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# The Rhetorical Genesis of American Political Union\*

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*This essay examines a familiar but still perplexing problem in U.S. political history: how a group of fiercely separatist, diverse British colonies successfully formed a separate national union. Tracing patterns in colonial and revolutionary-era political speech, I demonstrate that the origins of American political union were in important part rhetorical. A combination of religious doctrines and anti-British sentiment elevated union into one of the most important, if contested, political concepts in the founding era. This study is carried out via a combination of close reading and data analysis, the latter based on a representative set of period American newspapers. A lesser puzzle is addressed along the way: why "union" virtually disappeared as a referent for intercolonial contact during the critical years leading to independence, following 1763. The answer: British officials insisted on a very different understanding of the term.*

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Forging a political union among thirteen diverse colonies grouped in four distinct regions—making one out of many—was the “chief problem” facing the U.S. founding generation, and arguably its foremost achievement. But how to explain the accomplishment? A half-century after Hans Kohn called the “formation of an American nation out of so many disparate elements” a virtual “miracle,” leading students of the period remain perplexed. “We do not really understand,” writes Michael Zuckerman, how a “congeries of colonies which had displayed no previous gift for cooperation ever acted together so effectively in 1776 or stayed together afterward”—the fact, indeed, is “all but inexplicable.”<sup>1</sup>

The hazy foundations of American national unity also arouse disquiet among citizens, journalists, and politicians concerned about the communal bonds joining an

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1. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 152; Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism* (New York: MacMillan, 1944), 285; Michael Zuckerman, “A Different Thermidor,” in *The Transformation of Early American History*, ed. James Henretta, et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 170.

increasingly fractured people. Central to discussions both in and outside the academy has been a conviction that better understanding the initial impulses to union would help in assessing, and perhaps reversing, the present-day “disuniting of America.”<sup>2</sup> “Particularly in our time,” notes political theorist Sibyl Schwarzenbach, “the problem of social unity—of what it is that generally binds persons together in a just society—is emerging as of critical importance once again.”<sup>3</sup>

Americans’ original movement toward a unified polity has been explained in various ways, usually following disciplinary lines. Economists emphasize the effect of intercolonial trade,<sup>4</sup> while political scientists and historians cite the binding force of nascent institutions, or of events like war and tax increases.<sup>5</sup> Ideological historians reconstruct various paradigmatic “pattern[s] of ideas and attitudes” that informed colonists’ decisive steps towards unity.<sup>6</sup> Though varying widely in their accounts of how the British American *pluribus* coalesced into a *unum*, most of these studies focus on the years immediately preceding independence, not the earlier colonial

2. “Middle-class Americans,” concludes Alan Wolfe’s intensive recent study of that group, “are desperate that we once again become one nation.” Former U.S. Senator Bill Bradley, to cite a specific example, declares that “revitalizing our national community” is “America’s central problem.” Note the backward-looking thrust in each case: “once again,” “revitalizing.” Wolfe, *One Nation, After All* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 321; Bradley, “America’s Challenge,” in *Community Works*, ed. E. J. Dionne (Washington, DC: Brookings Press, 1998), 107-8.

3. Sibyl A. Schwarzenbach, “On Civic Friendship,” *Ethics* 107 (1996): 98. Analysts at various points on the ideological spectrum express similar concerns: see, e.g., Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: Norton, 1991); Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1993), esp. 10-32; Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 21-4, 201-03, 317-51; Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 473-75, 488-504.

4. Summarizing a wide range of scholarship, James Shepherd writes that Americans’ “economic independence” was a “likely prerequisite” for political unity: “British America and the Atlantic Economy,” in *The Economy of Early America: The Revolutionary Period, 1763-1790*, ed. Ronald Hoffman et al. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 17. See also T. H. Breen, “Baubles of Britain: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century,” in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Cary Carson et al. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 448, 474.

5. See Jack P. Greene’s claim that political disagreements between England and British America, culminating in war, “push[ed] American resistance leaders in the direction of a permanent national continental union.” Greene, *Peripheries and Center: Constitutional Development in the Extended Politics of the British Empire and the United States, 1607-1788* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 174. Other notable political-institutional arguments for union’s origins are Jack N. Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics: An Interpretive History of the Continental Congress* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979); Peter S. Onuf, *The Origins of the Federal Republic: Jurisdictional Controversies in the United States, 1775-1787* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); Theodore Draper, *A Struggle for Power: The American Revolution* (New York: Times Books, 1996).

6. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 54; see also Edmund Morgan, “The Revolution Considered as an Intellectual Movement,” in *Paths of American Thought*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Morton White (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1963), which asserts that defense of bedrock constitutional principles bred a sense of solidarity among colonists. The subsequent explosion of writing on ideological bases of the U.S. republic is summarized in Daniel Rodgers, “Republicanism: The Career of a Concept,” *Journal of American History* 79 (1992).

past. As David Fagg writes, "It may be possible to view instances of cooperative action as presaging eventual union, but few historians will be convinced that [such activity] from 1690 to 1763 made a major contribution to the dynamics of the American unity which emerged after 1763."<sup>7</sup> Fagg's view is widely shared. Most scholars affirm that there was virtually no national or even regional sentiment until the revolution, and that British America comprised hundreds of intensely local communities. Each town, concludes Kenneth Lockridge, was a "self-contained social unit, almost hermetically sealed off from the rest of the world."<sup>8</sup>

Yet across these homogeneous, fiercely autonomous "units," colonists advocated union with those outside their local community, long before the independence movement was born in the 1760s. American officials proposed formally to join several or all colonies as early as the 1630s; the United Colonies of New England, established in 1643, lasted more than 40 years. Appeals to intercolonial union appear regularly in newspapers, pamphlets, sermons, and other public records from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Such references, a century or more before any "nationalist" sentiment was detectable among colonists,<sup>9</sup> mark a developing language of political unity. This union talk was a source of British/American friction during the revolutionary crisis, and eventually proved to be a compelling basis for fellow-feeling in the early republic—a polity described at the time as a "logocracy . . . a republic of words."<sup>10</sup>

Reconstructing the *conceptual* development of union illuminates Americans' national-communal roots from a new explanatory direction. Conceptual studies have been fruitfully applied to a number of scholarly puzzles, historical and otherwise, over the past two decades.<sup>11</sup> Charting this concept's meaning during the colo-

7. David W. Fagg, "Unite or Die," *North Carolina Historical Review* 48 (1971): 403; see more recently Ian K. Steele, "Exploding Colonial American History: Amerindian, Atlantic, and Global Perspectives," *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998): 71-72. Gordon S. Wood notes that "many historians in the past several decades have ceased looking to the colonial period for the origins or roots of the United States": "A Century of Writing Early American History: Then and Now Compared," *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 693. The best recent synthesis of colonial history, Jon Butler's *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), stresses the profound diversity characterizing pre-revolutionary America, and mentions "intercolonial cooperation" only briefly, in the context of the revolution (235-36).

