

HIST 133J: The Creation of the American Politician, 1789–1820
Professor Joanne Freeman

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Nathaniel Zelinsky

Managing History: The Federalist Attempt To Shape the Hartford Convention’s Legacy

by Nathaniel Zelinsky

I: Introduction

In 1831, a young man in Massachusetts wrote a letter to the editor of the *Lowell Mercury*. Since birth, the author claimed, he had “heard the Hartford Convention often spoken of...[Its] intention was to have destroyed the Union of the States.” But he had never known an “authority” for the claim of the Convention’s treasonous designs, only the argument that “the people say so.” Could the *Mercury* educate “the rising generation” by publishing a much needed history of the Hartford Convention?¹

Seventeen years after it was held, the Hartford Convention was paradoxically widely known but poorly understood. Like this letter writer, many used the Convention as a catchphrase for treason, secession, and disunion. But few knew why or from where their perceptions of the assembly came.

The Convention arose out of the Federalists’ dissatisfaction with the War of 1812, which they deemed unconstitutional. In 1814, five New England states sent representatives to Connecticut’s capital. There, members convened in secret session for three weeks as December 1814 turned into January of 1815, publishing afterward a report of their grievances. At the time, Republicans attacked the Hartford Convention as secessionist, a charge that would come to define the popular conception of the assembly in the following years. Early Federalist attempts to combat this damaging narrative were both few and ineffective.

¹ The Lowell Mercury, March 26, 1831.

In 1828, history provided the Federalists the chance to change that narrative, when the election of 1828 and the Nullification Crisis rocketed the Hartford Convention back onto the national stage. That year, South Carolina controversially deemed a series of protective tariffs to be unconstitutional and, thus, unenforceable. Many political commentators throughout the United States, both opposed to and supportive of the doctrine of nullification, grasped a ready-made parallel to the Hartford Convention. Just as the Federalists had labeled certain executive acts unconstitutional in 1815, South Carolina was doing the same with a tariff in 1828 — or so the comparison went. In 1830, the Convention featured prominently in the widely publicized Senate debate between Daniel Webster and Robert Hayne, further raising the question of the Federalist legacy in the American mind.

Starting in 1828, the Federalists tried to capitalize on the opportunity provided by the Nullification Crisis to reshape the popular perception of the Convention. Their efforts culminated in the 1833 publication of the *History of the Hartford Convention*, by Theodore Dwight, the Convention's Secretary. The *History* was a blatant attempt to redefine the established narrative of the Hartford Convention. Unfortunately for the Federalists, this and other efforts at rehabilitation failed.

Three factors prevented the Federalists from reshaping the existing perception of their 1814 assembly. First, in 1828, a secret succession plot by Federalists predating the War of 1812 came to light. This pre-Hartford Convention plot further sullied the reputation of the Convention at the very time Federalists were trying to vindicate the assembly. Second, while defending the Convention and its members as loyal, Federalists also played partisan politics and attacked the nullifiers as treasonous. In doing so, the New Englanders failed to sufficiently differentiate themselves from their equivalents in South Carolina and their self-defense lacked rhetorical

clout. Third, Dwight's *History* and other accounts intentionally skirted many of the contentious issues of the Convention, chief among them the meeting's secrecy. Ultimately, the Federalists failed to capitalize on the Nullification Crisis because of this combination of bad luck, partisan politics, and a refusal to honestly acknowledge their own legacy. Managing history proved to be beyond their capability.²

II: The Causes of the Hartford Convention

A variety of grievances led five New England states to send representatives to Hartford, Connecticut in 1814. Northern merchants had chafed under the pre-war Embargo Act of 1807 that banned overseas commerce with both Britain and France.³ At the time, murmurs of secession arose in an angry Federalist press, starting the rumors of a supposed plan for an independent New England.⁴ Tensions further flared when Congress declared war against the British in 1812, a declaration that Federalist congressmen universally opposed.⁵ In the early days of the war itself, governors in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island refused to place their militias under federal authority, arguing that Congress' act federalizing state troops

² Modern Historians have little addressed the history of the Hartford Convention, and almost none have discussed its place in American historical memory. The chief exception is Samuel Eliot Morison's biography of Harrison Gray Otis, a chief organizer of the Convention, which examines how Federalists attempted to defend their legacy. However, Morison's subject limits the scope of his analysis to those events that directly involved Otis. See Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Life and Letters of Harrison Gray Otis*, vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913). A short pamphlet by William Edward Buckley also briefly chronicles the ways in which some of the Convention's supporters defended that body in the immediate aftermath of the assembly. See William Edward Buckley, *The Hartford Convention* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934). For a good analysis of the Federalists' many motivations for calling the convention, see James Banner, *To the Hartford Convention* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1970). See also, Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012); Henry Adams, *History of the United States During the Second Administration of James Madison* vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891).

³ Banner, *To the Convention*, 294.

⁴ Banner, *To the Convention*, 299; Buckley, *The Hartford Convention*, 3.

