brackenridge reflected on his precarious position as a moderate who opposed the excise tax, but also opposed the more radical methods of resolutions favored by the frontiersmen. He vacillated whether or not to stand with the "Sans Culottes" if the Western counties resolved to secede, "a right that is never given up in society."[73] He elaborated that "a part of a country, as well as an individual, may quit the government; and no doubt this country will quit the United States, in due time. That may be by a consent of the union, or without it."[74]

Although the whiskey excise ignited an outpouring of rhetorical and physical action against the United States, the excise and the insurrection surrounding it can perhaps be thought of as a sign of the deeper problems of a fractured nation. In other

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71 Ibid., 116.
72 Ibid., 188. Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Incidents*, 99-102.
73 Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Incidents*, 101.
74 Ibid., 101.

words, despite the somewhat narrow way historians may refer to "The Whiskey Rebellion," which may imply that a single issue fueled the insurrection, the distance— both material and imaginary— between frontiersmen and Eastern nationalists extended to the very foundation of the nation, the Constitution. Brackenridge recognized that many people wrongly imagined that repealing the excise would satisfy the frontiersmen, who were also incorrectly imagined to otherwise consider themselves as more a part of the nation than perhaps they actually were. However, Brackenridge "well knew they would not stop there [the repeal of the whiskey excise]."[75] Opposing one law "would lead to oppose another; they would finally oppofe all, and demand a new modeling of the constitution."[76] For the revolutionary frontiersmen of the Whiskey Rebellion, being a part of the nation was unthinkable so long as the United States operated under its 1787 Constitution.

Paul Gilje's study, *Rioting in America,* provides some general framework on violence and rioting that helps to tie together the various perspectives of the Whiskey Rebellion. Gilje begins by looking at rioting and dissent in colonial American and traces its various trends up through nearly the present day. Gilje argues that rioting and dissent form a much more integral, and rational, part of American tradition than people may generally think or realize. Gilje's big-picture approach to rioting in America exposes why Waldstreicher's argument of nationalism in the Early Republic appears so seductive. America's long history of mob violence and rioting contribute to a contemporary sense of nationalism by contestation. However, applying today's inclusive-contestant nationalism

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75 Ibid., 42.
76 Ibid., 42.

to the fractured Early Republic of the Whiskey Rebellion overlooks the strong, exclusive actions and words of people outside of the Early Republic's coastal urban areas.[77]

Although Gilje's focus is much broader than just the Whiskey Rebellion, his conclusions align very well with the narrative of the Whiskey Rebellion. Indeed, Gilje wastes no time in dispelling what might be a popular myth about mobs and rioting—that they are mindless rabble with no legitimate purpose—by arguing that by and large people who decided to riot did so rationally.[78] As Slaughter pointed out and Brackenridge recorded, Western Pennsylvanians followed a rational progression of meeting to discuss their grievances, writing the national government, and appropriating the spirit of 1776 before they took the next rational step to rioting and attacking tax-collectors. Gilje further points out that rioting usually followed some form of tradition.[79] This helps to explain the apparent dichotomy of Nash's argument that transformation to radical, political rioting required print culture and the clear physical evidence that Western Pennsylvanians lacked access to print culture. Even though Westerners lacked the print access necessary to create simultaneity with the coastal urban loop, they brought with them the traditions of violence and rioting.

Gilje contends that seventeenth and eighteenth century mobs generally rioted in order to protect the community.[80] This could mean protecting community morality by driving prostitutes out of town and destroying a brothel.[81] Or it could mean a more political protection of the community by preventing a sheriff from carrying out orders

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77 Paul Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 6-7.
78 Ibid., 7.
79 Ibid., 13.
80 Ibid., 27.
81 Ibid., 2.

perceived as unjust.[82] Importantly, though, these riots generally avoided any violence

against a person, preferring instead to target property and carry out ritual destruction

symbolizing protest or anger. These types of riots generally informed the rioting and

rebellion of the American Revolution; the Stamp Act riots or Boston Tea Party, for

example, easily fit the criteria of protecting the common good and expressing dissent

through non-violent crowd action. Similarly, Whiskey Rebels would often attack

property, such as the tax collector's house that George Washington mentioned, rather than

people.

     From the time of the American Revolution and into the Jacksonian Era, rioting

slowly continued to transform and evolve. Gilje considers that, in theory at least, a

democratic form of government ought to eliminate the need and legitimacy of mob

action.[83] Doubtless, many American officials like Hamilton thought that same thing.

However, in some ways, democratic government only increased mob action and rioting.

Sometimes, vying for power, political leaders would handpick a person they wanted to

lead a mob.[84] Additionally, the importance of newspapers to the democratic process

meant that riots sometimes targeted newspaper offices that printed political material they

disagreed with.[85] Gilje argues that this new kind of rioting marked a departure from the

more traditional rioting to protect the community because rioting then exposed

community fissures rather than community cohesion.[86] Certainly, the Whiskey Rebellion

exposed serious fissures in any sort of perceived national community, and this marked a

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82 Ibid., 25.
83 Ibid., 37.
84 Ibid., 40.
85 Ibid., 60.
86 Ibid., 63.

transition in the carrying out of mob action.

Ultimately, the national government succeeded in quelling the insurrection. In fact, the tellingly named "army of the Constitution" Washington assembled to suppress the rebellion never fought a battle against the "enemies of order," or anybody else.[87] The occupying force did, however, make certain that resentment toward the United States would continue in Western Pennsylvania as the army attacked wagoners, looted houses, destroyed property and otherwise plundered and terrorized Westerners.[88] Possibly, this somewhat anticlimactic ending to the insurrection resulted because the frontiersmen never appeared able to fully commit either to forming a completely new nation or attempting to destroy the current Eastern-based one and rebuild it anew. Possibly also, the dearth of print culture in the West meant that frontiersmen lacked some of the utilities of print that Warner argued were so important to the American resistance against Britain—as a natural resistance to tyranny and as a method of legitimizing dissent.

Although a failure in terms of a revolution and a rebellion, the insurrection casts serious doubt on the notion that the early United States was at all a cohesive nation. It appears to validate Trish Loughran's assertions that no national print culture existed in the early United States. A lack of national print culture creates problems for a national imagined community and the national simultaneity necessary to build and sustain a nation. Even when print from the coastal, urban loop did occasionally manage to circulate to the frontier, Dana Heller suggests different social and cultural environments themselves influenced the way different communities interpret identical texts.[89] For

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87 Thomas P Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, 224.
88 Ibid., 220.
89 Dana Heller, "Salesman in Moscow," in *The Futures of American Studies* eds. Donald E Pease and Robyn Weigman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 201.

example, a reprint of an Independence Day celebration held in Richmond, Virginia might take several months to show up in a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania newspaper (or for an Eastern newspaper with the reprint to show up in a Pittsburgh tavern). In September, do frontiersmen near Pittsburgh, angry about the national excise tax, view Richmond's "toast to the spirit of '76" as an expression of national feeling or as an expression of resenting the excise placed upon them in the name of "nation"?

The events, rhetoric, and actions surrounding the Whiskey Rebellion demonstrate that communities of frontiersmen certainly thought about the nation, and their part in it (or perhaps their part outside of it), in very different ways than Eastern communities did. What does this mean for the idea of a national imagined community? Even if one side called themselves "national," the inter-community violence, completely divergent appropriations of history, and lack of agreement on the charter national document all indicate that "nation" might be too unreliable of a word to describe the disconnected peoples, communities, and historical traditions in the early United States.

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