8. Kenneth Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years* (New York: Norton, 1970), 64; cf. Robert Middlekauff's claim that "the colonies at mid-[eighteenth] century apparently could not attain even rudimentary unity, or at least showed no desire to attain it": *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 28.

9. See, among numerous accounts, J. C. D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660-1832* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57: "Powerful barriers checked the development of an American nationalism before 1776."

10. Washington Irving quoted in Daniel Rodgers, *Contested Truths: American Keywords Since Independence* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 7.

11. On conceptual analysis of political events see Melvin Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), esp. 36-57, 124-60; Terrence Ball, et al., eds., *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,

nial era, and its influence on political talk during the revolution, helps make sense of the constitutional generation's pledges to form a "more perfect union." Preceding the growth of strong economic ties or common institutions, the discourse of national union provided a way for British America's culturally diverse—and geographically dispersed—residents to conceive themselves as one people.

Investigating union's shifting value and meaning among Americans between the 1630s and 1770s yields three principal conclusions. First, "union" was established as a term for affective interpersonal relations and for interstate alliances early in the colonial period. Americans from Roger Williams to Benjamin Franklin, and many Britons as well, promoted unity among the colonies long before a split from Britain was even contemplated.

Second, a serious contest developed around union's meaning during the years leading to independence. This was less a clash of grand ideologies than a specific battle over who was "united" to whom: Americans to Britain, like child and mother, as Britons insisted? Or colonists with one another? As shall be seen, a distinctive decline-and-surge pattern marks references to pan-American unity during the revolutionary crisis (1763-76). British officials, as early as the 1740s, worried about the corrosive potential of calls for closer unity among Americans. Amid the tumult following the Royal Proclamation (1763) and Grenville Acts (1764-65), British leaders sought to redefine union as a codeword for colonists' subordinate place in the empire. Given these high stakes, many politically-active Americans avoided the term in public speech after 1765, or adopted Britain's prescribed usage. Only as the crisis crested in late 1774 were joint colonial efforts again urged in terms of union. Thus the concept constituted a real ground of difference, at a time when colonists shared the British understanding of most other core political values. This little-noted episode testifies to the potent interplay of language and political development.

Third, the origins of American national unity were in important part rhetorical, alongside the more exhaustively explored economic, institutional, and ideological sources reviewed above. To be sure, this conceptual focus resembles the view that ideas chiefly inspired national unity. But American leaders did not derive union talk from reasoned commitments to Lockean liberalism, civic republicanism, or other inherited paradigms. Instead they were spurred by two less rational influences: religious doctrine and anti-British fervor. "Union" resonated deeply in each of these discourses, and the term therefore gained pride of place where others—republic, commonwealth, nation—instead might have. Despite British officials' threats, pleas and promises, union talk became a potent source of (as well as referent for) the common sentiment without which Americans could not have forged an enduring national polity.

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1989); and John Gerring, "What Makes a Concept Good? A Criterial Framework for Understanding Concept Formation in the Social Sciences," *Polity* 31 (1999). A critical look at conceptual approaches to founding-era thought is in Ralph Lerner, *The Thinking Revolutionary: Principle and Practice in the New Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 1-38.

This essay traces the emergence of union as one of the republic's most important political concepts. Beginning with the religious roots of union talk, the focus then turns to the term's political meaning and vital role in early American development. I conclude with thoughts on what this survey suggests for those seeking to reassert, or better understand, national unity in our own time. To meet what Will Kymlicka calls political theorists' "fundamental challenge," identifying "the sources of unity" in diverse democratic states, an inquiry into the rhetorical origins of American political union is highly germane.<sup>12</sup>

## I. Religious Unions

From the earliest British colonial settlements well into the 1750s, by far the most common invocations of union in the American colonies were religious. Unionist affirmations were central to all denominations, from Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Separate Baptists in the southern and middle colonies to New England's Puritans and Congregationalists. Such usage, casually mingling church and state, dates from John Winthrop's 1630 "city on a hill" lay sermon aboard the *Arbella*, where he urged "the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace" and implored "we must be knit together in this work as one man."<sup>13</sup> To understand the conceptual development of American political union, we must turn first to religious rhetoric.

Every church-going or Bible-reading colonist regularly encountered descriptions of union between God and humans as the Edenic condition, lost through original sin and redemptively possible through divine salvation. Religious historians identify five distinct union themes in early Christian theology, from incarnational unity (Christ taking human form) to spiritual union between the believer and God, representing "the ultimate Christian goal of complete union with the Lord."<sup>14</sup> Particularly relevant to American development are religious communities formed around a covenant. Covenantal bonds among believers, dating originally from Judaism and adopted by Puritan thinkers in Tudor England, superseded geographic and class connections as well as most existing social arrangements. Writes Adam Seligman: "Covenanting together, the Puritans also covenanted themselves off from the major existing institutional loci of solidarity—the Church, village, or parish—and so of those social identities which prevailed in English society. The withdrawal from existing loyalties both national and ecclesiastical to the Church of

12. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 192.

13. Winthrop in *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry*, ed. Perry Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 79-84 (I have modernized spelling and punctuation here, as throughout). David Hackett Fischer notes that "the importance of unity," both political and ecclesiastical, was "the leading theme of Puritan sermons" into the eighteenth century: *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 190.

14. S. B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1988), 698-99.

England and the growth of a new set of commitments, loyalties and identities . . . was a fundamental element in the construction of new loci of social life and individual identity.”<sup>15</sup>

The step from separatist covenants to valorizing close fraternal union among members of a congregation, and then a village, city, and nation, was a natural one. Roger Williams’s oft-repeated aphorism, “Union strengthens,” referred to unity across different sects (rather plaintively, as it turned out), and Jonathan Edwards devoted long tracts to extolling both spiritual and secular union as “one of the most beautiful and happy things on earth.”<sup>16</sup> Union’s deep Biblical and interpersonal resonance ensured its wide appeal among colonists anxiously inhabiting a “new world.”