⁵ Hickey, *A Forgotten Conflict*, 261. The causes of the War of 1812 have long been a subject of changing interpretation. For a historiographical discussion, see Warren H. Goodman, "The Origins of the War of 1812: A Survey of Changing Interpretations" *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. 28, no. 2 (September, 1941): pp. 171-186. The most recent and thorough study of the subject is John Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: politics, diplomacy, and warfare in the early American republic, 1783-1830* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

was unconstitutional.⁶ Leading Federalists encouraged wealthy New Englanders and banks to withhold capital from the national government.⁷ In addition to actively opposing the war, many in northern states began to feel at undue risk of attack. A series of British raids on Connecticut highlighted the exposed nature of much of the coastline in 1814.⁸

The same year, some Federalist politicians and newspapers, primarily in Massachusetts, agitated for secession. Even more called for a convention of New England states, which might either secede or merely petition Washington for a change in policy. Such calls were not new; Federalists had advocated for a similar convention after the Embargo Act and the start of the war.⁹

Moderate Massachusetts Federalists originally opposed a convention, fearing the dominance of more radical politicians bent on secession. By August of 1814, though, the American war effort was in truly dire straits. The city of Washington lay smoldering after destruction by the British, and enemy forces occupied Maine, threatening New England. To moderates, a convention seemed to be the best way to appease an anxious and radical public, while also avoiding a breach of the Union.¹⁰

In October, the Massachusetts legislature, guided by Harrison Gray Otis, passed a resolution calling for a convention and issued an invitation to its neighboring states to meet in Hartford. The legislatures of Connecticut and Rhode Island responded favorably to Otis' plan.

⁶ The Constitution provides Congress with the right to call up state militias “to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress Insurrections and repel Invasions.” The Federalist governors argued that no threat of invasion was imminent in the weeks following the declaration of war because it would take considerable time for the British to mount an overseas offensive. In their minds, Madison had no justification for federalizing the militias. Additionally, the governors objected to the fact that federal army officers, instead of state militia officers, would command federalized troops. Buckley, *The Hartford Convention* 4.

⁷ Hickey, *A Forgotten Conflict*, 263.

⁸ The national government partially left the New England coast defenseless as retaliation for the northern refusal to provide federalized militia. See Morison, *Life and Letters*, 97. For more causes of the Hartford convention, see *ibid.*, 93-105.

⁹ Hickey, *A Forgotten Conflict*, 274-5.

¹⁰ Banner, *To the Convention*, 304, 321-323.

Vermont and Democratically-controlled New Hampshire declined to send delegates, but three counties in the two reluctant states elected to send their own representatives.¹¹

Nationwide, Republican newspapers immediately branded the Hartford Convention as secessionist, despite being composed of loyal, moderate Federalists who saw the Convention as a way to placate radicals.¹² The press' fears echoed those of national officials. Concerned about the Federalists' intent, President Madison even dispatched an army officer, Thomas Jesup, to spy on the assembly and notify him of its proceedings.¹³

The members of the Hartford Convention first met on December 15, 1814. Almost nothing is known about its day-to-day proceedings. The participants adopted a strict resolution of secrecy, barring the doors to their meeting place and keeping only a scant official record.¹⁴ To a man, members refused to abandon this resolution later in life, presenting an almost unsolvable puzzle for future historians. For the Convention's critics, relentless secrecy became a hallmark of treasonous conspiracy, a charge the Federalists could never refute.¹⁵

After three weeks of deliberations, the Convention released a *Report of the Hartford Convention*, which was published as a pamphlet and immediately reprinted in newspapers around the country.¹⁶ Likely authored by Otis, the document outlined Federalist grievances and proposed seven amendments to the Constitution.¹⁷ The *Report* was a conscious Federalist

¹¹ For an account of the state legislatures' actions in each state, see Banner, *To the Convention*, 327-9; Morison, *Life and Letters*, 106-9.

¹² Banner, *To the Convention*, 330-3.

¹³ Jesup's reports actually exonerated the Convention's members. For an account of Jesup's spying, see Jack Clarke, "Thomas Sydney Jesup: Military Observer at the Hartford Convention," *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 29 no. 3 (September, 1956): 393-399.

¹⁴ Secrecy allowed the members to "escape the pressures from public opinion." Morison, *Life and Letters*, 140.

¹⁵ Roger Minott Sherman kept a diary, which was stolen from an archive in Bridgeport, Connecticut at the turn of the century. Morison suggests that Sherman may have recorded the debates and proceedings of the Convention verbatim. Sherman's notebook remains lost, however. See Morison, *Life and Letters*, 143 n58.

¹⁶ See for example: *Report of the Hartford Convention*, printed in [New York] *The Evening Post*, January 7, 1815.

¹⁷ Morison, *Life and Letters*, 148.

attempt at controlling the popular narrative. They would not try to do so again at a national level until the Nullification Crisis of 1828 thrust the Hartford Convention back onto the public stage.

Two themes drove the Federalist narrative in the *Report*: The Convention was not secessionist, and the war was the fault of the party in power. The report euphemistically noted that some New Englanders thought, “that the time for a change is at hand.” But, it argued, secession was a “last resort,” to be especially avoided in a time of war.¹⁸ Federalists also offered a list of the causes of the War of 1812. In reality, this list read like a history of Jefferson's and Madison's administrations, from the Republican promotion of party interests to “depriving judges of their offices in violation of the Constitution,” the “influence of patronage,” and the “admission of new States.” Most importantly, the report noted Republican “[h]ostility to Great Britian” and “partially...[to] France” as the conflict's chief impetus.¹⁹

The *Report* concluded by proposing seven amendments to the Constitution, including the apportionment of congressional seats based on the white male population. Because these measures were designed to limit Southern and Western influence, they had little chance of passing the House, let alone being ratified by the states. In his history of the Convention, William E. Buckley suggests that the *Report* was likely an effort to promote Federalist “party unity,” not a serious attempt to amend the Constitution.²⁰

III: Pre-1828 Historical Narrative

Despite the *Report*, the opponents of the Hartford Convention dominated the national narrative in the post-war years. While some Federalists defended the assembly's actions, they did so on local stages, not on a nationwide platform. As a result, Republicans successfully branded the assembly as secessionist.

