
On Their Tiptoes

Political Time and Newspapers during the Advent of the
Radicalized French Revolution, circa 1792–1793

MATTHEW RAINBOW HALE

In his 1937 magnum opus, *The Historical Novel*, Hungarian literary critic Georg Lukács suggested that new ideas about history—and implicitly, about time itself—laid the foundation for the development of the historical novel. According to Lukács, “the quick succession of . . . upheavals” associated with “the French Revolution, the revolutionary wars and the rise and fall of Napoleon . . . for the first time made history a *mass experience*.” Whereas individuals during the Enlightenment viewed “Progress . . . as an essentially unhistorical struggle between humanist reason and feudal-absolutist unreason,” the succeeding generations came to think of time in terms of “the inner conflict of social forces,” so that “history itself is the bearer and realizer of progress.” Lukács wrote from a Marxist perspective and was therefore deeply concerned with showing the diverse ways in which writers in the post-Napoleonic era addressed the question of “how modern bourgeois society arose out of the class

Matthew Rainbow Hale is an assistant professor of history at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland. He thanks the participants in a 2007 SHEAR panel session, the *JER*'s anonymous reviewers, Seth Cotlar, Paul Cheney, Ann Kirschner, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, Peter Messer, Jason Phillips, and Roderick McDonald for their constructive criticism. He also expresses gratitude to David Hackett Fischer, Jane Kamensky, and James Kloppenberg for support of the larger project of which this essay is a part. A Goucher College summer research grant, the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies Gilder Lehrman Junior Research Fellowship, an American Antiquarian Society Legacy Fellowship, a Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History summer research fellowship, and a McNeil Center for Early American Studies Dissertation Fellowship made possible the research and writing of this essay.

struggles between nobility and bourgeoisie.” No matter how one views Lukács’s politics, it is hard to deny the potential explanatory power of his insight that “the huge, rapidly successive changes” of the French Revolution and Napoleonic rule pushed humans “to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned.”¹

That insight was fully explored only as a generation of revisionist scholars began challenging the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution. More specifically, historians like Mona Ozouf, Lynn Hunt, and Jeremy Popkin revitalized scholarship on the French Revolution by paying close attention to previously understudied elements like festivals and the press. The collective emphasis on textual analysis and cultural symbols brought into relief French revolutionaries’ dynamic understanding of temporality. New ideas about time and history, it seems, were intimately related to far-reaching transformations in political culture, and any attempt to explain either of the two phenomena must necessarily consider the other.²

1. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln, NE, 1962; orig. published 1937); quotations from 23, 27, 27–28, and 24. My thanks to Paul Cheney for pointing me to this seminal work.

2. Mona Ozouf, *The Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA, 1988; orig. published as *La fête révolutionnaire, 1789–1799*, 1976); Lynn Hunt, “The World We Have Gained: The Future of the French Revolution,” *American Historical Review* 108 (2003), 1–19; Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, CA, 1984); Jeremy D. Popkin, *Revolutionary News: The Press in France, 1789–1799* (Durham, NC, 1990); Jeremy D. Popkin, *The Right-Wing Press in France, 1792–1800* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1980); François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, UK, 1981; orig. published as *Penser la Révolution française*, 1978); Jack R. Censer, *Prelude to Power: The Parisian Radical Press, 1789–1791* (Baltimore, 1976); William J. Murray, *The Right-Wing Press in the French Revolution: 1789–1792* (London, 1986); Hugh Gough, *The Newspaper Press in the French Revolution* (London, 1988); Hugh Gough, “The French Revolutionary Press,” in *Press, Politics and the Public Sphere in Europe and North America, 1760–1820*, ed. Hannah Barker and Simon Burrows (Cambridge, UK 2002), 182–200; Robert Darnton, “The Kiss of Lamourette,” in *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York, 1990), 3–20; Robert Darnton and Daniel Roche, eds., *Revolution in Print: The Press in France 1775–1800* (Berkeley, CA, 1989); and Alan Forrest, *The Soldiers of the French Revolution* (Durham, NC, 1990). See also Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968; orig. published 1955), 253–64; Reinhard Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual His-*

Taken together, the prescient analysis of Lukács and the wave of innovative work on the French Revolution invite new ways of evaluating various aspects of the early United States. In particular, they draw attention to the way in which the advent of the radicalized French Revolution—the series of international events taking place between the imprisonment of King Louis XVI (August 10, 1792) and the onslaught of the Terror (September 5, 1793)—prompted American newspaper writers and readers to address concepts of contemporaneity in a more rigorous fashion than ever before. This sustained engagement with notions of time did not materialize without problems, and partisan discussions of the proper mode of interpreting recent events and newspapers ensued. The resulting cacophony, which revolved around Federalist challenges to Democratic-Republicans’ belief that revolutionary time moved more quickly than regular time, destabilized traditional efforts to pinpoint the present moment on a preordained timeline. French Revolutionary intelligence thus assumed prominence as both cause and reflection of initial American encounters with a concept of political time divorced from inherited notions of Protestant providence, Whig cyclical history, and Scottish enlightenment progress. In a halting, unintended manner, American newspaper writers and readers broached the subject of contingency.³

A study of newspapers in 1792–1793 also reveals, more broadly, how profoundly the radicalized French Revolution molded American political culture. Historians have known for years that the French Revolution influenced the United States, but too often they have been content to assert the existence of that influence without probing its nature in full. That is unfortunate because certain parallels between Gallic and American political development are sufficiently striking that they provide a case study of

tory: Timing History, Spacing Concepts, trans. Todd Samuel Presner and others (Stanford, CA, 2002); and Reinhard Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York, 2004; orig. published 1979).

3. The French Revolution contained numerous “radical” elements before 1792–1793, but like many scholars of France, I find it useful to distinguish between the relatively “moderate” French Revolution of 1789–1792 and the more “radical” French Revolution initiated in 1792–1793. For an overview of the radicalized French Revolution, see William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (New York, 1989), 174–96. For a compelling account of the radicalized French Revolution and its impact on Europe and North America, see R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, Vol. 2, *The Struggle* (Princeton, NJ, 1964).

transnational history, of the way in which various forces cross over political boundaries and spur the same type of change in multiple national entities. An investigation of American political culture in 1792–1793 shows that the midpoint of George Washington’s presidency was not only a crucible for preexisting domestic tensions but also an instructive and integral episode in the extension of the radicalized French Revolution.⁴



Americans were interested in the French Revolution from its inception in 1789, but only in the winter of 1792–1793 did large numbers begin to see it in apocalyptic terms. In particular, four events—the French victory over the Prussians at the Battle of Valmy (September 20, 1792), the establishment of the French Republic (September 22, 1792), the execution of King Louis XVI (January 21, 1793), and the French declaration of war on Britain (February 1, 1793)—shifted attention away from a moderate dispute over different versions of constitutional monarchy and toward a stark ideological and military clash between monarchy and republicanism. In addition, various spillover developments—including the confiscation of maritime cargo, foreign interference in domestic political affairs, and the influx of thousands of refugees—gave European upheaval a tangible face and suggested to many Americans that the fate of their republic was intertwined with its French counterpart. Although an ocean separated the Old and New worlds, residents of the United States instinctively understood and experienced firsthand the awesome power of the radicalized French Revolution.⁵

4. To assert the importance of similarities is not to deny the force of dissimilarities, and I acknowledge that differences between the American and French 1790s are (and always will be) noteworthy. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this essay, I stress—in counterintuitive fashion—the continuities between American and French newspaper and political culture.

5. Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756–1800* (Cambridge, UK, 1985), 119–201; Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, 1997), 122–30; David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 126–41; Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York, 1984), 51–61; Charles Downer Hazen, *Contemporary American Opinion of the French Revolution* (Gloucester, MA, 1964; orig. published 1897),

For Democratic-Republicans, there was no greater testimony to the radicalized French Revolution's incredible force than the way in which it appeared to accelerate time. The "rapid succession of victories which attend the arms of the republicans of France" justified this conviction, but international political reform was also critical. "We confidently trust," wrote a group of New York City citizens led by James Nicholson and White Matlack, "that under the guidance of a benign, though unseen arm, the political circumstances of mankind are rapidly meliorating and improving" and "that the Republic of France is made a most distinguished instrument in this great, god-like work." Thus whereas political changes before 1792–1793 moved at a gradual pace, the radicalized French Revolution served to "transmute government into a state and form in which the people may be capable of a more accelerated progression in knowledge, virtue, and happiness." French Revolutionary time was compressed, in other words, and a decade's worth of change might take place within a year. The "chronologer has slowly counted months, where the philosopher has computed ages," Benjamin Vaughan observed, and "the gigantic changes which have been effected or prepared in this short interval . . . have been produced or accelerated by the war proposed to prevent them."⁶

164–88; Joseph M. Fewster, "The Jay Treaty and British Ship Seizures: The Martinique Cases," *William and Mary Quarterly* 45 (July 1988), 426–52; Harry Ammon, *The Genet Mission* (New York, 1973); Thomas C. Sosnowski, "Priestly Exiles: Non-Juring Clergy in the United States," *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1850: Selected Papers* (1998), 80–86; Thomas C. Sosnowski, "Emigres in America Look at the French Revolution," *Proceedings of the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1850* 20 (1990), 996–1075; Leo F. Ruskowski, *French Émigré Priests in the United States (1791–1815)* (Washington, DC, 1940); Gary B. Nash, "Reverberations of Haiti in the American North: Black Saint Domingans in Philadelphia," *Explorations in Early American Culture* 65 (1998), 44–73; Frances Sergeant Childs, *French Refugee Life in the United States, 1790–1800: An American Chapter of the French Revolution* (Baltimore, 1940); Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence, KS, 1997); Richard Jerome Twomey, "Jacobins and Jeffersonians: Anglo-American Radical Ideology, 1790–1810," in *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism*, ed. Margaret Jacob and James Jacob (London, 1984), 284–99.

6. Albany writer cited in the *Diary*, Jan. 10, 1793; James Nicholson and White Matlack, cited in the *Phoenix* [sic] Aug. 24, 1793; *Baltimore Evening Post*, cited in the *National Gazette*, Oct. 19, 1793; Benjamin Vaughan to —, Oct. 31, 1795, Benjamin Vaughan Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Penn-

Democratic-Republican notions that “the reign of kings and tyrants is drawing to an end—and that of reason and nature is rapidly advancing!” operated in conjunction with the conviction that humans were at a critical moment in history. As an English writer excerpted in a Boston newspaper put it, “the actual conjecture of European affairs at this instant, the rapid diffusion of the republican spirit, the accelerated whirl of political events, and the relation of Europe to the rest of the globe, all bespeak a crisis momentous to the human race.” Pro-French enthusiasts described the “novelty and importance” of the “present eventful European contest” in a variety of ways, but assertions that the “present moment is big with events of the most interesting kind” were perhaps the most common. “Bigness” and its links to metaphors of rebirth resonated because, like an expectant mother, the “approaching summer seems pregnant with as great events as ever have been recorded in the present century.” The momentousness of international affairs thus produced a *sense* of momentousness, and Jeffersonians believed the world would be a better place as a result of daily transpiring occurrences. Whereas Americans during Washington’s first presidential term had stressed the glories of the American Revolutionary past and its implications for the republican future, Democratic-Republicans from 1793 onward articulated a hypersensitivity to the present, so that the passage of each hour and day appeared revelatory of deep historical significance.⁷

Preoccupation with contemporaneity grew from such eighteenth-century developments as the Enlightenment emphasis on the diffusion of

sylvania. For the idea of temporal compression, see Hunt, “The World We Have Gained”; Koselleck, “Time and History,” “Concepts of Historical Time and Social History,” and “Remarks on the Revolutionary Calendar and *Neue Zeit*” in *The Practice of Conceptual History*, esp. 113, 121, and 151; Koselleck, “Historical Criteria of the Modern Concept of Revolution” and “Perspective and Temporality: A Contribution to the Historiographical Exposure of the Historical World” in *Futures Past*, esp. 50 and 145–46; and Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 261.

7. *Federal Gazette*, cited in the *National Gazette*, Jan. 5, 1793; *Columbian Centinel*, May 8, 1793; *General Advertiser*, cited in the *Diary*, July 13, 1793; *Columbian Herald*, Sept. 7, 1793; *Columbian Centinel*, Apr. 6, 1793; *The Phenix*, June 29, 1793. See also the *Diary*, Apr. 26, 1793; the *Columbian Centinel*, Apr. 13, 1793, the *National Gazette*, May 4, 1793, and the *Baltimore Evening Post*, cited in the *National Gazette*, Oct. 19, 1793. For efforts to stress the glories of the American Revolutionary past and its implications for the republican future, see Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 43–52.

knowledge and the maturation of global markets, but the radicalized French Revolution gave it unprecedented vitality and focus. More specifically, events in 1792–1793 compelled Democratic-Republicans to declare their loyalty to French Revolutionary principles in ways that drew attention to the immediacy of the situation. “[I]t becomes Republicans at all times to speak their sentiments freely,” proclaimed a group of Virginians from Norfolk and Portsmouth, “but more particularly at this alarming period when we behold the Tyrants of the world . . . making a grand effort to crush the infant spirit of freedom.” A writer in the *Phenix* [sic] agreed and more forcefully argued that “we should do violence to our feelings, were we not to seize an occasion like the present, to manifest to the world, how much we are interested in the dawn of universal happiness.”⁸

Democratic-Republicans commemorated this supposedly new epoch by appropriating French Revolutionary holidays and reinvigorating American ones. They offered toasts to “This day” and the hope that “many such [will] occur,” performed songs and poems “hastily composed for the occasion,” and made sure 1793 Fourth of July proceedings were “more extensively celebrated this year than usual.” Jeffersonian printers and writers also produced American editions of the new Gallic calendar and almanacs highlighting landmark French Revolutionary events. Some people were attracted to the novelty of the new chronology, but the careful deliberation with which advocates of the radicalized French Revolution fixed various dates in the public mind reveals they were sacralizing revolutionary time, setting it apart from ordinary life and dedicating it to the fulfillment of transcendent, divine purposes.⁹

8. *Gazette of the United States*, June 15, 1793; *Phenix*, Aug. 24, 1793. For the Enlightenment emphasis on the diffusion of knowledge, see Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York, 1989), esp. 197–217; Richard D. Brown, *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650–1870* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996), esp. 1–118. For the maturation of global markets and their relation to notions of contemporaneity, see Brown, *Knowledge Is Power*, 110–31; John J. McCusker, “The Demise of Distance: The Business Press and the Origins of the Information Revolution in the Early Modern Atlantic World,” *American Historical Review* 110 (2005), 295–321.

