

“Resolved, that we view with detestation every attempt to silence the FREEDOM OF THE PRESS, by a system of terror and proscription,” so wrote the fiery Alexander Contee Hanson about the uproar in Baltimore.¹ A Federalist printer in the Democratic-Republican city of Baltimore, Hanson’s editorializing against the War of 1812 had provoked what one historian has called “probably the most terrifying and brutal riot in the young nation’s history up to that time.”² Beginning with what many deemed sufficient warning against Hanson, a small crowd of Democratic-Republicans had torn down Hanson’s printing shop on a warm June night. Tired of his tirades against President Madison, and his accusations of French infiltration into the United States government, Hanson’s fellow citizens had exercised a colonial tradition aimed to enforce restraint. Hanson advisedly fled the city, re-establishing his paper in Georgetown. However, convinced that his rights had been severely denied, he, along with friends made secret plans to re-enter Baltimore on the evening of July 26, 1812. Expecting opposition, Hanson’s defenders entered armed. When dusk arrived, about 30 individuals had gathered at Hanson’s new location to show their support for him and his press. While Hanson expected civil unrest, the extent of violence visited upon people and property indiscriminately that evening by a large angry mob shocked both Federalists and Democratic-Republicans alike.

While riots had occurred since before the Revolution, the senseless brutality of the Baltimore Riot aimed at fellow citizens (war heroes included) challenges the traditional narrative of an America society governed by rational debates culminating in publicly sanctioned laws. The passionate reaction of the Baltimore Riot calls attention to a theme of paranoia and violent reaction that accompanied America’s push towards democratic maturity. This paper seeks to insert itself within the current political/ cultural

¹ Alexander Contee Hanson, ed., *Federal Republican and Daily Gazette*, Vol. 6, No. 853 in microfilm 514 from the *Early American Newspapers*, American Antiquarian Society.

² Frank A. Cassell, “The Great Baltimore Riot of 1812,” 241-242.

debate over the nature of the public sphere³ and what this nature reveals about the development of America's broadening political culture. Current historiography has defined the public sphere as facilitating the democratization of political participation through "rational discourses"⁴—be it print centered or ritual centered. For example, Christopher Grasso's *A Speaking Aristocracy* argues that due to increasing discussion in the public sphere the Federalists had to transform their political approach. While they had traditionally expected political support because of their position in society, increasingly they learned they had to engage in persuasive appeals that debated with, even courted the common man. Thus rational discourse in the public sphere challenged rule based solely on rank. Newspapers in the Early Republic increasingly broadened communication, which in turn widened political participation. The Baltimore Riot shows the real limitations of the public sphere as a "tool" of democratization. This paper seeks to balance the emphasis on rational discourses in the Early Republic by noting the irrationality, hysteria, and paranoia that also existed and influenced the life of the young nation. By focusing upon Alexander Contee Hanson and his newspaper, I am arguing that by nature the public sphere lacked consistent coherence, unity, and at times, the rationality needed to resolve political tensions. The Baltimore Riot of 1812 in response to Alexander Contee Hanson's *Federal Gazette*, reveals that though rational discourse in print media was seeking to establish itself as a democratizing force in society, it remained subject to the irrationality of passions, triggered by unresolved tensions over the nature of society and government in the young United States.

Habermas, Historians and Historical Causation

The stage that housed the actors and actions of the Baltimore Riot has been described as the "public sphere"—the arena where individuals funneled their identities into one organization aimed at

³ In this paper, the term public sphere is based upon Jurgen Habermas' definition as provided originally in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) and then further refined in his latest work, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996). In article based on his first book, ("The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)", trans. by Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique*, Vol.), Issue 3 (Autumn, 1974), 49.), Habermas defines the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed."

⁴ By "rational" or "rationality," I mean that which is reasonable and understandable, not characterized by extremism or excess. In the context of the Early Republic's public sphere, this means expression that was discernibly directed by explainable thought/ or and action.

influencing political life. An eighteenth century development, the public sphere emerged as the corresponding increase in political participation and media connected and energized individuals to use their collective power to influence politics. Understanding the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through this paradigm answered such questions as: How did the events in the taverns and on the street corners, relate to law making in eighteenth century America? The main architect behind such a construction, Jurgen Habermas “sketched the eighteen-century emergence of a zone of rational discourse in the association and print, mediating between the monarchical state and the ‘lifeworld’ of society.”⁵ His philosophical framework, while often adjusted by historians, was generally welcomed as unifying multiple layers of life during the Revolution and Early Republic.

Habermas’ theory further represents a unique joining of two divergent fields. On the one hand, cultural historians along with anthropologists and literary scholars have within the last half-century turned their attention to finding paradigms that illuminated language, symbolic actions, and behaviors as historical agents. By citing the existence of a “public” influencing print and social rituals—such as parades, clubs, societies, etc—Habermas bestowed causal power to language and culture. While Habermas excited cultural historians with a paradigm that empowered their primary field of study, he also pulled these historians into a conversation with political historians. Political historians must confront Habermas, for he argued that the actions that occurred within the walls of government were legitimated by the consensus within the public sphere. The public sphere thus provided historians focusing on different aspects of society the necessary framework for making broader connections between both methodology and historical content. In commenting on the significance of this concept, John Brooke noted, “The Habermasian public sphere thus served the critical function of helping historians to organize, discuss, and assess the dimension of ‘culture’ with an eye toward the power relations in society usually bundled together simply as ‘politics’.”⁶ Pulling these fields into conversation, Habermas reinforced the

⁵ John L. Brooke, “Reason and Passion in the Public Sphere: Habermas and the Cultural Historian,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXIX:1 (Summer, 1998), 44.

⁶ Brooke, “Reason and Passion,” 45.

complexity and interactivity of historical causation, while also providing a manageable framework from which to describe the political and cultural events of early America.

Habermas' paradigm emphasizes rationality of discourse. Such a discourse arose as the breakdown of church and state in the Reformation and the separation of society into sacred/ secular and private/ public in the Enlightenment unleashed debate over the intersection of the governed and the governing. With the French Revolution following on the heels of the American, collectively individuals demanded the right of "supervision" over government, a supervision often conducted through the medium of the burgeoning newspaper culture.⁷ "Newspapers changed from mere institutions for the publication of news into bearers and leaders of public opinion—weapons of party politics... [F]or the newspaper publisher [this]...meant that he changed from a vendor of recent news to a dealer in public opinion."⁸ It is important to note that the dual emphasis upon an "ideal speech community and an ideal speech event, which intimate situations of perfect communication between parties and unlimited opportunities for the resolution of deliberation," obscured tensions arising as the nation sought to define its existence.⁹ Today, this concept of the rationality of public discourse remains the focus of a number of historical monographs. As historians have applied this paradigm to late eighteenth and early nineteenth century America, they have tended to obscure an irrational stream of discourse and ritual within America's printing culture. Evaluating the *Federal Republican* and its role in triggering the Baltimore Riot of 1812 as a part of the public sphere challenges Habermas' assertion that this sphere be solely rational. Hanson's paper and Baltimore's riot highlight the breakdown of rational discourse within the public sphere.

Understanding how modern historians assume (with qualifications) the rational direction of political rhetoric and rituals in Early America will create the contrast needed for analyzing the passion and violence of the Baltimore Riot. Saul Cornell's work, *The Other Founders: Anti-Federalism and the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788-1828*, relies upon the public sphere to situate his diverse Anti-Federalists. Though existing on different class levels, anti-Federalists joined voices, print, and rituals

⁷ Habermas, "The Public Sphere," 53.

⁸ Habermas, "The Public Sphere," 53.