¹⁸ *Report of the Hartford Convention* in The Evening Post

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Buckley, *The Hartford Convention*, 28.

Matthew Carey's *The Olive Branch* likely had the greatest impact on the national conversation surrounding the Convention. As a staunch nationalist, Carey worried that New England's anti-war behavior threatened to tear the country apart. He wrote *The Olive Branch* to convince moderate Federalists to support the War of 1812 and to disavow secessionist radicals.²¹

Carey published the first edition of his book shortly before the Convention met, presenting a supposedly objective history of the causes and conduct of the war. In reality, though, he offered a selective reading which only appeared to be neutral.²² The book was instantly popular and over the next ten years sold more than 10,000 copies, more than any political text up to that date.²³

In the first edition of *The Olive Branch*, the Hartford Convention was explicitly depicted as a threat to the Union, and Carey called for a separate meeting of more moderate Federalists to counteract the divisive meeting in Connecticut.²⁴ In the six years after the war, he published another nine editions of his polemic. These editions refrained from terming the Convention treasonous, but Carey consistently tied the assembly to other Federalists who merited that label. For instance, the fifth edition of the book claims "there was a deep, a dangerous, and a treasonable conspiracy to dissolve the union," a charge that smeared all Federalists, including the members of the Convention.²⁵ By never explicitly exonerating the assembly's members of disunion, Carey deemed them guilty by association, an association he freely encouraged his readers to draw.

²¹ Edward C. Carter II, "Matthew Carey and 'The Olive Branch,' 1814-1818," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 89 no. 4 (October, 1965), 405.

²² *Ibid.*, 406

²³ *Ibid.*, 409.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 409. Carey did not know or refused to acknowledge that the members of the Convention were the moderate wing of the Federalist party.

²⁵ Matthew Carey, *The Olive Branch* (Philadelphia: Matthew Carey, 1815), 453.

The Olive Branch became a potent political weapon for the Republicans, as Carey's seemingly even-handed arguments easily won over moderates.²⁶ Federalists lost post-war elections at the state and national levels, losses fueled in large part by the stigma of the Convention. By 1819, only Massachusetts still had a Federalist governor in its statehouse.²⁷

The Federalists finally lost control of the Bay State in 1823, in an election that prompted them to attempt to reshape the historical narrative set by *The Olive Branch*. That year, the popular incumbent governor declined to run for another term. Federalists nominated Harrison Gray Otis, whose earlier orchestration of the Hartford Convention provided the Republicans with an easy target for criticism.

To fend off such attacks, Federalist Theodore Lyman defended Otis in a pamphlet entitled "A Short Account of the Hartford Convention." Lyman specifically designed his publication for use in the state election. Unlike Carey's *The Olive Branch*, which appealed to a national audience, the *Short Account* presented itself to a Massachusetts reader alone. On its first page, the pamphlet declared itself to be a defense of "the federal candidate for Governor" who had been attacked for being "*a member of the Hartford Convention.*"²⁸ Lyman then employed a logic based on local politics. He argued that past elections, in which Federalists retained the statehouse, "confirmed, affirmed, and ratified the proceedings of the Hartford Convention."²⁹ There was no need to rehash a debate that the people had already decided. Similarly, Lyman saw little need to defend the assembly's conduct because the *Report* spoke for itself.³⁰

²⁶ Carter, *Carey and the Olive Branch*, 412.

²⁷ On Federalist losses in Connecticut, see Richard Purcell, *Connecticut in Transition, 1775-1818* (London: Oxford University Press, 1918). On Federalist losses in general, see Morison, 203.

²⁸ Theodore Lyman, *Account of the Hartford Convention*, (Boston: Everitt, 1823), 1. (Italics in original).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

While its chief purpose was as campaign literature in a contentious election, the *Short Account* marked an important turning point for Federalists in displaying a previously absent sensitivity about their past. Lyman wrote the pamphlet because “a generation has grown up into active and useful life since [the Convention].”³¹ That generation and subsequent ones needed to be educated in the Federalist narrative.

The pamphlet received little attention in the Massachusetts press, and the coverage it did receive was negative. One writer, under the pseudonym “Samuel Adams,” expressed disbelief at Lyman’s claim “that there never was, and never could have been, either silence or mystery or secrecy” surrounding the Convention.³² The assembly’s resolution to bar its doors to the public and its members’ perpetual silence ran counter to Lyman’s assertions of benignity.³³

Otis lost the election of 1823 to a popular opponent. His biographer, Samuel Eliot Morison, suggests that the Massachusetts Federalists misjudged the electorate’s concerns. In reality, the people cared little about the Hartford Convention and Republican accusations of treason. But, in only refuting their opponents’ allegations, Federalists failed to articulate a coherent platform that voters could support.³⁴ By extension, Lyman’s pamphlet may have flopped because it was unnecessary. Republican criticism of the Hartford Convention lacked bite in Massachusetts. The *Short Account* was little read precisely because the electorate needed no convincing of the Convention’s honorableness.³⁵

The pamphlet was not the final Federalist attempt in Massachusetts to reset the historical narrative. In 1824, Otis authored a series of letters in the *Boston Centinel* defending the

³¹ Ibid., 2.

³² Ibid., 4.

³³ “Samuel Adams,” *Boston Patriot*, March 22, 1823.

³⁴ Morison, *Life and Letters*, 242.