While doctrinal disputes certainly existed among American sects<sup>17</sup> and between theologians, even heated disagreements contributed to connections across geographical borders. Ultimately, as Sidney Ahlstrom writes, common efforts at “conversion and regeneration” were “a bond of fellowship that transcended disagreements on fine points of doctrine and policy.” The outcome was union’s near-universal currency among religious-minded colonists from Vermont to Georgia, as a source of profound affective and interpersonal meaning. The term was at the liturgical heart of practically every one of America’s myriad sects, so that by the late seventeenth century union was firmly established as a core concept, evoking a broad relation of religious beliefs and practices.<sup>18</sup>

The conceptual centrality of union in colonial religion inevitably influenced American political conversation, in an era “when almost every sermon was a political statement.” William Hubbard’s election sermon of 1676 is a typical example: “in the body politic, where it is animated with one entire spirit of love and unity...all the several members must and will conspire together to deny or forbear the exercise of their own proper inclinations, to preserve the union of the whole, that there be no schism in the body.” The first colonial constitution, Connecticut’s “Fundamental Orders,” echoed church covenants in stating that “where a people are gathered together[,] the word of God requires that to maintain the peace and union of such a people there should be an orderly and decent government established

15. Adam B. Seligman, “Between Public and Private,” *Society* 35 (1998): 33. On colonial Americans’ covenantal bonds, see Dale S. Kuehne, *Massachusetts Congregationalist Political Thought, 1760-1790* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 29-50; Daniel Judah Elazar, *Covenant and Civil Society: The Constitutional Matrix of Modern Democracy* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1998).

16. Roger Williams, “The Bloody Tenet of Persecution” (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1967 [1644]), 18; Jonathan Edwards, “An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union” (Boston: D. Henchman, 1747), 16.

17. On turbulent sectarian relations, see Charles L. Cohen, “The Post-Puritan Paradigm of Early American Religious History,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (1997): 697, 722; Clark, *Language of Liberty*, 203-17, 339-81.

18. Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 293.



according to God." Legal statutes in Virginia began with a like invocation: "For the preservation of the purity of doctrine and the unity of the church. . . ."<sup>19</sup>

Religious exchanges were also a primary source of communication between colonies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. "Most denominations," writes John Ranney, "were intercolonial in their constituency; and in many churches [there developed] a strong movement for ecclesiastical unity, regardless of state lines." Ideas were transmitted through denominational conferences, reprinted sermons, itinerant preachers, and revival meetings. These exchanges served as an important early foundation of intercolonial unity, culminating in the "Great Awakening" of the 1730s and 1740s. As Ralph Ketcham affirms, the movement had lasting political effects: "Though the Awakening had passed its peak by 1750 . . . the sense of communion of those who experienced it remained, and in the 1760s and 1770s, when Americans debated *national* loyalty and *political* purpose, the continuing impact of their earlier religious ferment was everywhere evident."<sup>20</sup>

Religious themes, in sum, were the foremost basis for early political mentions of national union. The first proposal to join all British American colonies was made (in 1697) by Quaker leader William Penn. Decades later, as the crisis with England developed, another prominent religious figure, Jonathan Mayhew, urged Massachusetts lawyer James Otis to pursue "a communion of colonies" along the lines of "the communion of churches." Otis accepted the advice, proposing committees of correspondence as Mayhew suggested, and subsequently convening the intercolonial Stamp Act Congress in October 1765.<sup>21</sup> These activities helped set in motion a complex interplay of rebellious acts and union talk, to which we now turn.

## II. Political Union: Origins & Early Development

Political references to union were present among American gentry as early as the 1630s, when Connecticut officials proposed a "united . . . consociation amongst our selves" of the New England colonies. Such calls were commonplace by 1754, when

19. Lawrence Stone, "The Revolution Over the Revolution," *New York Review of Books* 39 (1992), 49 (on sermons' political import, see also Kuehne, *Massachusetts Congregationalist Thought*, 79-84); William Hubbard, "The Happiness of a People" (Boston: John Foster, 1676), 16; *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut, 1636-1665*, ed. J. Hammond Trumbull (Hartford: Brown & Parsons, 1850), 20; *The True-Blue Laws of Connecticut and New Haven*, ed. J. Hammond Trumbull (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1876), 324. On the connection between early American politics and religious thought, see Donald S. Lutz, *The Origins of American Constitutionalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 52-75; Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

20. John C., Ranney, "The Bases of American Federalism," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3 (1946): 4; Ralph Ketcham, *From Colony to Country: The Revolution in American Thought, 1750-1820* (New York: MacMillan, 1974), 38.

21. Mayhew quoted in *The Pulpit of the American Revolution*, ed. J. W. Thornton (Boston: D. Lothrop & Co., 1860), 44; on Mayhew's influence with Otis, see Clark, *Language of Liberty*, 368.



a Plan of Union, mainly drafted by Benjamin Franklin, was ratified by the Albany Congress. The Plan's modest aim—a mutual-defense society, built on cooperative measures—marked the limit of colonial leaders' imagination concerning national community before the 1760s. Americans' restraint owed to a mixture of fealty to Britain and intense mutual suspicion, epitomized in a comment from New York governor Benjamin Fletcher. Visiting Connecticut in November 1693, Fletcher bemoaned his neighbors' "Independent principle," grouching that "These small colonies . . . are [as] much divided in their interest and affection as Christian and Turk."<sup>22</sup>

Despite these differences, "union" and "united" by the mid-eighteenth century had come to be common descriptors for political connections among the colonies. Religious discourse inspired this unionist language, as we have seen; another chief contributor was British practice. Beginning with the England-Wales union of 1536, officials proposed a variety of plans joining different parts of the empire. The most noteworthy collaboration, between England and Scotland, was termed the Union of 1707. That arrangement is described in further detail below; note for now that Britons termed confederations of political bodies "unions" from the sixteenth century on, and that British Americans (as one component of a "United Kingdom") carried the practice across the Atlantic.

A common language served as a vital cohesive source among the British American political class. Though the colonial population was already quite heterogeneous by the early eighteenth century, with immigrants from across central and northern Europe arriving along with slaves from at least twenty different African tribes, all official business and other exchanges among colonial leaders was conducted in English. J. R. Pole notes that colonists "used the language in essentially similar ways; there do not even appear to have been marked differences of idiom."<sup>23</sup> The extraordinary importance of public speech in colonial America—one study notes that "talk became a primary focus of talk" among colonists—underscores the unifying force of language.<sup>24</sup> Uniform cultural experience helps explain this linguistic similarity: educated colonists read the same British and European authors, and worshipped in Protestant churches featuring similar doctrines. Most Americans also shared a loyalty to England, which eventually complicated the effort for separate unity but which did much to nurture a sense of commonality among colonists into the 1760s.

By the eighteenth century, ample exposure to other colonies' activities was available through local newspapers, virtually all of which carried extensive coverage of events from Vermont to Georgia. A typical four-page issue of an ordinary journal from 1745, the *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, included news from Williamsburg, Virginia

22. *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of New York*, ed. John Romeyn Brodhead (15 vols.; Albany: Weed, Parsons, 1858), 4: 73.