9. *National Gazette*, Feb. 27, May 25, June 5, and July 17, 1793; *Diary*, Jan. 16 and 24, Feb. 5, June 15, and July 13, 1793; *New-Hampshire Gazette*, Jan. 30, 1793; *Columbian Herald, or the Southern Star*, Mar. 19, 1794; *Columbian Centinel*, Jan. 9, Apr. 27, July 31, Aug. 21, Nov. 13, and Dec. 7, 1793; *Carlisle Gazette*, June 5, 1793; *General Advertiser*, July 12, 1793, Oct. 25 and 27, 1794, and July

Newspapers embodied and mediated Democratic-Republicans' belief that millennial time moved more quickly. Newspapers not only developed a feeling of community among otherwise unconnected francophiles, but also provided readers with a chronology of events. Although most newspapers lasted only a few years and had a relatively limited number of subscribers—circulations above 2,000 were considered huge—they were the most widely distributed print genre behind only Bibles and almanacs, and, as Jeffrey L. Pasley has shown, they “occupied the nodal points of the political system” and “thus contributed in fundamental ways to the very existence of the parties.” Newspapers furthermore provided Americans with one of their main sources of foreign information, yet in ways that perpetuated reliance on international “correspondents” and British publications. American newspapers thus encouraged people to see their lives in a trans-Atlantic rather than provincial framework, and as such were heavily implicated in—if not instrumental to—popular engagement with the radicalized French Revolution and related notions of political time.¹⁰

31, 1795; *Women's Early American Historical Narratives*, ed. Sharon M. Murphy (New York, 2003), 36; *Eastern Herald*, Aug. 3, 1793; Isaiah Thomas, *Thomas's Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode-Island, Newhampshire & Vermont almanack, with an ephemeris, for the year of our Lord 1795* (Worcester, MA, 1794); Isaiah Thomas, *Thomas's Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode-Island, Newhampshire & Vermont almanack, with an ephemeris, for the year of our Lord 1797* (Worcester, MA, 1796); Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street*, 120–151; Hazen, *Contemporary American Opinion of the French Revolution*, 182–83 and 248; Mary Ellen Loughrey, *France and Rhode Island, 1686–1800* (New York, 1944), 66. For the sacralization of time, see Ozouf, *Festivals*, esp. 158–96 and 262–82; Hunt, “The World We Have Lost;” Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 261–62; and Koselleck, “The Revolutionary Calendar and ‘*Neue Zeit*’” and “The Eighteenth Century as the Beginning of Modernity” in *The Practice of Conceptual History*, esp. 152 and 165. It is important to note that Democratic-Republicans did much more in response to the radicalized French Revolution than attempt to sacralize time. Among other activities, they founded Democratic-Republican Societies, supported Citizen Genet, and participated in civic festivals. In that sense, Jeffersonians saw themselves as contributors to, and not mere spectators of, international revolutionary reform.

10. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983); Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 17–52; David Waldstreicher, “Rites of Rebellion, Rites of Assent: Celebrations, Print Culture, and the Origins of American Nationalism,” *Journal of American History* 82 (June 1995), 37–61; William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a*

Foreign news reports took approximately seven weeks to reach the United States, but delays were common, especially in winter, and information about many events—the Battle of Valmy, for example—could take upwards of three months. When news arrived, Jeffersonians read it avidly. “The newspapers are eagerly called for from every quarter,” wrote William Bentley, “& the places of concourse are frequented every day with great solicitude.” The eagerness with which young Lyman Beecher sought news established a lifelong reading habit. “Those were French Revolutionary days, and the paper was full of battles between the French and Austrians,” Beecher recalled decades later. “I have read the papers regularly ever since, and kept up with the times.” Editors whetted readers’ interest “in the times” by peppering the pages of their papers with phrases like “late favourable news” and “*FURTHER AUTHENTIC EUROPEAN GLORIOUS NEWS!*”¹¹

The atmosphere of self-conscious expectation further boosted the

Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780–1835 (Knoxville, TN, 1989), 193; Seth Aaron Cotlar, “In Paine’s Absence: The Trans-Atlantic Dynamics of American Popular Political Thought, 1789–1804” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2000), 19–22; John Bixler Hench, “The Newspaper in a Republic: Boston’s ‘Centinel’ and ‘Chronicle,’ 1784–1801” (PhD diss., Clark University, 1979), 14 and 104–8; Jeffrey L. Pasley, “*The Tyranny of Printers*”: *Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville, VA, 2001), quotations on 13 and 11; Charles E. Clark, *The Public Prints: The Newspaper in Anglo-American Culture, 1665–1740* (New York, 1994); Charles E. Clark and Charles Wetherell, “The Measure of Maturity: The *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 1728–1765,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 46 (Apr. 1989), 279–303; Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic 1675–1740: An Exploration of Communication and Community* (New York, 1986).

11. *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, Mar. 15, 1793; *American Apollo*, Mar. 15, 1793; *Philadelphia General Advertiser*, Mar. 16, 1793, and Jan. 3, 1794; *Diary*, Mar. 29, 1793; *Weekly Museum*, Mar. 30, 1793; *Daily Advertiser*, Dec. 24, 1792; *The Mail; or, Claypoole’s Daily Advertiser*, Dec. 27, 1792; William Bentley, Apr. 19, 1793, *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D.* (Gloucester, MA, 1962), 2: 16; Charles Beecher, ed., *Autobiography, Correspondence, Etc. of Lyman Beecher, D.D.* (New York, 1864), 1: 37; *Independent Chronicle*, cited in the *National Gazette*, Sept. 14, 1793; *New-Hampshire Gazette*, Jan. 23, 1793; *Virginia Gazette. And Richmond and Manchester Advertiser*, June 27, 1793. See also Clark and Wetherell, “The Measure of Maturity,” 294; Ian K. Steele, “Time, Communications, and Society: The English Atlantic, 1702,” *Journal of American Studies* 8 (1974), 1–21; and Steele, *The English Atlantic*.

prominence of newspapers as “heralds of victory.” “AS to foreign matters the newspaper at present, has but little to boast of,” wrote John Melcher, editor of the *New-Hampshire Gazette*. “On the tip-toe of expectation the American public must now stand” and only “fresh arrivals will afford the pleasure of relieving the pain of anxiety.” Melcher’s comments were self-serving—the more he heightened public anticipation of European news, the more newspapers he would sell when it arrived—yet the editor’s description of the nervousness caused by the absence of news rings true. Democratic-Republicans were acutely aware of their dependence on trans-Atlantic communication and were accordingly rather fretful, very much on the “tip-toe of expectation,” when news was delayed or soon to arrive.¹²