³⁵ In the end, despite voter’s apathy about the Convention, both the Federalists and Republicans focused the election on Otis’ participation in the assembly, perceiving the topic to be more salient than it actually was. Ibid.

convention and his actions, probably sparked by the failure of the *Short Account* and his electoral loss. Later published as a pamphlet, the letters struck most observers at the time as angry, “rambling,” and “inconsistent.”³⁶

This second defense of the Convention mirrored the *Short Account* in several important respects. First, like Lyman, Otis wrote for a Massachusetts audience, not a national one. The letters excerpted and rebutted speeches by Governor William Eustis, the Republican who had bested him in the previous year’s election and who was highly critical of the Hartford Convention.³⁷ This rhetorical style limited Otis’ potential audience to his home state and those familiar with local politics. Second, Otis’ prose reveals him to be increasingly concerned with his and the Convention’s historical legacy. He lamented “[how] will this affair stand with posterity” and worried that future generations would be taught to simply hate the assembly without knowing why.³⁸ Unfortunately for Otis, most contemporary observers agreed that his letters were ineffective, offered little new information, and would have little impact on the historical narrative.³⁹

Thus, Matthew Carey’s *Olive Branch* quickly codified the national consensus surrounding the Hartford Convention. Carey’s book seemed neutral and measured; in reality, it was an instrument of politics that subtly manipulated the historical record. Lyman’s and Otis’ respective pamphlets reveal that Federalists had grown apprehensive about their and the Convention’s legacy. However, unlike Carey, they wrote to local audiences, limiting the appeal of their polemics. Not until the election of 1828 and the Nullification Crisis would Federalists regain the national stage.

³⁶ Ibid., 245.

³⁷ See for example, Harrison Gray Otis, *Otis’ Letters* (Boston: Simon Gardner, 1824), 5-4, 17.

³⁸ Ibid., 9, 8.

³⁹ Morison, *Life and Letters*, 245.

IV: The Election of 1828 and the Nullification Crisis

One of the bitterest political contests in American history, the election of 1828 thrust the Hartford Convention into the national limelight.⁴⁰ Both John Quincy Adams' and Jackson's supporters launched vicious attacks against the opposing candidate and his associates. In the course of the campaign, Jacksonites tried to tie Adams to the Convention in order to undermine him nationally.⁴¹ For instance, one paper, under the headline "Look! Look!! Look!!!" gleefully exclaimed that Adams' reelection would be lost without the support of "Hartford Conventionists."⁴² Another claimed that, by his "own adherents," the incumbent President was the "candidate of the Hartford Convention."⁴³ Adams became guilty by his association with former Federalists, and, in the popular narrative, the Convention was once again branded as treasonous.

In March of 1828, Adams came under attack from another angle. Former Virginia Governor William Giles, a Jackson supporter, authored a lengthy article in the *United States Telegraph*. Among other charges, Giles accused the President of switching allegiances from the Federalists to the Republicans in 1808 for political gain. Adams, the article asserted, had notified Thomas Jefferson of a Federalist plot of secession stemming from the Embargo of 1807, the titular reason for the 1808 change in party affiliation. However, Giles claimed that Adams revealed his intention to become a Republican prior to the Embargo's passing. Ergo, having already decided to switch parties, Adams conveniently manufactured the supposed disunion plot

⁴⁰ Lynn Parsons, *The Birth of Modern Politics: Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, and the Election of 1828* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 161-6.

⁴¹ Morison, *Life and Letters*, 247. Interestingly, in her history of that election, Parsons makes no mention of the Hartford Convention playing a decisive factor.

⁴² [Portsmouth] *New Hampshire Gazette*, January 1, 1828.

⁴³ [District of Columbia] *United States Telegraph*, January 31, 1828.

for his own gain. To substantiate his accusation, Giles reprinted an 1825 letter from the aged Jefferson, in which Jefferson says Adams revealed a most nefarious and daring *attempt to dissever the Union*, of which the Hartford Convention was a subsequent chapter.”⁴⁴

The attack by Giles and the implied affiliation with the Convention clearly stung Adams. In October of 1828, the President authorized a Washington-based paper, the *National Intelligencer*, to write a letter on his behalf, clarifying his version of events. Adams wrote, through the *Intelligencer*, that he had notified many correspondents in 1807 of Federalist leaders’ intent to affect “a dissolution of the Union, and the establishment of a separate confederation.”⁴⁵ Without explicitly mentioning it, Adams implicitly dammed the Hartford Convention as a treasonous assembly bent on disunion. This charge must have especially hurt the Federalist cause given Adams’ office and status as a former Federalist.⁴⁶

In 1829, after the election, angry Federalists who considered themselves leaders of their party in 1808 penned a letter in response to Adams’ accusations. The Federalists, including Harrison Gray Otis and other members of the Hartford Convention, demanded that Adams substantiate his claims against the Federalists. The now former president replied in kind and traced the origins of Federalist secession from 1804 to 1808. He called the Hartford Convention

⁴⁴ [District of Columbia] *United States Telegraph*, March 13, 1828. (Italics in original).

⁴⁵ John Quincy Adams, *Documents Relating to New England Federalism*, ed. Henry Adams (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1905), 25. See also, Morison, 247.