⁹ Brooke, "Reason and Passion in the Public Sphere," 63.

within the public sphere in an effort to challenge and debate the Federalists “control” of the political sphere. Cornell focuses on various “texts” utilized by the anti-federalists in an effort to voice their ideas in the developing political sphere. These texts range from being part of the belles-letter culture among the elite even to a riot of the plebian class. For Cornell, the outcome of the anti-Federalist challenges within the public sphere is the slow emergence of the rational idea of legitimate dissent within government. The public sphere of the Early Republic, served as a realm where ideas could be debated and differences resolved or at least respected.

A more ritual-centered discourse between the public and the politic emerges in David Waldstreicher’s *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of Nationalism, 1776-1820* and Joanne Freeman’s *Affairs of Honor*. Introducing the aims of his study, Waldstreicher argues that the nationalistic rituals, which grew up in the Early Republic were part of a larger cultural dialogue within the public sphere. Of further importance to his study is the realm of print, from which “celebrants of the nation took their cues.”¹⁰ Arguing for the “mutual dependence of rationality and ritual,” the public sphere emerges as that dominant institution influencing and slowly expanding political definitions.¹¹ While expanding Habermas’ strict definition of rational discourse to allow for rowdy celebrations and contentious barbecues, his thesis rests upon a public sphere where nationalism was purposefully and rationally forged. While Freeman’s focus on duels may appear to contradict this idea of the emergence of a rational discourse, she shows that the dueling culture was far from irrational. Surrounded by a strict code, dueling affairs were very public acts that sent very specific messages. Deep into the nineteenth century, dueling was an established means of dealing with affronts whether they came from those involved in politics or those involved in society—such as printers. Supported by the attitude that preserving one’s reputation kept government “pure” from those with baser desires, dueling brought the private and the public together to resolve disagreements in a “rational” manner—as the public sphere was intended to do. Whether in

¹⁰ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997), 11.

¹¹ Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 219.

rituals or rhetoric, America's public sphere represented a rational arena where public opinion and influence was forged.

More directly related to the issues of the Baltimore Riot of 1812 is Jeffrey Pasley's *Tyranny of Printers*. Here newspapers—specifically Democratic-Republican papers intent upon defeating Federalism—create a rational discourse that forged public opinion and changed political influences. Central to Pasley's argument is an army of middling printers who established countless presses across America. Willing to put their financial and personal future on the line, these men printed their way to a huge transfer in power from Federalist to Democratic-Republican. And so a theme emerges describing the Revolution and Early Republic as periods centered around and relying upon rational discourse.

Though this discourse involved rituals and protests, riots and polemicists, it nevertheless is envisioned as rational. Habermas' public sphere framework as utilized in American historiography broadly summarizes the American tradition as “rational freedom from illegitimate coercion.”¹² While this framework may well describe certain situations, it also leaves a host out. Hanson's paper and the Baltimore Riot, reveal the existence of paranoia and passion, hysteria and irrationality within the public sphere. Rather than seeing this as isolated event—a hiccup within an otherwise orderly society—the Baltimore Riot bleeds into other upheavals, events, which worked against rational discourse and demanded consensus through illegitimate coercion. By understanding this strain of paranoia and irrationality in the Early Republic, the irrationality of actions during the Antebellum period such as Elijah Lovejoy's death,¹³ the Charleston Mail crisis,¹⁴ and race riots that rocked Northern and Southern cities becomes much more understandable. Though an isolated event the summer of 1812, the Baltimore Riot helps explain future Antebellum violence and irrational crowd action. It also reveals the real limitations of

¹² Brooke, “Reason and Passion in the Public Sphere,” 65.

¹³ Elijah Lovejoy was an abolitionist printer who was murdered on November 7, 1837 in Alton, Illinois by an angry pro-slavery mob.

¹⁴ The Charleston mail crisis occurred in August 1835 when an angry mob of pro-slavery rioters confiscated abolitionist mail and burned it. From this period till the Civil War there was covert agreement from the United States Postmaster that abolitionist literature should be kept out of the mail.

understanding the Early Republic as a society dominated by a public sphere of rational discourse. However, before analyzing Hanson's paper and the riot, some contextualization is necessary.

Dry Wood and Matches: The Man, the Paper, and the City

Alexander Contee Hanson, *the Federal Republican*, and the Baltimore Riot prove particularly apt sources for analyzing the nature of the public sphere during the Early Republic. The juxtaposition of traditional “enemies”—such as Federalists with their reliance upon traditions of deferential political elections and Democratic-Republicans with their reliance upon new political methods, such as the press—not only makes this story particularly colorful, but also a natural point for synthesizing divergent streams of history. The *Federal Republican* marks the entrance of the Federalists into the newly burgeoning realm where rhetoric began to court popular support. Further, in contextualizing Baltimore's rise within the nineteenth century one historian noted, “for decades the Potomac region and Baltimore, two distinct civilizations within the boundaries of Maryland, had struggled figuratively for dominance. That struggle was not to become more literal. The battle of Charles Street and its aftermath was much more than a conflict between two political factions: it was a confrontation between two cultures, between two ideologies, and between two styles of social organization.” Indeed, Hanson's country estate upbringing placed his sympathies squarely within the Potomac mindset—a mindset that believed in an American republic led by a “speaking aristocracy in the face of a silent democracy.”¹⁵ Yet, politics in Baltimore was experiencing a transformation that emphasized popular representation and participation. A strong Democratic-Republican stronghold, while it was not impossible for Federalists to win elections, it proved far from the norm. Hanson reacted to the increasing Democratic dominance by establishing the *Federal Republican*. Thus confrontation of two cultures met at 45 Charles Street. Understanding the political, economic, and social contexts within Baltimore explain Hanson's paranoia and Baltimore's passionate response.

Within the government itself a major shift occurred as the older generation of Revolutionary leaders retired and the first “American” generation began assuming responsibility for the success of the

¹⁵ Frank A. Cassell, “The Great Baltimore Riot of 1812,” *Maryland Magazine of History* (70.3: 1975), 247.

Republic. Significantly during this period, older politicians viewed factions and parties with extreme distrust. Envisioning parties as the hotbeds of revolutionaries and the environs of the treasonous, very few from the old political world supported their existence. Yet, the political arena was far from faction-free. This inability to accept dissent as legitimate created a culture of crisis. Each group claimed it was the true representation of republicanism and the real heirs of the Revolution. Jefferson like Washington before him claimed to above parties. “I was right in saying I am neither federalist nor antifederalist; that I am of neither party, nor yet a trimmer between parties.”¹⁶ Though acknowledging the existence of factions as part of human nature, Madison also worried about their harmful influence upon government. Historically, republic’s had been short lived and overthrown by conspiracies. Understanding dissent to be conspiratorial by nature, they distrusted any and all forms of it—especially those disseminated through print. Further, believing the world to be watching and waiting for their downfall, they felt special concern to try and prove them wrong.

This distrust of factions encouraged a censorious attitude towards the press. Federalists believed the press to be the guardian of liberty. Educating the people to their Constitutional rights, it provided a means of unifying the nation against all forms of abuse. To this end, they argued that “the liberty of the press...should...be totally at the devotion of the ...friends of the people.”¹⁷ Therefore, if the press did not uphold this noble task and instead attacked government leaders, Federalist leaders believed they had the duty to censor the press. Slowly, from the 1790s to the 1820s the traditional print culture began to be challenged by such editors as Benjamin Franklin Bache and William Duane in the *Aurora*, who introduced a new type of volatile newspaper politics. William Duane, editor of the *Aurora* in Philadelphia transformed both politics and political culture through his paper. He challenged the Federalist gentlemanly ideal by using his name to publish and to address issues. He challenged every type of character assassination and embarrassment that the Federalists tried to bring against him. He became

¹⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 123

¹⁷ Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench, *The Press and the American Revolution* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1980), 75.

popular, well known, and an important person in politics and publishing.¹⁸ Jeffrey Pasley has argued that “the central role of the newspaper in nineteenth century politics made newspaper editors the most pivotal and characteristic political figures of the era, if not necessarily the most respected or best remembered today.”¹⁹ Their increasingly volatile editorializing contributed to the passion of the public sphere.