23. J. R. Pole, *The Idea of Union* (Alexandria, VA: Bicentennial Council, 1977), 74.

24. Jane Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 48.

(lightning killed “a Colonel and his two daughters”); Philadelphia; Maryland; New York; Rhode Island; and the latest dispatches from the war in Nova Scotia. Readers of the *Post-Boy*, and of most other colonial organs, would see speeches reprinted from various American officials, hear about Atlantic coastal hurricanes and “Murder in the Carolinas,” and learn the results of votes in Maryland’s assembly and figures for boat traffic in New York. Samuel Kernell traces newspapers’ “national outlook” to the 1840s, but the trend is evident more than a century earlier.<sup>25</sup>

Against this backdrop, officials and private citizens in British America proposed several plans for uniting all or several colonies, beginning early in the seventeenth century. Unionist schemes were launched by merchants seeking reduced inter-colonial trade barriers, bureaucrats desiring streamlined administrative procedures, and military commanders seeking more secure boundaries. Other colonists also dreamed up plans of union, motivated by commitments to religious concord, civil peace, or fraternal fellowship. “A good deal of colonial intellectual activity from 1690 on was accounted for by projects of confederation of one sort or another,” summarizes one historian.<sup>26</sup> Table 1 lists notable proposals for intercolonial unity, by way of demonstrating the extent of unionist ideas.<sup>27</sup> The table indicates the year in which each plan was proposed, and, in two cases, enacted; also summarized are each plan’s primary purposes and (if actually considered by the British Ministry) reasons for failure.

These plans testify to the presence of a unionist persuasion long before 1763, although most were little discussed among the majority of colonists. Their intended audience was colonial governors and assemblies, other opinion leaders, and the British Ministry, rather than the population at large. In short, no appeal for a more unified American people was made directly to that people.<sup>28</sup> If colonists were to join across political boundaries, it would be at the behest of their leaders, at home and in London. And, as shall be seen below, British ministers had ample reason to suppress most expressions of united feeling among the colonists.

At the same time, many of these proposals were reported in newspapers, and calls to unity across colonies for defense and commercial reasons had become routine by the early eighteenth century. Most politically-aware British Americans would

25. *Boston Post-Boy*, Sept. 2, 1745; other examples from issues of Jan. 14 and June 17 of that year. Samuel A. Kernell, “The Early Nationalization of Political News in America,” *Studies in American Political Development* 1 (1986).

26. Ranney, “American Federalism,” 9.

27. Sources include Albert Bushnell Hart and Edward Channing, eds., “Plans of Union, 1696-1780” (*American History Leaflets* 14; New York: Macmillan, 1894); Harry M. Ward, *Unite or Die: Intercolony Relations, 1690-1763* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1971), 3-31; Brodhead, ed., *Colonial History of New York*, 4: 870-79; J. M. Bumsted, “‘Things in the Womb of Time’: Ideas of American Independence, 1633-1763,” *William & Mary Quarterly* 31 (1974).

28. This was not out of the ordinary; very few official colonial actions, including assembly debates or even votes, were communicated to the public. See J. R. Pole, *The Pursuit of Equality in American History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 117-36.

**Table 1.**  
*Plans of Intercolonial Union, 1643-1763*

Major plans are in boldface; lesser but still prominent proposals are indented.

**United Colonies of New England (1643-84).** Among the four Puritan colonies: powers included war/peace (the Confederation declared war at least once, in 1675); admit new members; general intercolonial agreements/orders. Charter revoked by royal decree.

**Dominion of New England (1685-89).** Crown-imposed replacement for United Colonies; eventually rejected by colonies. Subsequent colonial attempts to recreate United Colonies failed.

- New York intercolonial congress (1690) among four colonies; met to coordinate policy in King William's War and continue joint military efforts. Planned but failed to meet again.

**Penn's Plan of Union (proposed 1697).** First plan to unite all (ten) colonies. Authority vested in central Congress, with jurisdiction over intercolony fugitives, commerce, and defense. No power to organize troops or levy taxes. Crown uninterested; Plan faded without formal hearing.

- Charles D'Avenant (1698): unite northern colonies via a joint assembly, and institute an intercolonial Trade Council.
- Robert Livingston (1701): three separate regional unions, formed for frontier defense, administrative coordination.
- "Virginian," probably Robert Beverley (1701): unite colonies outside New England.
- Joseph Dudley, central military authority for New England (1702): renewed New England Confederation, possibly including New York and New Jersey.
- Caleb Heathcote (1715): "consolidate" all colonies, to achieve self-financing.

**Earl of Stair Plan of Union (1721).** First British proposal to unite all existing colonies. Union with centralized authority over defense, taxes, postal system, trade regulation. Victim of official squabbling over details, though some colonial governors exchanged letters on Stair Plan.

- Daniel Coxe "Grand Council" plan (1726) to unite all colonies.
- Martin Bladen (1739): proposed two-house legislature, for military/trade purposes.
- George Clinton, "Plan of American Union" (1744): common defense among New England/mid-Atlantic colonies. Ignored by British Ministry.
- Archibald Kennedy (1751): colonial union with strong ties to Indians, to be legislated by Parliament. Franklin's 1754 plan in part a response to Kennedy's.

**Albany Plan of Union (1754).** Common defense, related laws, taxes levied for support. Benjamin Franklin the primary author and promoter. British opposed, and no colonies ratified.

- Thomas Robinson, "Plan for Union of Colonies" (1754): British plan, for military ends.
- Henry McCulloh, "Proposal for Uniting the English Colonies" (1757): economic plan featuring poll tax supervised by commission; "Bills of Union" to pay provincial troops.

have read about and discussed possibilities for closer relations with neighboring colonies. And this popular awareness of intercolonial activity expanded dramatically in the 1740s, with the Great Awakening. Another boost in the term's profile came in 1754, when seven colonies sent delegates to a Continental Congress at Albany. Benjamin Franklin had the greatest hand in drafting the resulting Albany Plan of Union—appropriately so, since he had been encouraging closer unity among the colonies for years. Disputes at the Congress were overcome long enough to approve the Plan initially, but it was subsequently rejected by all voting colonies, vetoed by the Crown, and pilloried at town meetings around British America.<sup>29</sup> Franklin's disappointment was considerable: he complained to an English friend later that year that "Everybody cries, a Union is absolutely necessary, but when they come to the manner and form of the Union, their weak noddles are presently distracted. So if ever there be a Union, it must be formed at home [e.g., in England] by the Ministry and Parliament."<sup>30</sup>

With the Albany Plan's failure, the boundaries of intercolonial union appeared clear. The term was familiarly used to denote political ties among the colonies ("Everybody cries, there must be a Union"), but these were minimal in practice until the 1760s. Colonial leaders' squabbling and an unwilling British Ministry combined to deny life to even tentative movements. Apart from Henry McCulloh's 1757 "Proposals for Uniting the English Colonies," largely excerpted from an earlier manuscript, calls for colonial union dwindled after 1754. By 1760 even the ever-optimistic Franklin sounded resigned:

However necessary a union of the colonies has long been, for their defence and security against their enemies, and how sensible soever each colony has been of that necessity; yet they have never been able to effect such a union among themselves, nor even to agree in requesting the mother country to establish it for them. . . . If they could not agree to unite for their defence against the French and Indians, who were perpetually harassing their settlements, can it be reasonably supposed that there is any danger of their uniting against their own nation, which protects and encourages them, with which they have so many connexions and ties of blood, interest, and affection, and which, it is well known, they all love much more than they love one another? I will venture to say, a union among them for such a purpose is not merely improbable, it is impossible.<sup>31</sup>

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29. On a 1755 Boston town meeting which criticized Franklin and other Plan advocates as "block-heads," see Leonard W. Labaree, et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (35 vols.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959-), 5: 490. Ward lists "particularistic objections" to the Plan from individual colonies, many of which anticipated battles in the constitutional convention (*Unite or Die*, 16). On the Albany Plan, see also Douglas Anderson, *The Radical Enlightenment of Benjamin Franklin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 156-58, 206-11.