⁴⁶ The pro-Jackson press pounced on Adams’ accusations. In Massachusetts, Theodore Lyman, the same person who published the *Short Account* of the Hartford Convention but who became a late in life Jackson supporter, penned an article in which he put names to Adams’ allegations. Among those named was Daniel Webster, who would play a major role in the Hartford Convention’s legacy through his famous debate with Robert Hayne (see below). Webster then sued Lyman for libel; the jury deadlocked, ten for conviction, two for acquittal. For a full account of the trial, see John Whitman, *Report of a Trial in the Supreme Judicial Court, Holden at Boston, December 16th and 17th, 1828, of Theodore Lyman, Jr.* (Boston: Putnam and Hunt, 1828). For a brief summary of the episode and Lyman’s motivations, see Morison, 247-8. See also, Robert Remini, *Daniel Webster: The Man and His Time* (New York: Norton and Company, 1997), 301. For the impact of Giles’ letter on Adams’ campaign, see Parsons, *The Election of 1828*, 170.

the “final catastrophe,” a culmination of Federalist treason.⁴⁷ Ultimately, this widespread, negative portrayal of Federalists and the Hartford Convention reaffirmed the poor impression of the Convention in the mind of the American public.

In the midst of the election and the brouhaha between Adams and former Federalists, Congress passed a tariff designed to protect infant Northern industries from overseas competition.⁴⁸ South Carolina’s representatives in Washington vehemently opposed the measure, which they saw as damaging to their own state’s economy and unconstitutional; nowhere, they claimed, did the Constitution provided for protective tariffs. In this context, many South Carolinians advocated the theory of nullification which held that states, and not the Supreme Court, ultimately arbitrated questions of constitutionality.⁴⁹

For the four years following 1828, nullification proved to be a heated topic in newspapers and on the floor of Congress. Many commentators grasped the parallel to the Hartford Convention, giving new life to the debate over the assembly’s legacy. This national conversation represented an opportunity for former Federalists and their supporters to reshape the narrative of the War of 1812. The Convention’s defense culminated in Theodore Dwight’s *History of the Hartford Convention* in 1833. However, despite their efforts, the Federalists failed to remake their legacy. Adams’s revelation of a Federalist succession plot in 1808, the inability to differentiate their actions from those of South Carolina nullifiers, and a refusal to honestly address the Convention’s seemingly conspiratorial nature doomed the Federalists in the eyes of the nation.

⁴⁷ *Charleston Courier*, February 19, 1829. For information about Federalist calls for secession in 1803, see Gerald Clarfield, *Timothy Pickering and the American Republic* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980). Interestingly, in his compilation of John Quincy Adams’ papers on this topic, Henry Adams omits this one of his ancestor’s letters.

⁴⁸ For a general history of the Nullification Crisis, see William Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 134-260; and, Richard Ellis, *The Union at Risk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁴⁹ Freehling, *Prelude*, 143.

In June of 1828, the Hartford Convention made its first appearance in the nullification controversy when South Carolina papers opposed to nullification made unfavorable comparisons between the contemporary nullifiers and the Convention.⁵⁰ Superficially, both groups — the Federalists in 1814 and the nullifiers of 1828 — advocated a similar brand of constitutional theory, in which states could interpret the constitutionality of an executive action. The *Charleston Courier* rhetorically asked how “the Southron [sic] differ from the Hartford Convention, that theme of reproach with all good patriots? Not a jot.”⁵¹ Similarly, an anonymous letter-writer wondered how nullifiers could denounce “the Hartford Convention as guilty of treason” when they were guilty of the same.⁵² For the most part, though, these analogies were confined to both South Carolina and the *Courier*, and likely did little to influence the national conception of the Convention.⁵³

The question of nullification found its way onto the floor of the U.S. Senate in 1830, and it was from there that the Hartford Convention was thrust back into the national limelight. In the course of five speeches, Senators Robert Hayne of South Carolina and David Webster of Massachusetts clashed over their respective conceptions of state’s rights, nullification and the nature of the Union.⁵⁴ The Webster-Hayne debate was widely reprinted in national papers and received unparalleled attention around the country, tying together the Convention and nullification in the nation’s discourse.

⁵⁰ Apart from being unpopular throughout the wider United States, nullification was a contentious issue inside South Carolina itself.

⁵¹ *Charleston Courier*, June 20, 1828.

⁵² “Lowndes” *Charleston Courier*, July, 18, 1828.

⁵³ For a similar example, see *Charleston Courier*, July, 18, 1828.

⁵⁴ For an analysis of the Webster-Hayne debate, see Stefan Brooks, *The Webster-Hayne Debate* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009). For the text of the speeches, see Herman Belz, ed., *The Webster-Hayne Debate on the Nature of the Union* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000). See also Remini’s account of the debate in his biography of Webster, Remini, *The Man and His Time*, 312-45.

The famous debate began with a relatively innocuous speech in which Hayne criticized the protective tariffs of 1828. Taking offense at his colleague's remarks, Webster responded to Hayne and equated nullification and disunion.⁵⁵ Hayne then replied in a blistering set of remarks centered on the Hartford Convention and New England's conduct during the War of 1812. For the Senator from South Carolina, Webster's charge of disunion seemed both specious and ironic. Had not his Federalist compatriots conceived an assembly bent on "open resistance to the Government, and the Separation of the States?"⁵⁶

Ultimately, Hayne had to reconcile the doctrine of nullification and the Hartford Convention, while also attacking the 1814 body. By Hayne's logic, if the New Englanders truly believed their rights were violated, the Federalists were well within their right to exercise "constitutional measures for redress."⁵⁷ But the Convention's timing, immediately following Washington's burning, betrayed Federalists disloyalty.⁵⁸ Further, the proposed constitutional amendments in the Convention's report were "radical changes in the Government, changes that can never be effected without a dissolution of the Union."⁵⁹ In proving his case, Hayne referenced the 1808 plot and Giles' letter, drawing on the still fresh controversy.⁶⁰

Following Hayne's second address, Webster delivered a prepared speech that would become famous in American rhetoric.⁶¹ Webster later published an edited version of his remarks in national papers, and this copy survived as the text read by schoolchildren today. In his

⁵⁵ Belz, *Nature of the Union*, 24. See also, Remini, *The Man and His Time*, 317.