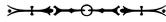
As purveyors of European news, Melcher and his fellow editors also internationalized revolutionary politics. Local newspapers provided Democratic-Republicans the context for their efforts to advance the cause of “our magnanimous Allies,” and the sooner they published French Revolutionary news, the sooner Americans would see revolutionary change. “[N]o event which shall transpire, shall remain uncommunicated,” Melcher promised his audience, and given the way he “ardently look[ed] to that period, when, divested of every passion, wars & rumors of wars shall cease, and mankind shall live together as brethren,” that promise can be viewed as a commitment to use his newspaper as an agent of millennial transformation.¹³

Of all the Democratic-Republican editors who promoted the role of newspapers in “the advancement of liberty,” Thomas Adams of the Boston *Independent Chronicle* was perhaps the most earnest. As early as September 1791, Adams introduced accounts of King Louis XVI’s flight to Varennes by informing his readers that “In consequence of the additional French Intelligence received since our last, and the high expectations which doubtless possess the minds on so interesting an event, we are obliged to omit . . . several articles of intelligence, advertisements, & c. which were prepared for this day’s paper.” With the radicalization of France in 1792–1793, the editorial activities of “the leading advocate of the Republican (or French) side of the great question” became even more politicized, as newspaper apprentice John Prentiss remembered decades

12. *National Gazette*, Sept. 14, 1793; *New-Hampshire Gazette*, Feb. 15, 1794.

13. *New-Hampshire Gazette*, Feb. 15, 1794.

later. “[C]ommunication with Europe” was “tedious, especially in winter when 50 days sometimes elapsed . . . before the anxious public were relieved,” Prentiss recalled, and foreign news items were immediately “posted.” “[M]any times when the *Chronicle* was about ready to go to press at 10 o’clock[,]” he added, “some important manuscript” would be turned in, “which could not or must not be delayed.” Cost and inconvenience notwithstanding, Adams allowed these last-minute additions because he conceptualized his newspaper in rather grandiose terms. “It was as if . . . truth, liberty, and the cause of world republicanism was destined to rise or fall with the Boston *Chronicle*,” historian John Hench astutely comments. “Such was an incredibly grave mission for any individual or organization to bear in the republican climate of the time.”¹⁴



Federalists had little patience with the “republican climate of the time,” especially since the insatiable hunger for news, the “chaos of European accounts,” and partisan bias combined to ensure that *misinformation* operated as popular currency. Federalist writers accordingly warned readers about “prolific Rumour” and the “many contradictory reports which are continually flitting through America.” Perhaps the most colorful admonition regarding “the tongue of *Rumour*” and how it “never run[s] faster than it does at this time” appeared in an anonymous poem published in John Fenno’s *Gazette of the United States*. Entitled “*RUMOUR*,” the ditty began by noting how “The news about France./ Leads us a comical dance;/ Rumour, that excentric [sic] hag,/ Capers up and down, zig zag.” What came next was a series of specific rumors that apparently led Democratic-Republicans astray at one point or another in 1792–1793:

Now the French are all in a bog,
 Now the Mynheers are all in a fog;
 Now Dumourier is cutting up the Prussians,

14. *Independent Chronicle*, May 19, 1794, Sept. 3, 1795, and May 19, 1794, cited in Hench, “The Newspaper in a Republic,” 202, 204, and 181; *Independent Chronicle*, Sept. 1, 1791; John Prentiss, “Autobiographical and Historical Recollections of Eighty-Eight Years” (1869), John Prentiss Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts; Hench, “The Newspaper in a Republic,” 203.

Now Catherine unkennels [sic] her Russians;
 Now Cobourg is hewing down whole ranks,
 Now Frederick is crossing the Rhine's banks;
 Now Custine cuts ten thousand to pieces,
 Nor leaves a single man to tell the news . . .¹⁵

In light of Democratic-Republicans' fascination with contemporaneity, the poem's rhythmic repetition of the word "now" was especially significant. It underscored popular preoccupation with the momentousness of the occasion. It also evoked the difficulty of keeping up with the latest news. It implied, furthermore, that Americans who ran hard after each new rumor were fools for failing to recognize the pattern of rumor, refutation, and new rumor. Too eager to spread up-to-date information about foreign events, Democratic-Republicans succumbed to the "Seductive arts" of "Rumour, that excentric hag," and were made to do a "comical dance."

As Democratic-Republicans yielded to the folly of misinformation, Federalists redefined the meaning of newspapers and news. In an essay gauging the possibility of "reading a news-paper to some purpose," a number of "*literary Gentlemen*" in the *Providence Gazette* admitted that fluency with global affairs was critical "when any country is likely to become the theatre of remarkable events and revolutions (as for instance France, Germany, and the Netherlands, at this present moment)." Newspapers were not, however, sufficient guides to thought and action because the very quality—temporal freshness—that gave them value ultimately limited their usefulness. "Accounts of the most extraordinary events in old times are now perused by us with the utmost indifference," wrote the *Gazette* authors. "With equal indifference will the history of our own times be perused by our descendents." This alternative, relativizing perspective on newspapers in turn required Americans to "be upon our guard, judging of nothing by first reports, but awaiting the calmer hour of reason, prepared to decide on full information."¹⁶

15. *Columbian Centinel*, Apr. 13 and Dec. 14, 1793; *Connecticut Gazette*, Sept. 5, 1793; *Columbian Centinel*, cited in the *Federal Spy*, Sept. 10, 1793; *Columbian Herald*; or, *the Southern Star*, Aug. 17, 1793; *Diary*, Apr. 20, 1793; *Massachusetts Spy*, Apr. 18, 1793; *The Mirrour*, Apr. 22, 1793; *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser*, Apr. 23, 1793; *Catskill Packet*, May 6, 1793; *Hough's Concord Herald*, Apr. 25, 1793; *Gazette of the United States*, June 1, 1793.

16. *Providence Gazette*, July 6, 1793.

A writer taking the name “ALA” buttressed the *Providence Gazette* authors’ view with a sonnet published in three separate newspapers. In the first few stanzas, phrases like “PAINE’s licentious mobs” and “clangorous war’s rude thunder’s roll” suggested the depth of European mania. “ALA” set up the poem’s climax by placing the word “while” at the beginning of each of the first few stanzas: “While” all these terrible things were occurring in Europe, “Columbians whiff their mild segars [sic],/ And calmly talk about the NEWS.” In this scenario, “NEWS” provided an opportunity for serene leisure rather than a stimulant to frantic action, a theme underscored by the rules of the sonnet. In the same way the simplicity of the final stanza, which consisted entirely of the eleven words from “Columbians” to “NEWS,” contrasted with the convoluted quatrains opening the poem, so the literary hubbub of French-inflected newspapers pushed responsible individuals to step back from the pattern of chaotic news distribution, partisan bickering, and rumor-mongering. Americans should approach foreign news items like the poet approached the sonnet’s iambic tetrameter and fourteen-line structure, as useful devices that channeled emotions into a productive and pleasurable pastime.¹⁷

Taken together, “ALA’s” sonnet and the “*literary Gentlemen’s*” treatise encapsulated the Federalist response to Democratic-Republican notions of revolutionary time. Followers of Washington never denied that the radicalized French Revolution generated a rapid succession of “big” events, a hunger for contemporaneity, and an enhanced role for newspapers. What they opposed was the headlong passion with which many Americans responded to these developments. People who tried to accelerate the inauguration of a new era by recklessly pursuing (or manufacturing) recent intelligence proved especially worrisome. If trans-Atlantic events moved at a faster pace than ever before, there was no reason to believe attempts to further hasten the rate of change would be successful. The “partiality, which the Editors” of Democratic-Republican papers “discover in favour of the French cause,” wrote a correspondent in the *Massachusetts Mercury*, “will neither accelerate the progress of Liberty, nor impede that of Despotism.” It was precisely because the radicalized

17. *Columbian Centinel*, Apr. 27, 1793; *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, May 10, 1793; and *The New Hampshire Journal: Or, The Farmer’s Weekly Museum*, May 16, 1793.