30. *Franklin Papers*, 5: 453-54.

31. "The Interest of Great Britain Considered," April 1760, in *Franklin Papers*, 9: 90.

Franklin's seeming elegy in fact stated a subversive political understanding of union. Animated by a seemingly preposterous concern—what colonist in 1760 was contemplating separation from the “mother country”?<sup>32</sup>—Franklin's proved to be a prophetic view. Earlier in the same essay, Franklin warned that “grievous tyranny and oppression” on Britain's part could inspire the colonies to unite.<sup>33</sup> Within a few years union would directly connote independence and a break from the British empire. This possibility seemed so terrible that many Americans *avoided* employing “union” in this sense until the eve of revolution. Instead they adopted a formerly uncommon, British understanding of the term.

### III. Displacement: Union Usage in the Crisis Years, 1763-74

First, some empirical demonstration. Figure 1 demonstrates literate Americans' pattern of “union” usage between 1756 and 1780, based on a survey of newspaper references to the term and its co-referents (“United,” modifying “Colonies” or “States”). Mentions of national unity are depicted as a proportion of total newspaper pages examined. In 1766, for example, my sample of newspapers included 67 pages with at least some news content. Reading through these, I counted 10 references to intercolonial or national union and related terms (“united colonies,” “unity of Americans,” and so forth). The proportion of union references per page was thus 0.15 (10/67). The running total is an index of Americans' propensity to express national sentiments in the language of union.<sup>34</sup>

Immediately apparent in the figure is a trough in references to pan-American unity during a period in which one would reasonably expect these to rise: the colonial crisis sparked by the Grenville Acts and subsequent events. The remainder of this section examines this precipitous drop in union references during the “critical years” prior to independence.

#### *The American View: Intercolonial Union, or Union With England?*

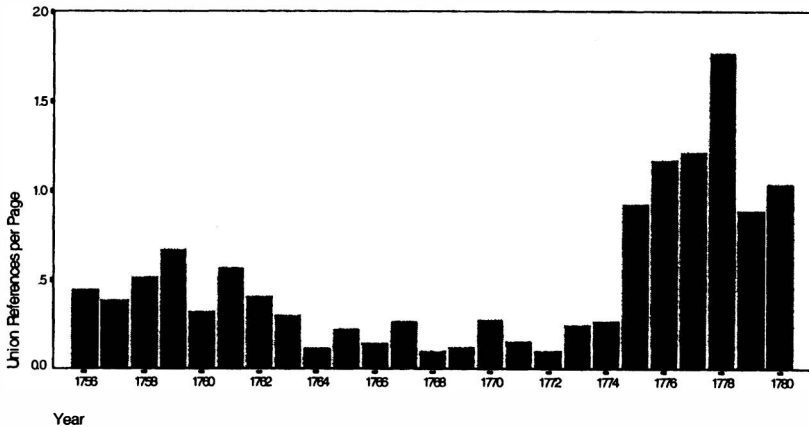
Taking Franklin as an influential example of American elites' political thought

32. As Bumsted (“Things in the Womb of Time”) demonstrates, the handful of colonists who before 1763 discussed separation from Britain did so solely, and vehemently, to deny the possibility. That *British* officials on both sides of the Atlantic were already voicing alarm on these grounds is discussed below.

33. “The Interest of Great Britain Considered,” April 1760, in *Franklin Papers*, 9: 90.

34. Figure 1 is based on a sample of 16 colonial newspapers, selected on three criteria: *representativeness*, regional and partisan; *longevity* (I tried to use journals published for several years, to ensure consistent readership); and *availability* of issues to researchers today. Armed with this sample, I counted references to national union and unity in editorial and news content, using four issues of each newspaper (if available) for every year from 1756 to 1780. I used, where possible, issues published during the first week of January, April, July, and October. I then summed yearly “union” references and divided by the total page count. This provided Figure 1's running ratio of “union” usage. Compare Richard L. Merritt, *Symbols of American Community, 1735-1775* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); and John K. Alexander, *The Selling of the Constitutional Convention: A History of News Coverage* (Madison: Madison House, 1990).

**Figure 1.**  
*Union References in American Newspapers, 1756-1780*



during the 1750s-1770s, we see patterns in references to intercolonial union in sharper perspective. Union appears in two different senses in Franklin's copious writings. One invokes union of the American colonies "for their mutual defense and security," among other purposes.<sup>35</sup> A second usage denotes union between England and America, on the model of the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707. Franklin applies the first, intercolonial meaning as early as the 1740s, in keeping with longstanding British American practice. In 1747, for example, Franklin's "Plain Truth" pamphlet urged, "at present we are like the separate filaments of flax before the thread is formed, without strength because without connection, but UNION would make us strong and even formidable."<sup>36</sup> But calls to unify the American colonies abruptly disappeared from Franklin's lexicon during most of the resistance period, returning finally in 1775.

Conversely, Franklin made no mention of union between America and Britain until the mid-1760s, but he regularly employed this usage over the decade thereafter. In January 1766, Franklin wrote an English friend that "the measure [Britons] propose of a Union with the colonies is a wise one," and concluded "if such an Union were now established, which methinks it highly imports this country [Amer-

35. "Reasons and Motives," July 1754, in *Franklin Papers*, 5: 387.

