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6. Nationalism Develops in the United States, 1789-1871

Robert L. Bloom
Gettysburg College

Basil L. Crapster
Gettysburg College

Harold L. Dunkelberger
Gettysburg College

See next page for additional authors

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6. Nationalism Develops in the United States, 1789-1871

Abstract

Nationalism as a political creed found roots also in the Western Hemisphere. The United States took a large step toward greater national unity in 1789 when George Washington became the first American President (1789-1797) under the new federal constitution. But just as citizens of the new republic debated the relative merits of aristocratic or democratic government, so they argued without essential agreement on the nature of their union -- whether the locus of authority should reside in the central government or be reserved to the individual states. The followers of Alexander Hamilton, the Federalists, interpreted the Constitution as permitting stronger central government. On the other hand, Thomas Jefferson and his cohorts insisted that the greater authority lay with the individual states. [excerpt]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Nationalism, George Washington, American Revolution, Constitution, War of 1812, Monroe Doctrine, Jeffersonians

Disciplines

American Politics | History | Models and Methods | Political History | United States History

Comments

This is a part of [Section XIII: Political Liberalism and Nationalism, 1815-1871](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

Robert L. Bloom, Basil L. Crapster, Harold L. Dunkelberger, Charles H. Glatfelter, Richard T. Mara, Norman E. Richardson, and W. Richard Schubart

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Nationalism as a political creed found roots also in the Western Hemisphere. The United States took a large step toward greater national unity in 1789 when George Washington became the first American President (1789-1797) under the new federal constitution. But just as citizens of the new republic debated the relative merits of aristocratic or democratic government, so they argued without essential agreement on the nature of their union -- whether the locus of authority should reside in the central government or be reserved to the individual states. The followers of Alexander Hamilton, the Federalists, interpreted the Constitution as permitting stronger central government. On the other hand, Thomas Jefferson and his cohorts insisted that the greater authority lay with the individual states.

While the Jeffersonians were strong enough to force some compromises, in the long run the Hamiltonian ideas prevailed. From his strategic position as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court (1801-1835), John Marshall (1755-1835) provided a nationalistic interpretation of the Constitution. The War of 1812 against Great Britain not only aroused those patriotic feelings which wars are apt to engender, but it disclosed the folly of relying on a weak and ineffectual central government. After 1815, during an "era of good feelings," sectional and class animosities appeared dormant in America. It was during this period that the Monroe Doctrine, often described as the expression of awakening American nationalism in international affairs, was proclaimed (1823). This proclamation also revealed that the United States citizens supported the independence and nationalist aims of the several South American republics.

Yet the increasing geographic extent of the nation tended to develop sectional and provincial attitudes and interests in the United States. By the 1830's divergent economic interests aroused mutual suspicions between the North and the South. The first important challenge to national unity came in 1832 when South Carolina precipitated the "nullification controversy." Following the leadership of the great southern spokesman, John

C. Calhoun, the legislature of that state enacted an ordinance declaring null and void in South Carolina the Tariff Act of 1832, and threatened imprisonment to any federal officer who attempted to collect revenues under the act. Here was a direct conflict of authority between the national and state governments, and for a time it appeared that the dispute could be resolved only by military force. President Andrew Jackson warned the defiant South Carolinians that he would employ federal troops to enforce the law, but the prospect of civil war had a sobering effect on all parties to the controversy. The United States survived this crisis largely due to the willingness of Americans to settle their differences through compromise.

American nationalism was strengthened during the early nineteenth century by the need to solve the problems arising from westward expansion -- problems concerned with transportation, Indian relations, public land policies, and dealings with other Western Hemisphere powers. Solutions to these problems could best come through a national effort. Nevertheless, by the 1850's the great moral issue of slavery had produced such intense sectional antagonism that the existence of national unity was once more threatened. By 1860 the issue was clearly drawn: Could any state, or groups of states, constitutionally withdraw from the union effected by the Constitution of 1787? Or, in the words of President James Buchanan (1857-1861), was such a principle "wholly inconsistent with the history as well as the character of the Federal Government?"

Under the leadership of President Abraham Lincoln (1861-1865) the forces battling for the Union triumphed. Henceforth the American political system was one in which the supremacy of the national government was generally acknowledged. The Supreme Court of the United States added the weight of its testimony, declaring that "the Constitution, in all its provisions, looks to an indestructible Union, composed of indestructible States...." The survival of the American people as a united nation also provided a fillip for the self-confidence so necessary to nationalism.

A CHRONOLOGY OF IMPORTANT POLITICAL EVENTS, 1815-1871

- 1815 Congress of Vienna completes its work
- 1815 Quadruple Alliance and Holy Alliance signed
- 1817 Coercive Acts passed in Britain
- 1819 Carlsbad Decrees passed in Germany
- 1820 Uprisings in Spain, Portugal, and Naples
- 1821 Uprising in Piedmont and Greece
- 1822 Last of the congresses meets at Verona
- 1825 Decembrist uprising in Russia
- 1829 Powers recognize independence of Greece from Turkey
- 1830 July Revolution in France
- 1830 Uprisings in Germany, Poland, and Belgium
- 1830 Kingdom of Belgium created
- 1831 Uprising in Piedmont
- 1832 British Reform Bill passed
- 1833 Slavery abolished in the British Empire
- 1846 Corn Laws repealed in Britain
- 1848 Revolutions in France, Italy, Austrian Empire, Germany, and elsewhere
- 1848 Metternich resigns his office and flees Vienna
- 1849 Frankfurt Assembly fails to create a united Germany
- 1852 French Empire of Napoleon III created
- 1852 Cavour becomes premier of Piedmont
- 1861 American Civil War begins
- 1861 Serfs freed in Russia
- 1861 Kingdom of Italy proclaimed
- 1862 Bismarck comes to power in Prussia
- 1867 Second British Reform Bill passed
- 1867 Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary established
- 1870 Franco-Prussian War
- 1870 Italian troops enter Rome, which becomes Italy's capital
- 1870 Third French Republic proclaimed
- 1871 German Empire proclaimed