Particularly, the vitriolic rhetoric pouring forth from Hanson’s *Federal Republican* and the violent public response underscores the real limits to the public sphere’s ability to sustain rational discourse between oppositions. The depths of distrust and animosity expressed through newspapers reveals that the print world was not a rational medium, nor one that always encouraged rational discourse or the emergence of public opinion.

Socially and culturally Baltimore was expanding. With an influx of immigrants from those of Scotch-Irish origin to French came new competition over jobs and city expansion. The population expanded widely, doubling in the period 1800 to 1820.²⁰ The number of free blacks jumped radically, from just 3,771 in 1800 to 10,047 in 1820.²¹ Religious differences abounded as city records note the existence of Episcopalians, Catholics, Presbyterians, First German Reformed, Quaker, and Methodist.²² Further, the hostilities between France, England, and the United States continued to create unrest as embargos and impressments stifled the maritime industry of the port city. As well, in the public sphere, where information was exchanged and debated, transitions from an oral culture dependent upon spoken rhetoric to a more print centered culture began to occur.²³ Newspapers, such as the *Federal Republican* or the democratically led, *Whig*, began emerging and the debates that previously had been restricted to those few men of letters, now engulfed the crowds in the taverns and city square. The consensus and homogeneity previously enjoyed by the inhabitants of Baltimore was crumbling and the tensions that

¹⁸ Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers*, 176.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 13.

²⁰ Baltimore City’s population in 1800 was 20,900. In 1820 it numbered 47,602. From: Whitman H. Ridgway, *Community Leadership in Maryland, 1790-1840: A Comparative Analysis of Power in Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 210.

²¹ Ridgway, *Community Leadership in Maryland*, 211.

²² Ridgway, *Community Leadership in Maryland*, 234-35.

²³ Patricia Crain, *The Story of A*, 4.

emerged erupted against Hanson. One historian noted about the period, “but there is no period in American history in which fundamental change proceeded with greater power, speed, and effect than in this most obscure of periods.”²⁴ Rising tensions meant that the public sphere was even less equipped to forge consensus, restrain passion and resolve disputes. While Baltimore’s growing urbanization and political unrest contextualize its eruption into chaos, analyzing Hanson and his *Federal Republican* contributes to our understanding of the existence of streams of paranoia and passion in the public sphere. Analyzing Hanson’s paper, his involvement in the Washington Benevolent Society, and the 1812 riot underscores the heated nature of politics during the war of 1812 and the very limited nature of rhetoric within the public sphere.

Rhetoric and Rioting: The Ir—Rational Public Sphere

Hanson’s goals with his newspaper could easily be summarized, as “attack the administration in any and every way; show that the Jeffersonians had sold out to France and were supporting Napoleon that the last hope of civilization, law, and order was old Mother England.”²⁵ No claims to objectivity or a balanced perspective existed in Hanson’s paper (or any other for that matter). Deeply resentful of Democratic-Republican political victories and popular support, Hanson’s paper interpreted every sign in the political, social, and economic arenas as proving the treasonous nature of the party in power. Hanson, as a Federalist, believed that he “took a realistic view of human nature; and seeing men as they were...had no illusions that the millennium was at hand or that democracy would work.”²⁶ Fearful of man’s nature, Hanson distrusted the crowds of voters as well as the Democratic-Republicans they voted into office. Far from existing as a rational media, these fears placed his newspaper on the edge of irrationality and hysteria.

As a traditional political newspaper, the *Federal Republican* covered political events around the country, often reporting congressional speeches and debates verbatim. Satire, poetry, and patriotic

²⁴ David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatives*.

²⁵ Joseph Schauinger, “Alexander Contee Hanson, Federalist Partisan,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 35 (1940), 354.

²⁶ John C. Miller, *Crisis in Freedom: The Aliens and Seditions Act* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1952), 15.

speeches all joined together to express total faith in the Federalist cause. “As a party,” he proudly printed, “we stand upon the most elevated ground. Beside justice, honor, and everything else that can recommend a cause, Providence seems to be on our side.”²⁷ While some have claimed that his paper remained the most influential of Federalists papers during the duration of its publication, it certainly can be debated how influential it really was in changing democratic opinions or attracting citizens to the Federalist side.²⁸ While his paper was meant to rival Duane’s *Aurora*, Hanson’s erudition and disdain for the common man, interacted to produce an educated paper appealing only to Federalists of similar disposition. Significantly, Hanson’s inability to write for the common man reveals the breakdown of the public sphere. Rather than discussing issues in hopes of achieving some form of public opinion, Federalists—as well as Democratic-Republicans—became more dedicated to their agenda. The result was a maelstrom of propaganda rather than useful dialogue.

Hanson’s contribution to the maelstrom of print materials in the Early Republic came through positive affirmations of certain views as well as negative diatribes against others. On the positive end and revealing the radical nature of his sympathies, Hanson published extensively from the *Hartford Convention*.

Events may prove that the causes of our calamities are deep and permanent. They may be found to proceed not merely from the blindness of prejudice, pride of opinion, violence of party spirit, or the confusion of the times, but they may be traced to implacable combination of individuals or of states, to monopolize power and office, to trample without remorse upon the rights and interests of commercial sections of the union. Whenever it shall appear that these causes are radical and permanent, a separation by equitable arrangement, will be preferable to an alliance by constraint, among nominal friends, but real enemies, inflamed by mutual hatred and jealousy and inviting by intestine divisions, contempt and aggression from abroad.²⁹

He further cheered their efforts by providing a celebratory narrative extolling the wisdom and dignity of the president of the convention, Daniel Webster and those who had assembled themselves.

²⁷ Schauinger, “Alexander Contee Hanson,” 361.

²⁸ Before the riot, Hanson was not the most popular Federalist, even among Federalists. Many thought him bombastic and cranky and a poor reflection on the face-lift many were trying to give to the Federalists. After the riot, however, most personality issues were laid aside in an effort to utilize the atrocity for political gain.

²⁹ Alexander C. Hanson, *Federal Republican*, Vol. IX, January 25, 1815, No. 1191.

“Those who were so ignorant of the character of the good and venerable President of the Convention, and of the Delegates generally, as to expect rash and intemperate counsels to proceed from them, will find themselves disappointed. They have done nothing, we rejoice to see, impairing, in the slightest degree, the confidence of good men in the wisdom and discretion of their New England brethren.”³⁰ In continuing to exalt the Federalist ideology, Hanson printed a list comparing Democratic Baltimore to Federalist Boston. Boston represented the city of freedom for expression, for legitimate rule while Baltimore represented a place where “the authority and laws give place to patriotic mobs.”³¹ He also continued to print a list of men who voted in favor of going to war. Called “A Spitting Register,” it was meant to draw attention to those who Hanson believed were contributing to the downfall of the U.S.³² Thus, paper and personality blended together into a bombastic sore that not only made the public sphere one of passion, but also taxed its limits in peaceable restraint.

On the negative end, one of the first “paranoid themes” that jumps from the pages of the *Federal Republican* is Hanson’s distrust, if not hatred, for the French. Believing them to be secretly at work to overthrow the United States, every pro-French politician and statement was seen as traitorous.

When the news of the entrance of the Allies into Paris was received, a democratic of some note declared, ‘he had rather hear of Boston’s being laid in ashes than that Paris had been taken.’ No doubt thousands of the democrats felt as this candid gentleman expressed himself. They would rather have heard of Massachusetts, Connecticut, of all New England being swallowed up by an earthquake, than hear that their favorite city had fallen. Yet these men call themselves republicans, whigs, patriots, while they prefer a foreign country to their own.³³

Another report cited in his paper, noted that at the “County of Rockingham, at Brentwood, [a] meeting [was] held where a speech was given that ‘traced our present calamities to their true cause, an hideous, dangerous and dreadful French Influence, winding itself into our councils and destroying our National

³⁰ Alexander C. Hanson, *Federal Republican*, Vol. IX, January 13, 1815, No. 1188.