French Revolution moved at an accelerated tempo that Federalists urged people to act deliberately. The more the pace of foreign events and news of those events sped up, the more it became vital to slow down.¹⁸

Slowing down was an agonizing proposition for fervent Democratic-Republicans, but the inescapable, disturbing presence of incorrect information led some to reevaluate the idea of accelerated time. “To copy the European news seems to be only to copy reports contradicted at every hour,” William Bentley noted, “& yet these reports discover the prejudices, & the fears of the people.” Along the same lines, the embarrassment of having spread a false rumor undoubtedly compelled at least a few francophiles to treat trans-Atlantic news more circumspectly. Most significantly, the putative unreliability of British news sources and Federalist editors caused Jeffersonians to publish their own set of commentaries on misinformation.¹⁹

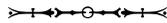
Some Democratic-Republicans thus agreed with Federalists that a degree of caution was necessary. “The success of the French nation, not depending on the accounts published in newspapers, it is but of little consequence whether the detached paragraphs in some of our *American* papers, are favorable or otherwise,” wrote *National Gazette* editor Philip Freneau. Instead of allowing news to drive them into a fury, “people in these states” should “so far suspend their judgment . . . [and] wait with patience till we have authentic intelligence.” A *United States Chronicle* author taking the name “BRUTUS” conveyed essentially the same message. “We derive our news chiefly from English and ministerial fountains,” “BRUTUS” wrote. “If the fountains are muddy and disturbed . . . a determined opinion” about current events will be rendered a virtual impossibility. The only available solution to this dilemma—to make sure “the allegations and proofs of the parties” were “scrutinized suspiciously”—was not glamorous, but it did allow people to “qualify, contradict or confirm our inferences.” Beyond that, Americans needed to come

18. *Massachusetts Mercury*, Aug. 30, 1793. Todd Estes, *The Jay Treaty Debate, Public Opinion, and the Evolution of Early American Political Culture* (Amherst, MA, 2006), provides additional support for this idea.

19. Bentley, May 9, 1793, *Diary of William Bentley*, 2: 22. For Democratic-Republican comments about Federalist rumors and tainted British sources, see *New-York Journal & Patriotic Register*, Apr. 3, 1793, citing the *General Advertiser*; *Independent Chronicle*, May 16, 1793; *New-Jersey Journal*, May 22, 1793; *Farmer's Register*, May 11, 1793.

to terms with the fact that temporal distance alone would facilitate a full understanding of the radicalized French Revolution. “When the storm is blown over and history has deposited in her archives” all the documents, “BRUTUS” wrote, “we may examine the controversy at our leisure, and decide with deliberation.”²⁰

Statements about “suspend[ing] judgment” and “decid[ing] with deliberation” reveal the paradoxical impact of the radicalized French Revolution. Having initially inspired dreams of accelerated time, the republicanization and militarization of France subsequently forced some Democratic-Republicans to concede that the speedy advent of a new age was not a straightforward proposition. This does not mean Jeffersonians recognized the tensions within their own ideology. Nor does it mean francophiles interpreted their activities as anything less than a necessary counterattack against the propaganda machine of Federalists and their British aristocratic allies. Still, Democratic-Republican worries about “rumors . . . to answer the *temporary purposes* of a disaffected party” clearly impinged upon claims about the sacralization of time. By acknowledging that a present-minded approach might endanger political and moral progress, a number of Jeffersonians executed a tactical, albeit partial and unwitting, rhetorical retreat.²¹



In conjunction with Federalists’ discussion of rumors and newspapers, the limited pullback of Democratic-Republicans speaks not only to a moment of crisis for the ideology of the public sphere, but also to the beginnings of a pivotal transformation in understandings of political time. Throughout the eighteenth century, Americans adhered to some version of the prevailing belief that political time unfolded against a foreordained future. In the traditional Protestant view, the inauguration of Christ’s millennial reign served as history’s endpoint. In the classical Whig perspective, the rise and fall of republics operated as the stable backdrop. According to Scottish moral philosophy, the march of humanity toward some ill-defined but ever more beneficent state of society functioned as the unavoidable temporal trajectory. What all these explanations had in common was a predetermined outcome that made the question of time

20. *National Gazette*, May 11, 1793; *United States Chronicle*, Aug. 15, 1793.

21. *Independent Chronicle*, May 16, 1793.

one of locating the present moment on the irreversible continuum of human existence. As J. G. A. Pocock, the scholar who has most cogently addressed the question of eighteenth-century political time, explains, “time acquired meaning from its relation to the eternal,” so that even the most progressive American revolutionaries envisioned the republic they created as “unhistorical because its future was unproblematical.”²²

Something similar could be said about Democratic-Republican perceptions of the republicanization and militarization of France; beginning in 1793, francophiles illuminated current events by situating them in a Protestant, Whig, or Scottish enlightenment framework. Nevertheless, what occurred in the aftermath of the radicalized French Revolution differed from previous eighteenth-century experiences with political time. To begin with, Ruth Bloch has demonstrated that “Between 1793 and 1796 the number of [non-newspaper] works on eschatology printed in America multiplied, averaging between five and ten times more per year than during the period 1765 to 1792.” In the same vein, an examination of Readex’s digitized collection, *America’s Historical Newspapers*, reveals that even after the increase in newspapers is taken into account, key words and phrases—including “millennium,” “accelerated,” and “rumor”—appeared more frequently between 1793 and 1795 than in two other eras (1774–77 and 1787–89) known for optimistic, end-time dreams. (See Table 1.) Without doubt, not every reference to the selected terms appeared in conjunction with reports of international turmoil. But the pattern is sufficiently broad to suggest that the radicalized

22. J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ, 2003; orig. published 1975), 31 and 546. For Christian millennialism, see Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, CT, 1977). For Whig political time, see Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*; J. G. A. Pocock, “Modes of Political and Historical Time in Early Eighteenth-Century England,” in *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK, 1985), 91–102; and Stow Persons, “The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth Century America,” *American Quarterly* 6 (1954), 147–64. For Scottish enlightenment philosophy, see Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 493–505; Peter C. Messer, *Stories of Independence: Identity, Ideology, and History in Eighteenth-Century America* (Dekalb, IL, 2005), 7–13; and Arthur H. Shaffer, *The Politics of History: Writing the History of the American Revolution, 1783–1815* (Chicago, 1975), 72–86.