36. *Franklin Papers*, 3: 202 ("Plain Truth" pamphlet, 1747). Cf. similar examples in 4: 117-21 (letter to James Parker, March 1751, summarizing several attempts "to unite the several governments in British America"); 5: 275 (his "Join or Die" cartoon, with the 11 colonies as joints of a snake, May 1754); 5: 387-417 ("Reasons and Motives"), 457-59 ("Plan for Settling the Western Colonies," Dec. 1754); and like appeals to American unity from the mid-1750s to early 1760s (6: 88, 148, 231-32; 7: 375-77; 9: 90-95; and 10: 405).

ica] . . . it would probably subsist as long as Britain shall continue a nation.”<sup>37</sup> Between 1765 and February 1775, Franklin mentioned (in private letters as well as public statements) “union” in the colonial context 51 times: all but one reference was to unity between America and England, or to the Anglo-Scottish exemplar. In contrast, between 1735 and 1764 his 38 references to political union included none to unity between America and England.<sup>38</sup>

A survey of leading American rebels turns up similar patterns in union references during the crisis. James Otis’s pamphlet in response to the stamp and sugar duties concludes with an invocation of “the [1707] act of union,” and a promise that American representation in Parliament would “firmly unite all parts of the British empire.” At the 1769 signing of Virginia’s nonimportation resolutions, the assembled company drafted a stern set of anti-British directives—then drank a toast to “A speedy and lasting Union between Great-Britain and her Colonies.” Daniel Dulany’s “Considerations on the Propriety of Imposing Taxes” was an especially notorious piece of colonial opposition writing in the 1760s, in part because of its dark warnings that “measures of prevention” might be taken and “redress may be obtained” by the colonies, presumably acting in concert. Dulany coated the pill by appealing that “an union [be] established” between the colonies and Great Britain. A decade later, with Lexington and Concord only months away, James Wilson closed his “Considerations on Parliamentary Authority” by citing the “strict connection between the inhabitants of Great Britain and those of America”: as fellow-subjects, “this union of allegiance naturally produces a union of hearts. It is also productive of a union of measures through the whole British dominions.”<sup>39</sup>

This sudden outburst of Americans’ paeans to their place in the Union of the British Empire, beginning as the imperial crisis intensified in 1764, accompanied a decline in references to pan-colonial unity. Along with the evidence in Figure 1, note that few of the principal calls to resist various British measures before 1775 include any mention of intercolonial union in even its weak, Albany Plan sense, much less to denote a more cohesive, English-excluding set of bonds among the colonies.<sup>40</sup> Exam-

37. *Franklin Papers* 13: 23-24. Compare, e.g., 12: 363 (letter to son William, Sept. 1765); 19: 96 (to Noble W. Jones, Apr. 2, 1772); 20: 282-83 (to Mass. House of Reps., July 7, 1773, where Franklin lists the mutual advantages of “a strict Union between the Mother Country and the Colonies”); 20: 330-31 (to John Winthrop, July 25, 1773); 20: 385-86 (to William Franklin, Sept. 1, 1773); and 21: 366-68; 380-86 (Franklin’s two separate December 1774 “Hints for Conversation”).

38. These precise counts are possible thanks to a CD-ROM of Franklin’s collected papers, an advance version of which was kindly made available by the Franklin Papers, Sterling Library, Yale University.

39. James Otis, “Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved” (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1764), 65; Virginia Assembly, “Nonimportation Resolutions, 1769,” in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (24 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950- ), 1: 31; Daniel Dulany, “Considerations on the Propriety of Imposing Taxes,” in *Pamphlets of the American Revolution*, ed. Bernard Bailyn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1765), 17, 47 (emphasis in original); James Wilson, “Considerations on Parliament,” Aug. 17, 1774, in *The Works of James Wilson*, ed. R.G. McCloskey (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1967), 2: 745.

40. See, e.g., the pamphlets collected in Bailyn, *Pamphlets of the American Revolution*. None pub-



ples extend well beyond these familiar writings. Rhode Island governor Stephen Hopkins, widely recognized as an “ardent champion of colonial unity” before the crisis began and during it a regional leader of opposition to British authority, in his 1765 pamphlet on the controversy avoided the term altogether, a practice he maintained in public statements until 1775. George Washington, who before the Stamp Act used the term regularly to call for intercolonial defense—and who, as early as 1769, contemplated the colonists taking up arms against the British—after 1763 eschewed “union” with reference to the colonies until June 1775. To extend the point beyond elites, a collection of popular American patriotic songs and ballads of the period includes no reference to ‘union’ or ‘united’ in twenty-odd top “hits” from 1764-74. After 1775 there recur stirring lines like “An Union through the colonies will ever remain/And ministerial taxation will be but in vain.”<sup>41</sup>

Why *should* we expect colonists to describe their mutual efforts in terms of union during the crisis? Three reasons are pertinent. First, efforts at joint action—regularly termed “union” before 1763, as we have seen—were extensively mounted after the crisis began. Among these were the Stamp Act Congress, convened within weeks of the Act’s promulgation; establishment of the intercolonial Sons of Liberty; the coordinated nonimportation policies of 1765, 1767, and 1774; a series of popular anti-British demonstrations and riots; and the committees of correspondence and the Continental Congress that grew out of these. Colonists, as Richard Merritt demonstrates, “crossed the threshold of American common identity” during the 1760s. Calls for (and examples of) unified action were widespread, but the most obvious word for such efforts was otherwise engaged.<sup>42</sup>

Second, *British* officials, in writings well known among rebel leaders, frequently used the term to denote intercolonial activity. Early in the crisis, former Massachusetts governor Thomas Pownall warned against “the danger” of the colonies’ “form-

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lished between 1764 and mid-1774 includes an appeal for closer union among the American colonies. The only prominent exceptions I could find were John Dickinson, who called for united action among the colonies in two of his 1767-68 “Farmer’s Letters,” and Samuel Adams, who remained a fiery promoter of union throughout the crisis.

41. Hopkins described in Ward, *Unite or Die*, 17; cf. Frank Greene Bates, *Rhode Island and the Formation of the Union* (unpublished Ph.D. diss.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1898), 41; Washington to George Mason, April 5, 1769, in *The Papers of George Washington: Revolutionary War Series*, ed. Philander D. Chase (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), 3: 299. Typical of Washington’s usage before the crisis was his letter to Robert Morris, April 9, 1756: “Nothing I more sincerely wish than a union to the colon[ie]s in this time of eminent danger” (*ibid.*, 1: 309; cf. 1: 502-3). Ballads from the period appear in *Songs and Ballads of the American Revolution*, ed. Frank Moore (New York: D. Appleton, 1855), quote at 105.