³¹ Alexander C. Hanson, *Federal Republican*, Vol. VI, August 10, 1812, No. 850.

³² Alexander C. Hanson, *Federal Republican*, January 7, No. 1181, Vol. IX.

³³ Alexander C. Hanson, *Federal Republican*, Vol. VIII June 10, 1814, No. 1128.

Felicity’.”³⁴ In detailed retellings and re-publishing’s of the events of the Baltimore Riot, accusations of French complicity were never far from the surface. “Such are the particulars of this atrocious and bloody affair... and a parallel to which is scarcely to be found in the annals of revolutionary France.”³⁵

Embracing the increasingly popular medium of print, Hanson sought to employ every rhetorical method possible to either woo or worry individuals into the Federalist camp.

Hanson’ attitude towards Jefferson and Madison proved another subject which provoked hostility. Believing them to be pawns of the French, he accused them of following a course of “democracy” that would spell sure ruin. In his eyes, Madison had shown himself to be a “dupe, or perhaps worse, a supporter of Napoleon. What else... would explain Madison’s willingness to war with Britain while he did nothing about the French who also had violated the rights of American commerce on the high sea?”³⁶ Haranguing about the war effort directed by President Madison, Hanson argued “The destruction of liberty of the Press, which with our rulers appears to be, from the express avowal of some of them, a far less important enjoyment than the liberty of the seas, promised by Bonaparte, never was before made the general aim of the populace.”³⁷ Hanson printed this even though Madison never prosecuted a printer during his presidency—even at the height of the war. Attempts to show deference or respect towards those in government or to analyze the situation “objectively,” were impossible for Hanson. His rhetoric thus piled accusation on accusation, encouraging not only his own distrust to accelerate to hysteria, but also unsettling those reading his paper.

Hanson’s derogatory attitude highlighted his distrust of the character of men leading during the Early Republic. “There is scarcely an act of tyranny and oppression complained of against George the

³⁴ Alexander C. Hanson, *Federal Republican*, Vol. VI, August 28 1812, No. 858.

³⁵ “An exact and authentic narrative, of the events which took place in Baltimore, on the 27th and 28th of July last. Carefully collected from some of the sufferers and eyewitnesses. To which is added a narrative of Mr. John Thomson, one of the unfortunate sufferers, ...” from: *American Memory: The Capital and the Bay: Narratives of Washington and the Chesapeake Bay Region, ca. 1600-1925*, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/lhbcb:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(lhbcb20045\)\):@@@\\$REF\\$](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/lhbcb:@field(DOCID+@lit(lhbcb20045)):@@@REF)

³⁶ Frank A. Cassell, “The Great Baltimore Riot of 1812,” 244.

³⁷ Alexander Contee Hanson, “Federal Republican and Daily Gazette,” Vol. 6, No 849, August 3, 1812-December 30, 1814. Early American Newspapers, American Antiquarian Society, Micro Film 514, Reel 1.

Third which has not been committed by Jefferson and his political pimp... whiffling Jemmy.”³⁸ He went further and in describing Madison’s return to the White House after a brief reprieve at Montpelier, wrote, “His Pegmean Highness has arrived at the Palace from Montpelier. Last evening a Cabinet Council was held. This morning the court press issued the hand-bill below. The unwillingness of his Democratic Majesty, and his people, to give up his Imperial Ally is extreme.”³⁹ Such a distrustful view of Madison encouraged him to use his paper to continually question Madison’s authority as president. Hanson even printed an article that stated that a number of Maryland citizens wanted Madison to resign for his ill handling of the government. “We understand conditions are to be set on foot immediately in some of the counties of Maryland respectfully soliciting Mr. Madison to abdicate the chair of State. This is no hoax. Many of the people of Maryland, we believe a large majority, consider Mr. Madison as the mere tool of Bonaparte, and as completely identified with him.”⁴⁰ Such was the level of distrust that the print medium lost its traditional reliance upon rational discourse.

Biting satire, also an expression of Hanson’s irrational distrust and fear filled his pages. In one long poem titled, “Reward to Valorous Merit: A Song,” Jefferson and Madison were dubbed bumbling idiots trying to white wash the stains of their illegitimate rule and corrupt practices.

Old Jeff commenc’d at Adams fall,
 The people daub’d with white wash,
 Through eight sad years he whitened all,
 And rul’d and reign’d with tight lash.
 And when old Jeff his course had run,
 Had white-black’d-wash’d the nation,
 He gave his Brush ‘de bonis non,”
 For Jim’s administration.

With brush in hand, Jim then began,
 Most bunglingly to daub bright:
 But could not make Black appear White.

³⁸ Schauinger, “Alexander Contee Hanson,” 355.

³⁹ Alexander C. Hanson, *Federal Republican*, Vol. VIII June 3, 1814, No. 1126.

⁴⁰ Alexander C. Hanson, *Federal Republican*, Vol. VIII June 14, 1814, No. 1129.

The people now begin to see,
 By rays of Freedom's sun bright,
 That Jim's whitewash is Slavery--
 Jim's brush they seize with strong might.⁴¹

One reason Hanson so strongly wanted to publish his newspaper in Baltimore was because of his disdain for the growing immigrant class overwhelming much of the city's industry and communities.

Known for their xenophobia, Hanson adopted this Federalist trait. He viewed the Baltimore Democrat-Republicans as "mostly European rabble out to pervert the true principles of the Constitution."⁴²

Assuming a basic presupposition that many in the Early Republic held, Hanson believed European immigrants fleeing countries with totalitarian rulers would not understand the republican principles of the Constitution and thus would undermine its authority. In reporting on the treasury, the *Federal Republican* opined, "it is some consolation to the natives, amidst all their distress, dishonor and bankruptcy, the treasury has been beggared by foreigners. It is by foreign renegadoes that our elections are decided. It was for the protection of foreign fugitives and deserters that war is said to have been declared. And it is by raising foreign adventurers to the head of the treasury, that the money has all disappeared and the credit of the government has sunk too low to be raised again." In summary, he asks his readers, "When our elections are decided by foreigners, and the government is managed by foreigners, is it at all surprising that we have no national character?"⁴³ Paranoid Federalists warned that the current support for war against Britain came from Irish immigrants who had escaped the English rule in their homeland and now wanted to continue to fight from American soil.⁴⁴ When discussing the Baltimore mob that mounted the attack in July of 1812, Hanson openly revealed his disdain. "Well grounded suspicion, however, has both been slow in designating the monster in Baltimore, whose corruption, profligacy, and jabolical

⁴¹ Alexander C. Hanson, *Federal Republican*, January 20, 1815, Vol. IX, No. 1190

⁴² Frank A. Cassell, "The Great Baltimore Riot of 1812," 247.

⁴³ Alexander Contee Hanson, "Federal Republican and Daily Gazette," January 6, Vol. IX, No 1180 August 3, 1812-December 30, 1814. Early American Newspapers, *American Antiquarian Society*, Micro Film 514.

⁴⁴ Frank A. Cassell, "The Great Baltimore Riot of 1812." 244.

hearts, were well suited to place such orders from his superiors, in a train of execution...⁴⁵ Xenophobia and disdain for the lower classes, led Hanson to believe that Baltimore's immigrant population was actively seeking to undermine the Constitution and use the United States merely as a bunker from which to attack Britain or as informants inviting a French invasion. He believed that only rule by an educated elite would be the only sure method of keeping the U.S. a virtuous republic. Hanson's already passionate nature became even more infused with ardor to protect the republic.