Table 1: Frequency of English-Language Newspaper References to Various Words and Phrases Associated with Millennialism, Accelerated Time, Contemporaneity, Public Expectation, the Arrival of News, Misinformation, and Reliable Intelligence

	1774–1777	1787–1789	1793–1795
<i>millennium</i>	0.083	0.563	1.170
<i>universal happiness,</i> <i>universal prosperity,</i> <i>universal peace,</i> <i>universal liberty,</i> <i>and universal</i> <i>freedom</i>	0.333	0.922	1.651
<i>accelerate and</i> <i>accelerated</i>	1.528	5.593	9.255
<i>alacrity and rapidity</i>	8.250	17.875	22.245
<i>this day</i>	52.639	100.859	194.377
<i>present moment</i>	0.139	1.790	2.141
<i>tiptoe and tip-toe</i>	0.000	1.031	1.292
<i>public anxiety, state</i> <i>of anxiety, and</i> <i>anxious public</i>	0.028	0.078	0.217
<i>earliest intelligence,</i> <i>recent intelligence,</i> <i>and recent news</i>	0.194	0.281	0.783
<i>news</i>	73.861	55.266	102.481
<i>rumor and rumour</i>	2.778	8.688	21.142
<i>false report(s)</i>	0.361	0.219	0.500
<i>authentic news</i>	0.000	0.156	0.585
<i>corroborative</i>	0.056	0.063	0.783

Note: the figures, rounded to the nearest thousandth, represent the number of references to a particular word or phrase divided by the number of newspapers in the Readex database published during the selected years. The database contains thirty-six English-language newspapers published between 1774 and 1777, sixty-four published between 1787 and 1789, and one hundred and six published between 1793 and 1795.

Source: Readex's *America's Historical Newspapers*, Series I and II (Consulted June 2007)

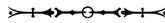
French Revolution generated a new level of anxiety regarding political time and news.²³

This apprehension worked against efforts to locate the mid-1790s on a specific historical continuum. The result was that newspapers symbolized a cultural debate about the significance of news for larger concep-

23. Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 121.

tions of humankind's prospects. The focus of political discussion, consequently, began to shift away from attempts to situate the present on the map of an unalterable temporal trajectory and toward the imperfect inspection of current events through the lens of an uncertain future. The radicalized French Revolution thus introduced contingency into concepts of political time.²⁴

To be certain, most individuals were unaware of this change. Yet more and more, competing versions of the present vied with each other in print, and since it was so difficult to verify which version was true, constant scrutiny of the news came to stand alongside traditional efforts to pinpoint the exact relationship between the present moment and a particular foreordained outcome. Federalists, in this respect, had a huge advantage, not only because they had a vested interest in exposing the false rumors of their opponents, but also because they were apparently more willing to admit, as Richard Curson put it, that the "Politicks of different nations is so convulsed; It is impossible to foresee what events may take place."²⁵



Boston *Columbian Centinel* editor Benjamin Russell (see Figure 1) was the most forceful Federalist advocate of the idea that the future is unpredictable, and a review of his activities makes clear how dramatically the radicalized French Revolution altered American newspapers and understandings of time. Oddly enough, the same anticipatory attitude that pushed Democratic-Republicans to describe the "present period" as "pregnant with the most important events" also beguiled Russell. Even before he acknowledged readers were "solicitous to obtain" news "of the succession of events, on which so much depend," Russell adjusted his editorial policies to fit current exigencies. On one occasion the inclusion of "lengthy and important European intelligence . . . of necessity, precludes many domestick and less interesting articles." In another instance, "the EDITOR deemed it his duty to facilitate the arrival of the Mail from

24. See Koselleck, "Modernity and the Planes of Historicity," in *Futures Past*, 22, and Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA, 1990), 36–45.

25. Richard Curson to Horatio Gates, Jan. 25, 1793, Horatio Gates Papers, courtesy of the New-York Historical Society.

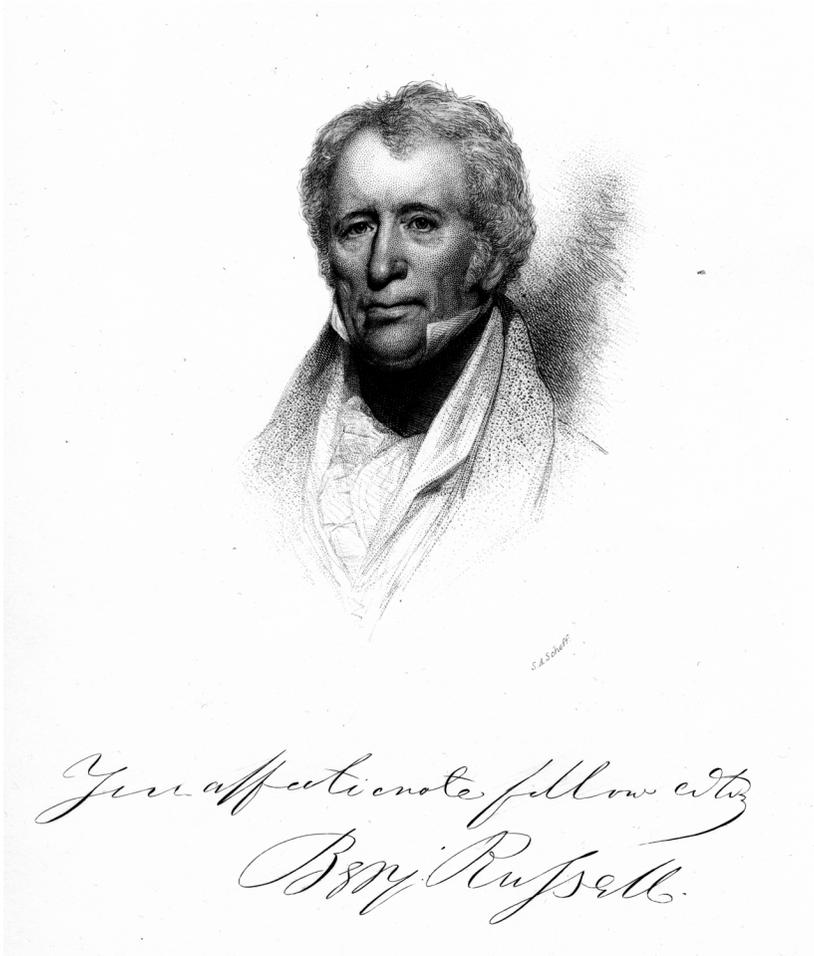


Figure 1: Portrait of Benjamin Russell, c. 1870, engraved by Stephen Alonzo Schoff (1818–1904). Gift of Mrs. H. O. Moore, 1933, great-granddaughter of Benjamin Russell. American Portrait Print Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

New-York . . . and, notwithstanding the disagreeableness of the weather, he effected his wishes.” Overall, the recognition that the present “moment” was full of “events of the most interesting kind, which must daily unfold themselves” caused Russell to strive for swift news transmission: “On the tip-toe of impatience we know the publick stand—it shall be our sedulous endeavour to relieve them from their station, as early as possible.”²⁶