⁵⁶ Belz, *Nature of the Union*, 61.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 70-1. Hayne quoted extensively from Matthew Carey's *Olive Branch*, a further testament to the effectiveness of that book in shaping the historical narrative of the Hartford Convention. See *ibid.*, 48, 61, 65. Hayne also referenced Lyman's *Short Account of Hartford Convention*, which he calls "a rare book." *Ibid.*, 68.

⁶¹For an analysis of the teaching of Webster's second speech, see Belz's foreword in his text of the debate. *Ibid.*, vii-xv.

published version, he limited his defense of the Hartford Convention and merely noted Hayne's inconsistency in viewing the assembly as both an "authority" for nullification and a "topic of reproach."⁶² An analysis of Webster's notes, however, suggests that he originally gave a stronger defense of the Convention on the Senate's floor. In the printed speech, he removed arguments in favor of the assembly because he wanted to emphasize Southern radicalism, a task that would have been rhetorically difficult had he also defended New England secession.⁶³ The Massachusetts Senator essentially ceded to Hayne the Convention's legacy to score a political victory. While historians mark the debate as a triumph for Webster's conception of Union, Hayne's version of the Hartford Convention prevailed in the ensuing national conversation.

In the months and years following the Webster-Hayne debate, newspapers around the country began drawing a parallel between the Convention and nullification. Many opposed both the Convention and nullification, a philosophically consistent position. For example, one Massachusetts newspaper wrote "[t]he only difference...in them consists in the *means used* and the 'the time when,' &c."⁶⁴ Similarly, another paper in Connecticut noted that supporters of nullification "[assumed] the same ground with the federalists, who got up the Hartford Convention held in 1814."⁶⁵ And a New York press derided pro-nullification meetings in South Carolina, which were held in the same "mode in which the Hartford Convention was called together."⁶⁶

⁶² Ibid., 120. Webster also denied being involved in the Convention. Ibid., 93. At different points in his political career, opponents had tried to attach Webster to the Convention, though he was not a member. See Remini, *The Man and His Time*, 130.

⁶³ Harlow Sheidley, "The Webster-Hayne Debate: Recasting New England's Sectionalism," *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 67 no. 1 (March, 1994), 22.

⁶⁴ Lowell Mercury, March 5, 1831.

⁶⁵ [Bridgeport] Spirit Of The Times, October 5, 1831.

⁶⁶ The New-York Morning Herald, April 18, 1830. For a similar comparison, see also [Hartford] American Mercury, October 17, 1831.

In proving their charges of treason and disunion, critics of the Convention repeated the old trope of secrecy. For instance, one paper wrote that, because the Hartford assembly met in “CLOSED DOORS...facts warrant the conclusion, that this Convention was called for the purpose of devising a separation of the Union.”⁶⁷ For these conspiracy theorists, only the disclosure of the proceedings would “remove the suspicion of their plotting treason.”⁶⁸

The Convention’s supporters tried to defend the body’s historical legacy. However, like Webster, they also attacked the doctrine of nullification, a paradoxical position that muffled their defense of the Hartford assembly. In Massachusetts, a paper reflecting this pro-Federalist stance refuted the connection between the Convention and “Carolina *nullifiers*” with the following: “[The Federalists] never held any doctrine which would bear a comparison, for the danger of its tendency, with that now so boldly advocated [in the South].”⁶⁹ Ultimately, such blanket assertions based on little evidence must have held scant weight.

Thus, aging Federalists found themselves without a coherent narrative. Giles’ letter in the election of 1828 and the continued charge of secrecy created an ostensibly persuasive case against the Convention. In presenting their counter narrative, whether on the Senate’s floor or in the popular press, the assembly’s supporters engaged in partisan politics, refuting the doctrine of nullification and neutering their own arguments in the process.

In 1833, the Hartford Convention’s secretary, Theodore Dwight, set out to succeed where his Federalist colleagues had failed by writing an authoritative history of the body. Given the national platform onto which the Webster-Hayne debate had thrust the Convention, the book had the potential to reshape the historical narrative. However, Dwight fell short, for the same reasons as his counterparts in the Senate and the press, namely his refusal to reveal the details of the

⁶⁷ The Lowell Mercury, March 26, 1831. (Caps in original).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ [Worcester] Massachusetts Spy, July 7, 1830. (Italics in original).

Convention, his unwillingness to acknowledge the secessionist movements within the Federalist party, and his inability to distinguish between nullification and the Convention.

The *History of the Hartford Convention* appeared in the winter of 1833. Dwight clearly published it as a reaction to the Webster-Hayne debate, devoting an appendix to refuting Hayne's comparison between nullification and the Hartford assembly.⁷⁰ In a letter, one of Dwight's cousins understood the book's purpose to be twofold: to rebut "those who are now on the stage" as a result of the nullification crisis and to better inform "the future historians of our country."⁷¹

The degree to which Dwight wrote for these "future historians" is palpable in his prose. The *History* began with the 1787 Constitutional Convention. Through painstaking research in official documents, Dwight then constructed the entire Federalist narrative of American history from that moment forward. He repeatedly stated that Jefferson's lifelong "animosity against Great Britain, and attachment to France" led to the War of 1812, the linchpin of his and other Federalists' worldview.⁷² In short, Dwight's book presented the case for, not only the Hartford Convention, but for the Federalist Party since its inception. This detailed portrayal of events was a clear attempt at shaping the broader historical discourse in decades to come. In this regard, the *History* offered nothing new, but instead articulated a Federalist narrative as old as Alexander Hamilton and as recent as Theodore Lyman's *Short Account*.