Another mark of the distrust between the factions within the Early Republic, which produced a lack of rational discourse and a tendency to subvert the "dangerous" faction, was the Federalist establishment of the *Washington Benevolent Society*. The Maryland chapter of this national political club was quite influential, and as usual Hanson inserted himself in the middle, becoming the Baltimore chapter's president. The institution existed publicly as a humanitarian organization to educate underprivileged young boys. In reality, led by prominent Federalists in Baltimore, it provided money and pamphlets to organize Federalists across the state (and across the nation). While fraternal organizations had first began under the Jeffersonians, with the most popular and effective being the Tammany Society, in 1800 a group of Federalists in Alexandria started the society known as the Washington Society of Alexandria.⁴⁶ From this organization the Washington Benevolent Society was born, an organization that eventually spread across Maryland and the states. An early experiment in party organization, its main weakness lay in its secretiveness, which bespoke the tremendous distrust and paranoia gripping the public sphere.⁴⁷

Along with the establishment of these clubs, Federalists slowly began adopting tactics associated with Jeffersonian electioneering techniques. Public meetings, barbecues, and political holidays began to assume more importance. As well, they began emphasizing the need for supporters to get out and vote. "In Maryland a Federalist newspaper wrote, 'Federalists of Maryland, remember your duty! Don't you

⁴⁵Alexander Contee Hanson, "Federal Republican and Daily Gazette," August 3, 1812-December 30, 1814. Early American Newspapers, American Antiquarian Society, Micro Film 514, Reel 1.

⁴⁶Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism*, 111-114.

⁴⁷Cassell, "The Great Baltimore Riot of 1812," 243.

stay at home folding your arms, and yawning, with a segar in your hands, in sloth and lethargy, while the jacobins are cutting up your stage and casting it piece-meal to be devoured by the blood-hounds of their faction! No! Exert yourselves, each, as if you had your plantation and negroes at stake.”⁴⁸ Part of this push caused them to provide horses and carriages for the public. “They deliberately tried to create popular oriented vote-seeking political organizations which might defeat Jefferson with his own weapons. The younger Federalists successfully established these party organizations in at least ten states. They sponsored partisan newspapers and secret political societies on an unprecedented scale, and borrowed Jeffersonian electioneering techniques, rhetoric, and issues for their own elitist purposes.”⁴⁹ The most important thing to note with these increased activities was the distrust that the Federalists and Democrats held for one another and their growing box of tricks used to try and elect the “true” protectors of the Constitution. The fact that the Washington Benevolent Society often met in secret to decide and plan “public” meetings, created a strong hierarchy within the Federalist camp and once again reinforced intolerance of others views and political rights.⁵⁰ The public sphere rather than being that arena of dialogue which produced a consensus of public opinion, represented a stage whereby previously determined acts aimed at producing the desirable previously determined end.

Hanson’s paper not only marked Federalist entrance into the newspaper realm, but the virulence of partisan thought during the early nineteenth century. David Hackett Fischer noted that “never, not even in the heyday of Pulitzer and Hearst, were American papers as scurrilous and irresponsible as in the

⁴⁸ Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism*, 108.

⁴⁹ Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism*, xviii-ix.

⁵⁰ A good example of the attitude of this society, comes from this speech excerpt given at a meeting of the Washington Benevolent Society in Massachusetts: “An Oration delivered before the Washington Benevolent Society of Massachusetts, on the 30th day of April 1813 being the anniversary of the first Inauguration of President Washington, by, Josiah Quincy. “Assembled in the name of Washington, we enquire of his spirit concerning our duties. In his life and writings, by precept and by example his spirit responds: ‘Sons of Washington! Be faithful to your country!’ We held to the venerated influence and devote this hour, to what is true and what is useful to be known, concerning the condition and prospects of our country. Over these heavy clouds hang. It is a solemn scene; and not time to collect flowers of fancy or to indulge in sports of the intellect—May the spirit of Washington rest upon us! May it invigorate our thought...” Alexander C. Hanson, *Federal Republican*, Vol. VII May 13, 1813, No. 970.

young republic.”⁵¹ Rather than engaging in rational discourse or symbolic resistance, the rhetoric flying between partisan groups within Baltimore created more tensions. Any type of interaction occurring within the public sphere was not within the classical rational tradition. In fact, as the Federalists became more active in Baltimore they experienced more aggression against them, and some started carrying weapons. “The armaments, the growing record of political violence, and the high passions of both Federalists and Republicans created an extremely dangerous situation, one that could explode at any moment.”⁵² Baltimore democrats did not respond well to such tensions. While it is important to note Hanson’s violent rhetoric which in many ways brought upon himself and his party much deserved wrath, at the same time, the response of the city reveals that neither side was really operating within a rational medium of communication concerned to protect universal rights, forge public opinion, or encourage the existence of legitimate dissent.

Hanson’s ability to attract reprisal began as early as 1809. Though not in active duty, Hanson held a post in the Maryland militia. Hanson published an article in the *Federal Republican* encouraging the people of Maryland to disregard a recent mobilization of troops by the President (which occurred before the war was declared). In keeping with the rising political distrust between factions and the breakdown of discourse, Maryland governor Robert Wright ordered Hanson to be tried for mutiny. While never jailed because a Republican judge questioned the legality of such an action, this served to only further heighten tensions in the state.⁵³

While this act to silence Hanson came from the government itself, the *Federal Republican* also experienced censorship from the postmasters in Baltimore. Hanson, in his usual bombastic way, described the subversion of the freedom of the press by the complicity of state and postmasters in refusing to deliver his papers.

Since Mr. Granger’s dismissal, the complaints of our subscribers from all quarters, have increased in tenfold degree... Our readers well know the powerful motives which the government and its

⁵¹ David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jacksonian Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers: 1965), 148.

⁵² Cassell, “The Baltimore Riot of 1812,” 243.

⁵³ Pasley, *The Tyranny of the Printers*, 282.

agents have to prevent the circulation of federal newspapers. Look at the situation of the country, the events of each day, the disclosure continually made—is it to be expected that they who have been guilty of every species of political depravity and moral turpitude—whose evil designs and nefarious machinations have thrown a whole people into deep mourning, is it to be supposed that such men would hesitate to order their post-masters to perjure themselves and to prevent the circulation of federal prints?⁵⁴

In another article, the editors noted their inability to make the law enforce the delivery of the *Federal Republican*. “In every post-office in the United States, newspapers, as well as letters, are carried out by those officers, except the *Federal Republican* in Baltimore.”⁵⁵ As well, the *Federal Republican* reported that in the floor of the House the reporter for the *Federal Republican* was denied a seat with the stenographers. The House later passed a resolution calling for more seats to be set up for future stenographers. However, this was never done and so the *Federal Republican* lost its ability to report directly from the affairs of the House for a time.⁵⁶

With the advent of war in 1812, Hanson’s rhetoric became more irrationally suspicious and accusatory, enraging many loyal Democratic-Republicans across the city. Even some Federalists found Hanson’s remarks distasteful. Regardless of what the majority of Federalists thought or felt, Hanson’s criticisms became synonymous with Federalism in the city of Baltimore. The resulting riot lasted for three days and terrorized more than just Hanson. Breaking with previous patterns of limited damage or focused reaction, this riot truly was mob driven and crazed.⁵⁷ Once again, the riot reveals the tenuous nature of Baltimore’s public sphere. It challenged the traditional ideas of utilizing the public sphere as a means of working with the authorities as well as traditional practice of showing deference to those such as past

⁵⁴ Alexander C. Hanson, *Federal Republican*, January 6, No 1180, Vol. IX.

⁵⁵ Alexander C. Hanson, *Federal Republican*, Vol. VI, August 19, 1812, No. 854.

⁵⁶ Alexander C. Hanson, *Federal Republican*, Vol. VIII October 8, 1813, No. 1030.