42. Merritt, *Symbols of American Community*, 126. Jack Rakove’s authoritative study of the crisis concludes that intercolonial “union remained the paramount good” among Americans, though he does not consider the term’s absence from period discourse. *Beginnings of National Politics*, 69; see generally 3-86. See also Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 94, 221; Greene, *Peripheries and Center*, 157-65.

ing any Principle of Coherence with each other." While the possibility seemed to him "trivial," Pownall did warn that "the particular danger here . . . is that of furnishing them with a principle of union," and consequently endorsed "the sure wisdom of keeping this disunion of council and imperium amongst them." The Stamp Act's primary drafter, Thomas Whately, was more succinct: "all bonds of union between them [must be] severed." The separate shocks following the Stamp Act, Townshend Acts, and Tea Act all inspired considerable rumbling among British ministers about the dangers of colonial unity. Americans noted the trend: as Joseph Galloway of Pennsylvania declared in 1764, "An union [the Albany Plan] has been already rejected and such a one we shall now never enjoy. Our superiors think it convenient to keep us in another state."<sup>43</sup>

Third, to turn to an interpretative argument: a principal claim among historians of early America, especially over the past three decades, is that a "Great Transition" from classical to modern society occurred in the new U.S. republic. The nature of this transformation remains disputed, but most scholars agree that such a shift did occur during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In Michael Zuckerman's summary account, during the revolution Americans "assumed that the republic could survive solely on a conception of the people as a homogeneous body and of the public good as a unitary entity to which the separate cares of separate citizens had steadily to be sacrificed." But "the advent of a very different set of commitments and conceptions" early in the confederation period resulted in "ravag[ed] republican hopes for communal unity."<sup>44</sup>

If colonial and newly confederated Americans spoke the classical, affective language of common good while the post-1787 generation favored commercial individualist doctrines, a communal term like "union" would seem the very heart of such classical talk. Perplexingly, however, in practice the American conceptual evolution of union appears to have moved in reverse. During the burst of republicanism leading to revolution, the term was missing from colonists' "ritual reaffirmations of solidarity and shared purpose." Subsequently, especially after constitutional ratification "shattered the classical Whig world," the term's frequency of usage was scarcely matched by any other political word, a trend that increased into the Civil War era and beyond. Given that "cultures do not, as a rule, dismiss the words that

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43. Thomas Pownall, *The Administration of the Colonies* (3d. ed.; London: J. Walter, 1766), 63-65; Thomas Whately, "The Regulations Lately Made Concerning the Colonies" (London: J. Walter, 1765), 98; Galloway quoted in Julian P. Boyd, *Anglo-American Union: Joseph Galloway's Plans to Preserve the British Empire, 1774-1788* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1941), 20.

44. Zuckerman, "A Different Thermidor," 179, 184-85, 188; see also Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), vii-ix, 562, 606-15; J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 506-25; Jack N. Rakove, *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 151-2.

allow them to say what they mean," union's absence as a referent for intercolonial ties between 1764-74 is a significant aberration.<sup>45</sup>

Thus *silence* marks one key aspect of union's place in American political language. This is not the only instance in U.S. political history where an absent feature is significant: Louis Hartz's *Liberal Tradition*, for example, explains the convictions of colonists, founders, and Progressives alike in terms of a missing feudal past.<sup>46</sup> Here, the absence of union talk may testify to the concept's centrality. As a referent for separate nationhood, union carried such explosive portent that it was avoided, tiptoed around, swept under the rug. Compare another compelling topic of the era: slavery. Nowhere in the Declaration or Constitution do "slave," "Negro," or related terms appear.<sup>47</sup>

Thus the question becomes why a common term, one familiar before 1764 and which after 1774 widely denoted pan-American solidarity, so rarely appeared in this context during the crisis years. Fear of retribution? Perhaps; yet agitated colonists scarcely hesitated to damn the British from the outset of the imperial crisis. In 1764 Parliament and the Ministry were portrayed as "fatal" to colonial interests, and during subsequent outbreaks of opposition were routinely called "venal," "barbarous," "despotic," and the like.<sup>48</sup> Such truculence, given England's relatively liberal tradition of free speech, was not explicitly or, for the most part, even implicitly forbidden by the Crown or its ministers. In the case of union talk, however, such a ban effectively applied, for British leaders had already moved to claim the term as their own.

### *The British View: An Incorporating Union*

Conceptual histories rarely focus on why a term disappears from political discourse, probably because most objects of analysis—power, liberty, rights, equal-

45. Zuckerman, "A Different Thermidor," 180; Wood, *Creation*, 605; Rodgers, *Contested Truths*, 19. On union's place in American political thought after the 1770s see Rogan Kersh, *Dreams of a More Perfect Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming), chs. 3-6.

46. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955); see also Greene, *Peripheries and Center*, 55-76 (on the "virtual absence" of formal attention to Parliament's relation to the colonies: the ensuing pages investigate "the meaning of this silence").

47. As Luther Martin noted at the Constitutional Convention, delegates "anxiously sought to avoid the admission of expressions which might be odious to the ears of Americans." *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, ed. Max Farrand (4 vols.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), 1: 135. Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration did include a reference to slavery, as one of the "injuries and usurpations" visited on Americans by the King; Congress stripped this out as too provocative. See discussion in *Jefferson Papers*, 1: 407-14, 436.

48. See, e.g., John Adams's latter two "Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law" essays, published in 1765, which set out an elaborate account of British perfidy [*Papers of John Adams*, ed. Robert J. Taylor (10 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977-89), 1: 118-28]. Adams and other colonists freely employed other terms of dissension, such as 'liberty,' of which Michael Kammen writes "no notion was invoked more frequently" after 1763. Kammen, *Spheres of Liberty: Changing Perceptions of Liberty in American Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 17.

ity—remain very much “alive.” An account of “union”’s absence as the referent for intercolonial ties is necessary here, to fill out the evidence depicted in Figure 1 above. “Union,” originally used to signify loose cooperation among the colonies and close, religious-cum-political ties within smaller societies, underwent a temporary displacement during 1764-74. The word instead appeared in the dress of harmony between Britain and America, along the lines of the Anglo-Scottish Union.

Formal confederation of England and Scotland, spurred particularly by James I, began with the 1603 uniting of the two states’ crowns. A century of subsequent edicts, cajoling and diplomacy eventually led to an Act of Union between England and Scotland in 1707. A prominent feature of the bipartite union was its “incorporating” character. The arrangement was not a dual-federalist one, but Scotland retained significant autonomy especially in its civil institutions, including the Church of Scotland and legal and educational systems separate from England’s. This incorporating model was an innovative departure from traditional unitary-state conceptions, which enshrined “parliamentary sovereignty as the supreme law, allowing no room for rival authorities above or below it.”<sup>49</sup>

The Anglo-Scottish Union, plagued by popular disapproval in both countries, was a poor administrative model for binding other Commonwealth members to London.<sup>50</sup> Eventually it served as a useful *rhetorical* model, however. British leaders were slow to develop a coherent strategy of empire: Ira Gruber notes that “What they had were less theories than metaphors.”<sup>51</sup> Union was a long-established referent for federation among states. And, at least partly in response to American attempts at independence, in the 1760s British public speakers increasingly referred to a “Union” of England and the American colonies, along Anglo-Scottish lines.