Similarly, Dwight provided no new account of the Convention or its motivations. He claimed that the assembly met as the result of New England's concern over the federalization of

⁷⁰ Theodore Dwight, *History of the Hartford Convention* (New York: N&J White, 1833), 434-7. That fact that Dwight refuted Hayne in an appendix, rather than throughout his text, suggests that Dwight might have already been writing his history prior to the Webster-Hayne debate and only added a refutation after the debate occurred. If this is correct, the nullification controversy presented a salient moment to publish a book already in the works.

⁷¹ Timothy Dwight to Theodore Dwight, February 20, 1834, Box 2, Folder 58, Dwight and Ferris Family Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

⁷² Dwight, *History of the Hartford Convention*, 57. For more claims of Republican Francophile tendencies, see also, *ibid.*, 35, 65, 80, 92. Dwight argued that the War of 1812 was a Jeffersonian attempt to assist Napoleon in his war with Great Britain. *Ibid.*, 323.

the militia and the safety of Northern states.⁷³ This justification avoided the unpleasant fact that some Federalists, especially newspapers, advocated for secession just prior to the Convention. But, by skirting this sensitive topic, Dwight failed to fully address the anti-Convention narrative.

Most surprisingly, Dwight maintained the vow of secrecy and did not include a personal description of the Convention's proceedings. Instead, he reprinted the *Report* and the official journal, much like Lyman did in his pamphlet. The *History's* silence on the actual events at the Convention prevented Dwight from refuting the claims of a treasonous conspiracy that surrounded the Convention since its inception and continued to harm its reputation in the popular press. Dwight ineffectively attempted to refute the conspiracy theorists by arguing that, to avoid the light of day for "nineteen years," a plot would have to be held in "impenetrable obscurity."⁷⁴ Given the many actors charged with involvement in the secession scheme, including multiple states' legislators and the Convention members, the assembly could not possibly have advocated treason without leaving some real trace of that advocacy. However, like Lyman's version of the same argument, Dwight's justification of the Convention's secrecy fell on deaf ears because his refusal to reveal the facts left intact the now conventional impression of the Convention as a disunionist body.

In his appendix refuting Hayne, Dwight was hampered by the Federalist paradox, defending the Hartford Convention while opposing nullification. He attempted to argue that the 1814 assembly "recommended no measure which had the slightest tendency to prostrate the national constitution, or to destroy the Union." In contrast, the South Carolina nullifiers "calculated to dissolve the Union."⁷⁵ In the end, Dwight unsuccessfully differentiated between the two by unpersuasively stating that the Convention was the result of justifiable grievances in a

⁷³ Dwight, *History of the Hartford Convention*, 341.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 402.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 447.

time of danger to New England, whereas the nullification advocates resorted to the same extreme measures in “a time of peace and prosperity,” when no similar emergencies were present.⁷⁶ Like other Federalists, Dwight could not persuasively distinguish between South Carolina in 1833 and New England in 1814.

Dwight’s work, while highly anticipated, was met by a muted reception. Prior to the *History*’s publication, newspapers around the country informed their readers of the book’s intended release.⁷⁷ And, when the manuscript appeared in print, the same papers eagerly reported on the event.⁷⁸ As the hype built up, some wondered how Dwight would address the Convention’s “inviolable secrecy...when [he] will not divulge” details of the assembly’s proceedings.⁷⁹

Unfortunately for its author, the *History of the Hartford Convention* was no *Olive Branch*. Dwight’s book failed to make much, if any, impact on the national narrative once it appeared in print. After publication, mention of the book in the press dropped precipitously. A few papers lauded the book, for presenting “the facts of the case,” which vindicated the Convention.⁸⁰ Many, however, either ignored the *History* or reacted negatively to its publication.⁸¹

Four factors explain why Dwight’s book fizzled, after it had gained a prominent national stage. First, unlike Matthew Carey who took painstaking measures to appear neutral, Dwight was an openly partisan author. As the Secretary of the Convention, he had a stake in its history.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 446.

⁷⁷ See for, example, *Saratoga Sentinel*, August 6, 1833; and *The Norwich Republican*, August 7, 1833.

⁷⁸ A one sentence article from a Virginia paper, typical of other publications, read: “Mr. Dwight’s history has just been published.” *Alexandria Gazette*, December 24, 1833.

⁷⁹ [Bennington] *Vermont Gazette*, July 30, 1833.

⁸⁰ [New York] *Commercial Advertiser*, December 24, 1833.

⁸¹ Dwight’s book also received little attention in books and historical journals for the next 20 years. For an exception that proves this rule, see “Origin and Character of the Old Parties,” review of *History of the Hartford Convention* and by Theodore Dwight, *The North American Review*, vol. 39, no. 84 (July, 1834): pp. 208-268.

Dwight tried to ameliorate this problem through the only means available to him, the *New York Daily Advertiser*, a paper he founded and operated. On the day of the *History*'s publication, the *Advertiser* praised the author's neutrality and "fidelity to the truth of history."⁸² However, despite Dwight's assertions to the contrary, he could not credibly brand himself as a neutral historian.

Second, the *History* was a poorly crafted book, four hundred and forty seven pages long without any chapter breaks or headings. After reading the book, a family member politely suggested that Dwight include chapters in subsequent editions.⁸³ In contrast, the successful *Olive Branch* was a shorter, readable text divided into seventy-eight chapters, each with a convenient heading. Thus, even if they accepted Dwight's neutrality, readers likely had difficulty reading the *History*.