⁵⁷ Though beyond the scope of this paper, there is a very interesting array of sources relating to the interpretation of riots and this riot in particular. My research falls within the historiography that sees this riot as breaking with the Anglo-American mob tradition as explained by Paul Gilje in his works, “The Baltimore Riot of 1812 and the Breakdown of the Anglo-American Mob Tradition,” *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 13.4 (1980): 547-64. While I would disagree with Gilje argument for the rationality of mob movements in American history in his work, *Rioting in America*, his argument for the transitional nature of the Baltimore riot is important. Norman Rosenberg’s *Protecting the Best Men* and John C. Nerone’s *Violence against the Press: Policing the Public Sphere in U.S. History* favor the argument that the 1812 riot was an extension of the Revolutionary riots that used collective action to police the community. For an overview of the riots that followed 1812 Michael Feldberg’s *Turbulent Era: Riot and Disorder in Jacksonian America*, contains a good analysis of the nature of rioting in the nineteenth century.

Revolutionary War heroes. The rhetoric that surrounded the riot and then that followed it revealed the breakdown of rational means of discourse in resolving and forging public consensus.

After having his printing press destroyed by a smaller and more organized “mob” in June, Hanson had fled the city. However, believing his rights to have been violated he almost immediately began planning his return. Belying the tensions of the time, Hanson planned to enter the city with arms. Letters passed between Hanson and his friends as they prepared. While Hanson acts the part of the total innocent in his publications after the riot, he does express knowledge of the city’s hatred towards him in his early letters. “I cannot express the solicitude I feel in your enterprise, and the regret, the mortification, in not being able to assist in it,” wrote one of Hanson’s friends about the upcoming plans to re-enter Baltimore. “You will act advisedly and take care, should it become necessary not to use force that is deadly force, until the attempt of the assailants will justify you in the eye of the law... Yours very affectionately, J. H. THOMAS.”⁵⁸ Another friend, John Lynn wrote Hanson detailing how they should enter the city and with what supplies. Secrecy remained extremely important and further heightened the suspense expressed between Hanson’s followers.⁵⁹ Hanson entered the city with nine gentlemen, all of whom knew of the danger and viewed their roles as protectors of the freedom of the press. Though it is unclear when General “Light Horse Harry” Lee a Revolutionary War veteran became a part of Hanson’s band, he immediately became responsible for organizing the defense of 45 Charles Street in the event of an attack. Taking his role seriously, his plans called for at least 60 men to guard the house, indicating where each was to be

⁵⁸ “A portrait,” *American Memory*, 87-88.

⁵⁹ To further reveal the depth of commitment between Hanson and his friends, here is a fuller portion of a letter which passed between them: from, “A portrait,” *American Memory*, 87. “I repeat, that if it is possible, I will with heart and soul join the band; nothing in this world, at present, would afford me more real pleasure than to assist in the noble undertaking. Secrecy and great caution will be necessary until the party are actually in possession of the house. In the first place, there ought (according to the size of the house) to be a full quantity of gallant men to defend it at every door, window, &c. muskets with the bayonets, and a plenty of good pistols, with a large store of ammunition. Let there be a plenty of buck shot provided for close work, and when they reach closer still, (which will never be, I believe, but it is always best o? be well prepared) I would advise that a store of tomahaws or hatchets, with dirks for every man, be provided. If we are thus prepared, and they can neither fire the house nor starve us out, the garrison will never be under the necessity of a surrender I have thus thrown my ideas together in great haste; should they do no good, they will not injure. Too much caution cannot be made use of. I repeat again, if it is possible, I will be with you in time; but should it not be in my power, I hope I shall stand excused. I hope there will be no want of young soldiers, and those commanded by such men as Lingan and Anderson cannot fail of success. In haste, I am your's sincerely. JOHN LYNN.” (written on the 19th of July)

stationed.⁶⁰ Hanson, for his part, knew that his paper had deeply roused the masses of Baltimore. While he expected resistance, it seems unlikely that he anticipated or expected the mob to be so brutal and uncontrollable as it turned out to be.

The spark, which inflamed the scorners gathering outside of 45 Charles Street, appears to have come when young boys began hurling stones at the house. When a man in the crowd (who actually, it appears, was trying to stop the boys) had his foot crushed by a stone the anger was unleashed. Hoping to reason with the surging crowd, Hanson addressed them from his second story window. However, no public discourse would calm the inflamed crowd. Their anger only increased and two hours later city authorities began to half-heartedly try to quiet the mob. However, with elections looming in the near future, Democratic officials were loath to risk votes. Eventually Hanson and his followers agreed to be escorted to the city jail for greater protection. The following night the same mob gathered this time outside of the jail. Let in by a democratic turnkey, the real horror of the Baltimore Riot began. Tarring and feathering, beating and chanting, the crazed mob unleashed all types of brutalities upon the defenseless Federalists. One of the unhappy victims, John Thompson reported “I had left my coat in the gaol, and they tore my shirt and other clothing, and put the tar on my bare body, upon which they put feathers. They drew me along in the cart in this condition, and calling me traitor and tory and other scandalous names.”⁶¹ As they danced around a repugnant mound of naked, bleeding Federalist bodies the mob sang, “We’ll feather and tar every d--d British tory. And this is the way for American glory.” Legitimizing their actions by rhetorical appeals to the Revolution, the crowd continued their frenzied abuse. “One Federalist ruefully observed, the crowd could not have been ‘more joyful at a dance, than they were at the abuse of the murdered... When the victims cried for mercy, the women ‘bawled out kill the tories.’”⁶² One witness noted, “During this whole time the Mob continued to torture their mangled bodies, by beating first one and then the other; sticking penknives into their faces and hands, and opening

⁶⁰ Cassell, “The Great Baltimore Riot of 1812,” 246.

⁶¹ “An exact and authentic narrative, of the events which took place in Baltimore, on the 27th and 28th of July last. Carefully collected from some of the sufferers and eyewitnesses. To which is added a narrative of Mr. John Thomson, one of the unfortunate sufferers...,” 43.

⁶² Cassell, Frank A., “The Great Baltimore Riot of 1812,” 256.

their eyes and dropping hot candle grease into them.”⁶³ Revolutionary War hero, Lingan was beaten to death and many other Federalists would have perished had not a local doctor taken pity on their plight and convinced the crowd that he “needed” the bodies of the limp Federalists for medical experimentation.

The radical response of the masses in the riot marked a turning point in Early American public violence. Though riots were not a new phenomenon in America or England, the 1812 riot broke with the typical patterns of previous riots. Paul Gilje titled earlier riot practices as part of a long standing “Anglo-American mob tradition.” This tradition recognized mob action as “quasi-legitimate,” stepping in where the law failed the community. While the community took the law into their own hands in these situations, the unspoken goal was always the “good of the community.”⁶⁴ The anger of the mob was traditionally turned on property, not people, as a way of meeting out punishment to the offending party. A ritual emerged between the mob and the leadership that allowed each to fulfill their purposes without risking loss of authority for the officials or frustrating the aggrieved community. The authority would not try to stop the crowd if it would listen and disburse when the leadership felt the proper amount of damage had been done. The way the elite controlled them was through “talking the mob down.”⁶⁵ Most importantly, “the Anglo-American mob tradition thrived in small scale pre-industrial communities where contacts between all levels of society were fluid and where social relations were marked by deference and personal recognition.”⁶⁶ While the first mob action against Hanson (the destruction of his printing press) fell into this category, the second did not. The unleashed passion that ran wild for three days creating chaos and destruction across the city in 1812 marked a transition in urban American life—a tradition that became too oft repeated in the antebellum period with its tensions over slavery, state’s rights, etc. While the previous use of mob action could possibly fall within the bounds of discourse in the public sphere, the riot of 1812 moved beyond the rational and beyond the discursive.