Not surprisingly, some of the same difficulties encountered by Democratic-Republicans undermined Russell’s efforts to relay foreign intelligence speedily, and he responded with a number of clever editorial maneuvers. To mitigate the tension caused by news gaps, he reminded readers of “the *European Intelligence* they have before received” and the exact date of the last transmission. To counter most Americans’ unfamiliarity with European terrain, he employed an atlas borrowed from French noble exile Louis Philippe, a text so thorough that it “enabled the editor to describe the topography of the battle-fields minutely, and thus to surpass his contemporaries.” Russell tried to offset the confusing nature of foreign news, finally, by focusing on the organizational clarity of his presentation: “To give the readers of the CENTINEL less trouble, we have arranged such particulars as we have received, under distinct heads.” The “distinct heads” listed generally referred to specific military events and reflected a belief that the clash of armies would determine the fate of political programs. But they also revealed the way in which the public’s hunger for European news subtly transformed the format of at least one newspaper. In an era when news “items themselves usually carried no headlines, titles, or other differentiation between subjects and items” and “were arranged under dated geographic headings that denoted the location, not of the events described, but of the newspaper from which the item was taken,” the *Columbian Centinel* featured an early incarnation of headlines that categorized international reports according to the substance and location of particular events in time. Only by concocting new modes of communicating with readers could Russell construct the “COMPLETE CHAIN OF EUROPEAN INTELLIGENCE” (see Figure 2).²⁷

26. *National Gazette*, May 4, 1793; *Columbian Centinel*, Apr. 20, Mar. 6, Apr. 13, Apr. 6, and May 15, 1793.

27. *Columbian Centinel*, May 1, 1793; Samuel Adams Drake, *Old Landmarks and Historic Personages of Boston* (Boston, 1873) 101; Pasley, “*The Tyranny of*

Despite innovative efforts to generate intellectual coherence from trans-Atlantic reports, editorial proficiency was impracticable. “IT is almost impossible, from the *variety* of accounts, which hourly arrive from *Europe*, to give such an accurate statement of positive and probable events, in that hemisphere, as were to be wished,” Russell admitted in April 1793, while in October he lamented that “So diffuse are the various articles of intelligence from Europe, that it is impossible . . . to paint a just portrait thereof.” Informational confusion did not prevent Russell from relaying news, but it did make him cautious. “We shall attempt a sketch of the politicks of Europe, to the middle of *October* last, in our next,” Russell hesitantly indicated in December 1793. “A careful analysis may produce something like accuracy.”²⁸

Russell’s willingness to state publicly the difficulties facing editors is at first glance rather surprising. To be sure, journalistic sensibilities in the late eighteenth century were undeveloped compared to modern practices, and it is therefore unreasonable to expect Russell to embrace twenty-first-century norms of self-promotion and professionalism. The labor-intensive routines of early modern printing also undermined editors’ ability to specialize in the presentation of news. Still, for someone attuned to the popular hunger for intelligence, Russell’s admission that European reports befuddled him is curious. Something similar could be said about the relationship between Russell’s diffident preambles and his position as a newspaper man in Boston. Unlike rural editors who faced little or no local competition, Russell worked in a highly competitive environment. In fact, in the ten-year period leading to the radicalized French Revolution, Russell developed a heated rivalry with the aforementioned Thomas Adams and his *Independent Chronicle*. Yet while Adams trumpeted his paper’s ability to deliver news in a speedy, near-providential manner, Russell lowered expectations by stressing the confounding nature of European intelligence. It was almost as if the *Columbian Centinel* editor lost his nerve. Why would Russell concede so much to Adams and other rivals?²⁹

The answer is that he conceded nothing. By emphasizing editorial

Printers,” 32. My thanks to Jane Kamensky for pointing me to the Samuel Drake passage.

28. *Columbian Centinel*, Apr. 20, Oct. 26, and Dec. 14, 1793.

29. Pasley, “*The Tyranny of Printers*,” 24–47; Hensch, “The Newspaper in a Republic,” 12–14 and 145–66.

dilemmas, Russell offered an economically viable, purposively professional, and staunchly partisan strategy for the diffusion of French Revolutionary news. Fleet communication remained important, but the *Columbian Centinel* editor sought to balance a desire for contemporaneity with an insistence on precision. The “EDITOR of this paper, having established a correspondence in *Europe*, will devote himself to its accurate communication,” Russell asserted in April 1793. On other dates in that year, he used telling phrases like “first authentic intelligence,” “earliest and most AUTHENTIC INFORMATION,” “corroborative of former news,” and “ACCURATE SUMMARY OF INTELLIGENCE By the Last Saturday’s Mails.” The accent on reliable news did not go unnoticed. According to Samuel Drake, “The Centinel was, at this time, distinguished for the accuracy of its information in regard to the war then raging between republican France and combined Europe.”³⁰

Russell valued accuracy not only because “There is an intrinsic excellence in truth,” but also because it reflected an alternative mode of engaging ongoing developments. In a November 1793 “SUMMARY OF Latest Foreign Intelligence OF EUROPE,” he described how unconfirmed “accounts of the defeats and disasters of the *French*” provided “by one [ship] arrival” preyed upon weak-minded individuals: “In *the style of the times*, every [one] of these events is highly coloured: And doubt and despondency are their consequences, in the minds of the fickle, and the uninformed.” No sooner had the ignorant begun to wallow in “the loss of *Valenciennes, Mentz, and Conde*” than a ship carrying contrary news completely reversed the public mood. “By the next arrival the scene changes, and we are informed, that the *Combined army* has suffered a total defeat,” the *Columbian Centinel* editor noted. “These accounts receive a proportionate colouring; exultation and confidence, are their consequences, in the same minds which had experienced the operation of doubt and despondency.”³¹

The central issue of the “SUMMARY” was that people’s emotional disposition fluctuated so wildly and according to unexamined international accounts. “The one and the other is irrational, and unworthy the stability of the American character,” Russell wrote. “[I]t ought to be the duty of every one to investigate the TRUTH of every report; to sift the

30. Drake, *Old Landmarks*, 101; *Columbian Centinel*, Apr. 20, Aug. 17, May 1, Oct. 23, and June 19, 1793.

31. *Columbian Centinel*, Sept. 14 and Nov. 20, 1793.

accounts received, and to separate the *germe* [sic] from the *chaff*.” In the heated political culture of the time, this circumspect approach sparked criticism, but in Russell’s mind, there was nothing more timely than instructing the public about the perils accompanying an undue preoccupation with contemporaneity. People needed to realize that international, revolutionary news was by its very nature partisan, incomplete, unreliable, and fleeting, that “accounts . . . *are fabricated in every nation, to answer the purposes of the moment.*” Only by thinking beyond “*the moment*” could Americans establish a temperate national character impervious to the mercurial fortunes of trans-Atlantic intelligence and war. Only by taking a long-term view of the present could they live judiciously in the present.³²

On the surface, Russell’s emphasis on the future and its implications for the present seemed to mirror traditional Protestant, Whig, and Scottish enlightenment concepts of time. The difference was the future evoked by Russell was so open-ended. Whereas prevailing understandings of time prompted Democratic-Republicans to read the future in French Revolutionary events, Russell encouraged his audience to scan news carefully because it may become apparent that something was happening that had not been previously prophesied or anticipated. The monitorial ethos modeled in the pages of the *Columbian Centinel* was conservative rather than revolutionary, responsive rather than predictive, and steady rather than dynamic. But Russell’s editorial style should not be characterized as altogether reactionary, as simply the by-product of arch-Federalist attachment to the past. In his commitment to accuracy and deliberation, Russell pioneered a sophisticated approach to trans-Atlantic events whereby Americans would master rather than be mastered by news. In short, he taught readers to live in a world of contingency, in a cultural environment revolving around what Anthony Giddens characterizes as “reflexivity . . . the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character.”³³

32. *Columbian Centinel*, Nov. 20, 1793.

33. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 38. See also Koselleck, “Concepts of Historical Time and Social History” in *The Practice of Conceptual History*, 127–28; Peter Onuf and Nicholas Onuf, *Federal Union, Modern World: The Law of Nations in an Age of Revolutions, 1776–1814* (Madison, WI, 1993), 1–3.

Critical engagement with contingency in turn reinforced the development of the competitive political system so disdained by most Americans. Historians have noted that the party division of the 1790s emerged in reaction to foreign revolution. Less understood is the degree to which the introduction of the unknown into concepts of political time was coterminous with the formation of the Democratic-Republican and Federalist coalitions. Before the radicalized French Revolution, Americans could imagine a world without parties in part because they had confidence in their ability to pinpoint the present moment on the grand continuum of time. Proper political activity, accordingly, was a matter of calmly steering the ship of state along its preordained journey. Once people admitted the possibility of the unforeseen, however, constant popular involvement was necessary to ensure that appropriate decisions were made in response to each intelligence update. The belief in an unpredictable future consequently helped lay the foundation for an active, democratic citizenry. By insisting upon a supervisory role for newspapers and the reading public, individuals like Russell gave credence to the oppositional political dynamic they sought to counteract.³⁴

In the same way the radicalized French Revolution engendered a causal relationship between revolutionary contingency and partisanship, it spurred a necessary link between inefficacious conspiratorial interpretations and the emergence of modern, social scientific ideas. As Gordon Wood has demonstrated, the unsettling rush of late eighteenth-century events—especially the “[French] Revolution [which] was simply too convulsive and too sprawling, involving the participation of too many masses of people, to be easily confined within conventional personalistic and rationalistic modes of explanation”—pushed people to question the “presumed moral identity between . . . motive and deed.” The same

34. Joseph Charles, *The Origins of the American Party System: Three Essays* (New York, 1961; orig. published 1956); Jack N. Rakove, “The Political Presidency: Discovery and Invention,” in *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic*, ed. James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, and Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville, VA, 2002), 30–58; Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1991), 81–89. For the relationship between new ideas about time and the creation of political parties, see Koselleck, “Concepts of Historical Time and Social History” in *The Practice of Conceptual History*, 129, and Koselleck, “Perspective and Temporality” in *Futures Past*, 128–51.

onslaught of foreign events and jumbled news reports that called into question American attempts to situate the present moment on a Protestant, Whig, or Scottish enlightenment timeline thus helped undermine “the logic of [Newtonian] science” and its emphasis on “mechanistic cause and effect.” In both cases, the intellectual world wherein “enlightened thinkers . . . could . . . no more accept the seeming chaos and contingency of events than the Puritans had” fell victim to the “French Revolution, [which] more than any other single event, changed the consciousness” of large numbers of people.³⁵



All in all, then, the evidence reveals not only the degree to which news in the mid-1790s was less an objective record of “what happened” than a set of “stories about what happened,” but also the way in which transnational tumult spawned a close correspondence between the disposition of American and French newspaper writers and readers. So close was this connection that stringing together a series of scholarly statements about French newspaper and political culture in the 1790s offers an accurate summary of its American counterpart. As in France, the “rhythm of publication and the breathless quality of the paper’s news stories conveyed the sense that every day of the Revolution was important, that ‘time . . . was a succession of turning points.’” This “extraordinary revolutionary experience of time,” of “unexpected events” that “seemed literally to compress time” prompted partisans to display both an overdetermined awareness of contemporaneity and an insatiable “demand” for “news of political change, of social progress, of the fortunes of war.” Printers’ attempts to satisfy readers’ “urgent thirst for the latest news,” meanwhile, testified to a belief that newspapers were effective “weapon[s]” in the struggle to “counter the ‘aristocratic’ menace to the social ideal” of popular sovereignty. That struggle met fierce resistance from journalistic opponents of the French Revolution, some of whom “deliberately tried to break away from the pattern of instant news reporting.” The resulting “multiplicity of competing papers”—“one of the most tangible signs of the changes wrought

35. Gordon S. Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (July 1982), 401–41 (quotations on 431, 418, 413, 419–20, and 431).

by the [French] Revolution”—in turn wielded “real influence on the political world.” It helped “produce an atmosphere of tension and expectation that made an explosion of some sort inevitable.” It ensured that “Time became an issue” and “ceased being a given.” It fostered “papers that gave the politics of the revolutionary decade its party structure.” And it pushed people to suggest “that it was impossible to foresee the turn of events and that human intentions and the course of history were two separate matters.”³⁶

To be familiar with popular American engagement with political time and newspaper culture in 1792 and 1793 is therefore to confront the power and reach of the radicalized French Revolution. At virtually every turn, editors, writers, and readers in the United States acted in ways that paralleled their French counterparts because the Atlantic Ocean could not stay the republicanization and militarization of France. French-inflected affairs instead set the pace for American political development. Partisans on both sides discussed this phenomenon, but no image more effectively captured its essence than the thermometer. The “mercury of republicanism in this city seems to rise and fall with the good or bad fortunes of France,” observed one Philadelphian, “and her measures are approved or condemned according to her victories or defeats.” Federalist Jedidiah Morse likewise acknowledged that the way in which Democratic-Republicans alternately celebrate “when the French are victorious” and “sing small” in the aftermath of French defeat “form[s] a sort of political thermometer, by which we can pretty accurately determine what . . . is the state of French politics.” Not surprisingly, both of these metaphorical assessments rested on an awareness of how the arrival of European intelligence affected residents of the United States. Newspapers did more, in that sense, than simply relay European information. By serving as conduits through which the radicalized French Revolution altered the public mood and made crucial changes in longstanding concepts of political time, newspapers

36. Robert Darnton, “An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *American Historical Review* 105 (Feb. 2000), 1; Popkin, *Revolutionary News*, 7, 37, 39, 142, 182, 183, and 185; Hunt, “The World We Have Gained,” 5 and 6; Forrest, *Soldiers of the French Revolution*, 110–11; Gough, *Newspaper Press*, 25, 36, and 96; Censer, *Prelude to Power*, 125; Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, 67.

functioned as both the most reliable instruments for measuring and the primary stimulants of the rhythms of partisan conflict. In the foreign news coverage of publications like Benjamin Russell's *Columbian Centinel*, readers and writers discerned and shaped the character of American political culture.³⁷

37. *National Gazette*, Apr. 20, 1793; Jedidiah Morse to Oliver Wolcott, Dec. 16, 1793, cited in George Gibbs, ed., *Memoirs of the Administrations of Washington and Adams, Edited from the Papers of Oliver Wolcott, Secretary of the Treasury*, Vol. I (New York, 1846), 124.

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