Third, Dwight avoided the issue of secrecy and did not break the Convention's resolution of silence. Here, Dwight confronted a dilemma: Had he offered his personal recollections of the Convention, critics could have accused him of lying. Nevertheless, by maintaining the secrecy of the assembly, like other Federalists, Dwight was not able to overcome the charge of conspiracy.

Fourth, Dwight never successfully distinguished between the Hartford Convention's motivations and those of the South Carolina nullifiers. Papers would continue to draw the parallel between the two events, painting Dwight and the Convention as "Northern Nullifiers."⁸⁴ For example, the year after the publication of Dwight's book, the *Charleston* continued to oppose the Hartford Convention because "the principle of nullification emanated from that body."⁸⁵

⁸² [Keene] New-Hampshire Sentinel, January 30, 1834. The *Sentinel* reprinted the announcement from the *Commercial Advertiser*.

⁸³ Timothy Dwight to Theodore Dwight, February 20, 1834.

⁸⁴ [Newport] Rhode-Island Republican, January 1, 1836.

⁸⁵ Charleston Courier, January 6, 1834.

V: Conclusion

In 1809, John Adams wrote to New Hampshire Federalist William Plumer, concerned that no one would write a “true history” of their time. Instead, there would be “nothing but Federalist Histories or Republican Histories — New England Histories or Virginia Histories.”⁸⁶

Such is the story of the Hartford Convention. From 1814 onward, the assembly’s critics defined its popular image negatively for political purposes. Matthew Carey wanted to promote unity, and the Jacksonites of 1828 hoped to sink Adams with the charge of treason. For their part, the Federalists provided no coherent counter-case to the Republican national narrative. When they did defend the Convention, they did so to local audiences, like Lyman’s pamphlet and Otis’ letters. They never successfully presented their history to the country.

The election of 1828, the nullification crisis, and the Webster-Hayne debate presented the Federalists with a second chance at redefining their legacy. The Convention was once again a salient issue for the entire nation. But try as they might, the assembly supporters could not reshape the dominant conception of the events of 1814. The revelation of earlier secession plots further sullied the Federalist name and implied a grand scheme of disunion culminating in the Hartford meeting. As they tried to defend their history, some Federalists also attacked nullification, a logical inconsistency that muted their defenses. Or, like Webster, others chose to sacrifice the reputation of the Convention to score current political points. The potential for a revisionist history peaked with Dwight in 1833. Unfortunately for his cause, he wrote a poorly-designed text that lacked the pretense of neutrality, avoided the issue of secrecy, and failed to differentiate the Convention from nullification. As a result, the book fizzled into insignificance, failing to sway the public to the Federalist side.

⁸⁶ Charleston Courier, March 3, 1829.

The Hartford Convention remained a salient political issue. In late 1834, another debate occurred in Congress over the assembly's loyalty.⁸⁷ As the new Whig party was born, many of its opponents tried to attach to its members, themselves former Federalists, the stigma of their former party and the Hartford body.⁸⁸ By 1838, the issue of the Convention was still relevant. In Newton Massachusetts, a crowd listening to an aging Federalist sermonize hissed him down for his loose affiliation with the Hartford Convention.⁸⁹ But, despite these instances, the opportunity to remake the Federalist legacy died with Dwight's book, and the Republican narrative of history predominated. Not until turn-of-the-century scholars such as Morison would the Convention be truly vindicated.⁹⁰ Even then, it is not clear to what degree the modern literature has permeated the American mindset.⁹¹

In his lectures on the theory of history, John Lewis Gaddis suggested that historians “interpret the past for the purposes of the present with a view to managing the future.”⁹² If this is the case, the Hartford Convention's historiography provides cautionary lessons for those wanting to manage history. As the *Olive Branch* demonstrated, the first historian on the scene can quickly dominate the narrative and become difficult to overturn. Moreover, form and style are as important as content, a fact Theodore Dwight learned the hard way. Without being accessible

⁸⁷ Salem Gazette, August 5, 1834.

⁸⁸ See for example, The [Litchfield] Sun, December 12, 1835.

⁸⁹ The Hartford Times, July 21, 1838.

⁹⁰ Scholars should examine whether the Civil War influenced popular and scholarly perception of the Hartford Convention. The nullification crisis may have been emphasized and the Convention deemphasized in popular American history because the latter better fit the narrative of Southern secession.

⁹¹ Modern perceptions of the Hartford Convention represent a fruitful prospect for future research. The assembly's portrayal in secondary school pedagogical literature reveals how the Convention is taught and, consequently, how many Americans may view it. A preliminary survey suggests that most sources depict the Convention fairly as a collection of moderates with grievances who wanted to avoid disunion. For example, see a lesson plan by the National Endowment for the Humanities, “President Madison's 1812 War Message: Answers Lead to More Questions” accessed April 21, 2012, <http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/president-madisons-1812-war-message-answers-lead-more-questions#sect-extending>. However, some South Carolinian literature — deliberately designed to teach children secession from a “southern perspective” — portrays the Convention as secessionist. See “Secession: A Southern Perspective,” April 21, 2012, <http://www.teachingushistory.org/lessons/Secession.htm>. Thus, even today, political overtones may dominate popular understanding of this moment in American history.

⁹² John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10.

and objective — or, at least, perceived to be objective — new histories may smack of partisanship, only appealing to those already convinced of their merits. Ultimately, the Federalist legacy reminds us that the management of history is a difficult business whose outcome is far from certain.

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