⁶³ “An exact and authentic narrative, of the events which took place in Baltimore, on the 27th and 28th of July last. Carefully collected from some of the sufferers and eyewitnesses. To which is added a narrative of Mr. John Thomson, one of the unfortunate sufferers, ...,” 28.

⁶⁴ Gilje, “The Baltimore Riot of 1812 and the Breakdown of the Anglo-American Mob Tradition,” 547.

⁶⁵ Gilje, “The Baltimore Riot of 1812 and the Breakdown of the Anglo-American Mob Tradition,” 548.

⁶⁶ Gilje, “The Baltimore Riot of 1812 and the Breakdown of the Anglo-American Mob Tradition,” 547.

It is easy to think of riots in modern terms with crazed crowds looting, destroying, defying authority, and requiring large amounts of force to calm. Many times riots are associated with labor disputes or with racial and religious intolerance. However, Americans in the Early Republic were just beginning to realize these issues. Riots that had historically taken place till 1812, had reacted to a different set of tensions, had operated within more homogenous communities, and had produced different levels of violence. While the original action of 30-40 men taking apart the *Federalist Republican* printing office was aimed at Hanson's property and thus done in the spirit of "traditional restraint," the anger of the mob outside of the house on Charles Street was aimed at Hanson and his men. While taking down the original press the mob reportedly had said to the Mayor, "Mr. Johnson, I know you very well, no body wants to hurt you; but the laws of the land must sleep, and the laws of nature and reason prevail; that house is the temple of Infamy, it is supported with English gold, and it must and shall come down to the ground!" Here the bounds of deference were respected and thus the authority did allow the "law to sleep." This guided attack on property was a symbolic calling to account of Hanson, whom they felt had gotten out of hand and yet could or would not be stopped by the authorities. The second riot was intent upon inflicting harm on men, not objects. Significantly, this personal harm was done under the guise of Revolutionary War rhetoric. Hanson and his men represented Tories and so therefore should be killed. Such a frenzy of passion had consumed the crowd that past and present mingled to create a horrific situation.

Further, in the Charles Street Riot there was a breakdown of social control, as the elite could not reason with the mob. While it remains doubtful as to the true sincerity of the authorities to even want to stop the riot at first, when they finally began to realize the evil-designs of the crowd, they were unable to disperse the mob.⁶⁷ In fact, many of the militia were among those in the crowd and would not respond to the calls of their officers. In a marked departure from the narrow goals of previous mob activities, rioters

⁶⁷ There is a whole detailed storyline that could be traced which reveals the continual desire of the authorities to ignore the problem at first and then to deal with it as little as possible when it became beyond ignoring. One example would be the fact that while the militia was called out, they were told to march to the riot site with unloaded muskets.

and looters sacked the Charles Street house in a disorganized and uncontrolled manner. The previous riot had found the mob systematically taking down the printing press as a means of stopping its content.⁶⁸ Nothing reasonable or rational led the second mob forward. The social respect and deference previously a part of this tradition totally broke apart. “His [Mayor Johnson’s] personal authority meant little to the rioters and in a perverse sense of democracy, they viewed him as a mere hireling, dependent upon them for his very sustenance and duty bound to lead them in their wild depredations. This separation of personal and political authority left the mayor helpless.” Still himself operating under this tradition of deference, one of the leaders of Hanson’s group, General Lingan tried to appeal to the crowd on the basis of his deferential position. A hero from the Revolutionary War, Lingan believed that his position would cause the crowd to stop its heartless attack. As the *Federal Republican* reported, “He reminded them that he had fought for their liberties throughout the revolutionary war, that he was old, infirm, and that he had a large and helpless family dependent on him for support.”⁶⁹ Deference meant nothing in the passion of the moment and he was murdered on the spot.

As horrible as the events themselves were, Paul Gilje argues that “the Baltimore riots of 1812 are an important benchmark in the history of American popular disorder because they suggest the outlines of a new trend of rioting in which the larger community was divided into warring factions of competing sub-communities and because they presage the intense racial, ethnic, and class conflicts of Jacksonian America.” As well, with the inability of old social ties to work as constraints, “the mob denied all paternalistic authority and asserted a new, purely democratic order of society.”⁷⁰ This assertion of “pure” democratic values—greater popular participation in politics—shocked the Federalists wed to the concept of republican virtuous rule. The conversations in society and in government thus grew more tense as competing ideas of proper governance moved out of the gentleman’s parlor, even off the printed page and into the streets.

⁶⁸ Gilje, “The Baltimore Riot of 1812 and the Breakdown of the Anglo-American Mob Tradition,” 548-99.

⁶⁹ “An exact and authentic narrative,” *American Memory*, 28-9.

⁷⁰ Gilje, “The Baltimore Riot of 1812 and the Breakdown of the Anglo-American Mob Tradition,” 556-557.

The aftermath of the riot produced dramatic rhetoric from the *Federal Republican*, as well as from other Federalist and Democratic-Republican printers. While fixating upon liberation language, in reality the dialogues surrounding the riot led further away from any type of discursive “liberating” public sphere. Hanson’s obvious distrust of and disdain for the opposing faction expressed through the content of his publication only served to further divide Baltimore and to harden the factional lines of disagreement. Though he preached loudly about the liberty of the press, it is quite clear that Hanson’s idea of liberty was not unfettered expression, but rather expression that supported and protected his understanding of the republic. Hanson made special use of the riot events. Rhetorical flourishes poured forth from his paper emphasizing the atrocity that had been committed against him and his men. For weeks, stories were gathered from onlookers and eyewitness accounts given from those who were providentially spared from death. “[T]hough they never could have anticipated being delivered over to the executioner, through the inhuman treachery of the civil authorities,” Hanson writes, they stood their ground as noble men defending the principles of the Declaration of Independence and of freedom in general.⁷¹ Placing himself and his men in the role of true defenders of freedom, Hanson only further alienated those who would, while not condoning the riot, disagree with his political beliefs.

Further alienation occurred as Federalists across the country also used the event as a rallying cry to unity and more ardent efforts at recovering control of the government. Within Maryland and Virginia countless meetings were held in honor of the event, from which resolutions emerged that condemned the authorities for their inactivity and the Democrats for their ill actions. Approaching the event with all sobriety, rituals emerged to commemorate the event and further remind the citizens of this “wavering” nation of the necessity for vigilance. In Montgomery County the Federalists “*Resolved*, That we recommend to the citizens of Montgomery county to wear crape on the left arm for the space of thirty days.”⁷² Meetings in Georgetown (where Hanson moved the *Federal Republican*) issued stinging condemnations of the authorities of Baltimore as “too timid or unwilling to punish.” Casting doubt upon

⁷¹ “An exact and authentic narrative,” 63.

⁷² “A portrait of the evils of democracy submitted to the consideration of the people of Maryland,” *American Memory*, 72.

the legitimacy of Baltimore officials they “consider[ed] the freedom of speech, and of the press (at once the peculiar privilege of freemen, and the best support of freedom) as dreadfully endangered by the lawless violence of a Mob, as by the force of a despotic power.”⁷³ Loudoun County, Virginia, Anne Arundel in Maryland (home of Hanson), Somerset, and others also held meetings whose minutes were printed in the *Federalist*. Hanson saw to it that the horrors of the riot remained before the public’s mind as long as possible. Often printing responses from others Hanson noted, “The multiplied subscriptions which flow upon us at the present time, serve to demonstrate the general interest felt in the support of our paper and decided approbation of its principles. Many of them avow this in terms of elegance and animation, which deserves to be recorded.”⁷⁴ The rhetoric which had sparked the riot, thus contributed to keeping it alive before the public’s mind reminding them of the failings of the Democratic-Republicans and the necessity of returning to the true guardians of the Republic, the Federalists. Hanson’s rhetoric thus juxtaposed the “rational” language of liberty while encouraging paranoia of opposition that led to spontaneous acts of irrational violence.

This dual theme of rationality and paranoia also emerged at Lingan’s funeral and in the liturgies read in his honor. In the Federalist eyes, this event marked the true barbarity of democracy. It also confirmed their declarations that the Democratic authorities were not the true defenders of the Constitution, for what legitimate authority could allow such horror to go unchecked for three whole days? In making such assertions, the Federalist’s continually referred back to the “glory days” of the Founding. “By what standard of patriotism shall we try our Lingan? Shall we try him by the standard of modern patriots; mushrooms of yesterday, who have grown up from the soil, first fattened by the blood of heroes: or rather, shall we try him by the illustrious standard of seventy-six?”⁷⁵ The standard of seventy-six, thus became the ideal that only Federalists could restore to political life. “I well remember the good old federal times,” opined a eulogist at Lingan’s funeral, “when the father of his country, blest with his virtues our rising empire. Then was the majesty of the laws supreme; then was the liberty of the press inviolate; and

⁷³ “An exact and authentic narrative,” *American Memory*, 65-66.

⁷⁴ Alexander C. Hanson, *Federal Republican*, Vol. VI, Sept. 2 1812, No. 860.

⁷⁵ “A portrait of the evils of democracy,” *American Memory*, 95.

sure, if ever there was a time, when its licentiousness required a curb, it was when its slanders were aimed at the reputation of the *First of Men!*”⁷⁶ The rhetoric of the rational defenders of liberty served to further increased tensions by accusing the rioters of representing Democratic-Republican politics.

While many rallied behind Hanson, even electing him to the House of Representatives the next season, the government was not so hasty to clear him of any wrongdoing. Further, other newspapers and democratic organs questioned the integrity of Hanson. Hanson quickly published a list of questions for his readers with his justification for his defense on 45 Charles Street. Excerpts from a Boston newspaper were also printed in the *Federalist Republican*, which detailed the existence of others who expressed animosity against those who voiced concern at the riot. “While no mention was made of this late horrible massacre...a severe commentary was issued in that paper against the spirited address of a republican magistrate of New-York, because he expressed his abhorrence of mobs.”⁷⁷ Any statements against the *Federal Republican* were immediately deemed as supporting the mob. The public sphere, meant to be a sphere of discourse where society could gather to form public opinion and influence government hung in shambles after the riot. The rhetoric that argued in favor of the liberty of the press, translated into aggravating challenges that further widened the distrust between factions.

Connections: The Revolution, the Riot, and the Rest

Hanson’s riot positioned as it was during the War of 1812 offers historians a unique opportunity to analyze the nature of the public sphere during the transitional period of the Early Republic. The British attack on American supremacy returned American rhetoric to founding discourses complete with deifications of heroes and total distrust of dissenters. While many legacies from the Revolution dominated wartime rhetoric, at the same time new patterns of communication and political relationships were emerging. Baltimore’s growing urbanization, increasing immigration, economics tensions over jobs and shipping problems due to impressments and the war created an environment of intense distrust and suspicion. Further, the clashing of attitudes and ideas about the structure of society and the nature of

⁷⁶ “A portrait of the evils of democracy,” *American Memory*, 99.

⁷⁷ “A portrait,” *American Memory*, 64.

government contributed to a breakdown of traditional patterns of deference and paternalism. The insistence of the urban population to become more involved in political life unsettled hierarchically minded leaders. While dissent and opposing views were pouring forth from those divided into the Federalist and the Democratic-Republican camps, any acceptance of dissent as legitimate or acceptable were beyond the grasp of the majority of those involved in politics. Deemed as eventually leading towards treason and anarchy, all factions were viewed as harmful. Thus, in the issues facing Baltimore, rhetoric could not accommodate two sides as legitimately representative of genuine political views. For each, the other represented foreign influence and dangerous subversive elements. In the minds of some, a Constitutional crisis was occurring—the Republic was on the edge of collapsing. While this appears outlandish to modern ears, those living during such turbulent times truly doubted the success of the United States. And when the British came walking into Washington DC, those who had resisted the war all along, truly believed their worst fears had materialized. Tensions increased as neither faction was “comfortable with the idea of permanent opposition as a part of government.” At the same time, “neither could ... successfully engineer majoritarian reprisals against the opposition.”⁷⁸ Such a standoff taxed and exhausted the rational tools within the public sphere and eventually passion ruled in the form of the Baltimore mob.

Many have a tendency to view the Early Republic as a period characterized by “rational discourse” as gentlemen argued over the proper relationship of government and liberty. Even rituals of dissent—such as parades, or July 4th celebrations—contained an inherent logic that pushed for further liberties to be extended to common American citizens. However, moving from this period to the turbulence of Antebellum America can appear confusing as all of a sudden peaceful homogeneity in cities and towns breaks apart on issues from slavery to renter’s rights to Indian removal. Known for being an era of inflamed passions and divided interests, the Antebellum years witnessed a rise in mob action, peaking in 1834-5 as riot after riot swept through the states. As tensions increased in urbanizing cities, as racial issues became more important, and as government appeared to become more captive to deadlock,

⁷⁸ John Nerone, *Violence Against the Press*, 71.

groups asserted their feelings extra-legally. The Baltimore Riot is significant because of its ability to reveal the nature of the public sphere and then to connect the sphere's strains of violence in the Early Republic with that during the Antebellum period. The tendency is to categorize the Baltimore Riot as a strange blip. However, far from a blip, the Baltimore Riot of 1812 represents a current of American irrationality which responds to stress and change by sudden passionate outbreaks. Seeing the Baltimore Riot as part of a trend locates Antebellum violence within a tradition of active citizen rebellion. The close connection between the print culture and the riots also reveals the real limitations of "rational discourse" in the growing public sphere.

The press in the early nineteenth century held an important place in the public sphere. Part of that revered code of freedoms the liberty of the press was a celebrated part of American Nationalism. The press furthered conversations of the nature of America's past, present, and future. Alexander C. Hanson's *Federal Republican* entered the burgeoning city of Baltimore as mouthpiece aimed at winning this democratic stronghold. However, rather than seeing the press as part of a larger market place of ideas being rationally debated by a community, early America viewed the press as responsible to protect society through virtuous enlightenment. These ideas crashed in Baltimore, and rather than protecting men contributed to their downfall. In asserting that the riot of 1812 reveals the real limits to rational discourse, intolerance of dissent, and depths of animosity existing between factions within the Early republic, this paper argues that life in the Early Republic was no where near calm or secure. The period of the early nineteenth century was tremendously chaotic and contradictory in political terms. Riots, boycotts, plot of secession, and secret treaties with Britain, all created a very disorganized country. Rather than seeing the Early Republic as a period of rational discourse disrupted in the 1820s by issues of slavery, farmer's rights, anti-renters, etc., it is crucial to observe the elements of irrationality already existent in America. When one sees the press as more of a rhetorical tool rather than a medium of rational discourse, the increasing eruptions during the Antebellum period become more clearly understood. The strong censorship therefore, that emerged further into the nineteenth century, represents patterns of societal violence rather than strange and isolated incidents. America's foray into democracy meant uncertainty

about methods of controlling discourse. With the breakdown of a deferential society and the assertion of increased popular political participation, the role of law, authority, and communal interactions were blurred. The nineteenth century's attempt to find a new balance led many times to extremes—such as the abolitionist printer Elijah Lovejoy's death. The censorship of mail, such as occurred in Charlotte, South Carolina with abolitionist papers, harkens back to the censorship exercised over Hanson's paper. While a public sphere existed in American public life, its function in producing consensus or of impacting politics remains contested and complex. Far from being an era governed by pure rationality, the public sphere of the Early Republic was marked by complexity. The fury of the riot on that summer day in July of 1812 represents the nature of the public sphere as filled with competing passions, paranoia's, and irrationalities that strenuously challenged reliance upon rational rhetoric to forge societal consensus.