The benefit of an incorporating union, Ministry officials explained to colonists, was an attentive, supportive English “parent” providing expanded social, commercial, and military benefits. General Thomas Gage, arriving in America as military governor of Massachusetts, issued a proclamation that both sternly rebuked colonial misbehavior and promised enhanced “Union with the Colonies.” Thomas Pownall, safely back in London after his own turbulent turn as Massachusetts governor, wrote almost obsessively on themes of union and division. Concerned that the American colonies might “form an alliance, and settle the union of their mutual

49. Michael Keating, “Reforging the Union: Devolution and Constitutional Change in the United Kingdom,” *Publius* 28 (1998): 217-19. On the background and development of the Union, see the essays in *A Union for Empire: Political Thought and the British Union of 1707*, ed. John Robertson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

50. See, e.g., Eric Richards, “Scotland and the Uses of the Atlantic Empire,” in *Strangers Within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire*, ed. Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 74 and *passim*.

51. Ira D. Gruber, “The American Revolution as a Conspiracy: Understanding the British View,” *William & Mary Quarterly* 26 (1969): 535; cf. Ian R. Christie, “A Vision of Empire: Thomas Whately and ‘The Regulations Lately Made Concerning the Colonies,’” *English Historical Review* 113 (1998): 304-5.

interests," Pownall offered a vision of uniting "Great Britain, with all its Atlantic and American possessions, into one great commercial dominion." The colonies, "united to the realm . . . [like] Scotland," would "be guarded against having, or forming, any principle of coherence with each other." Another British official, Thomas Crowley, drafted so many blueprints for uniting the American colonies to England that Franklin observed in 1773, "He seems rather a little cracked upon the subject."<sup>52</sup>

There was likely more than coincidence behind Britons' spreading references to "union" during the crisis. Constant reminders of colonists' filial dependence were a means of preserving order and authority. For a time, Franklin and other American leaders responded in kind, embracing the notion of Anglo-American unity and avoiding mention of a separate intercolonial union. Thomas Jefferson recalled in his autobiography that the "only orthodox or tenable" view during the crisis "was that the relation between Great Britain and these colonies was exactly the same as that of England and Scotland."<sup>53</sup> Occasionally the impetus for this unionist usage was critical, to suggest that Scots through their Union enjoyed benefits that Americans deserved as well;<sup>54</sup> more commonly, Americans welcomed the new collaborative promises. Even Samuel Adams, busily spurring resistance efforts, paused to note "So sensible are [colonists] of their happiness and safety, in their union with . . . the mother country, that they would by no means be inclined to accept of an independency, if offered to them."<sup>55</sup> Why would the increasingly rancorous American colonists obediently reserve "union" for relations with England, and not their own expanding ties?

A plausible answer lies in Britain's potent hold over the colonies, both substantive and symbolic. Historian Jack Greene demonstrates that Americans' "mimetic" impulses were "increasingly intense" during the crisis years. Colonists' predisposition to "cultivate idealized English values and to seek to imitate idealized versions of English forms and institutions" were an outgrowth of "deep social and psychological insecurities, a major crisis of identity."<sup>56</sup> This "identity crisis," other scholars

52. Gage, 1933, II: 118; Pownall, *Administration of the Colonies*, 35-36 (cf. 3-12, 35-39, 62-69, 87, 157-61, 198-202); Franklin to William Franklin, Sept. 1, 1773, *Franklin Papers*, 20: 386-87. See also Whately, "Regulations Lately Made," 39-41; and various defenses of an incorporating union in *American Archives*, ed. Peter Force (6 vols.; Washington, DC: P. Force, 1837-46), 2: 200-01 (Barclay, 14-point plan for "A Permanent Union between Great Britain and Her Colonies," Feb. 16, 1775); 397-99 (anonymous defense of Galloway Plan, April 1775).

53. *Jefferson Himself: Selected Writings*, ed. Bernard Mayo (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1942), 50-51.

54. As Franklin wrote in 1766, "if we must, with Scotland, participate in your taxes, let us likewise, with Scotland, participate in the Union." "Homespun," in *Franklin Papers*, 13: 46; cf. Otis, "Rights of the British Colonies," 61.

55. Adams to Marquis of Rockingham, Jan. 22, 1768, in *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, ed. Harry Alonzo Cushing (3 vols.; New York: Octagon Books, 1968), 1: 170; cf. his letter to Arthur Lee, April 4, 1774, where Adams reversed the relation, asserting that "the being of the British nation, I mean the being of its importance . . . will depend on her union with America" (3: 101-02).

56. Jack P. Greene, "Political Mimesis: A Consideration of the Historical and Cultural Roots of Legislative Behavior in the British Colonies in the Eighteenth Century," *American Historical Review* 75 (1969): esp.

observe, resulted in large part from the series of humiliating actions by England from 1763 on, which together indicated that Americans occupied a second-class status within the empire. In response, colonists labored to assure Ministry officials—and themselves—that they were loyal Britons, worthy of an incorporating union with the parent nation.<sup>57</sup>

At least in their own eyes, Americans remained culturally English into (and even after) the revolutionary years.<sup>58</sup> Dissident American leaders and loyalists alike had mostly been born and/or educated in England, and these colonists tended to replicate British forms down to their rhetorical styles.<sup>59</sup> In the 1760s and early 1770s, facing an apparent choice between continued ties with England and separate status outside the British Empire, colonists initially embraced the former, investing union ideas with the meaning preferred by Ministry spokesmen. That Americans accepted the “prohibition” on union as a descriptive term for their own relations is less surprising than it may at first appear.

Compared to other central political concepts of the period, union seems a special case. With values like liberty or equality, the colonists freely pointed out Crown and Ministry hypocrisy. But union was not an established principle of British political ideology, asserted on behalf of subjects’ individual rights. A united empire remained an uncertain prospect in the mid-eighteenth century, to the deep concern of the officials charged with administering it. To denounce Anglo-American unity was a serious challenge to the concept of empire.<sup>60</sup> Already alert to possibilities of colonial separatism hardly imagined by Americans before the 1760s, British ministers were quick to discourage tendencies towards colonial union—including rhetorical appeals. Colonists accustomed to London’s benign neglect objected to infringements on their self-determination, but they simultaneously feared the loss of imperial protection. While loudly defending their liberties, they quietly set aside mention of intercolonial union. But as ties to England began seriously to fray in the 1770s, the term again took on the potent meaning British ministers had worked to eradicate.

343-47. See also Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 165, 168.

57. See the excellent summary in T. H. Breen, “Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution: Revisions *Once More* in Need of Revising,” *Journal of American History* 84 (1997): 27-35.

58. For overviews see Ian K. Steele, “Exploding Colonial American History: Amerindian, Atlantic, and Global Perspectives,” *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998): 80-2; Fischer, *Albion’s Seed*, 6, 77-88; Ketcham, *From Colony to Country*, 3-21.

59. On British influences in Franklin’s speech, see Lois Margaret MacLaurin, *The Vocabulary of Benjamin Franklin* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1927); see also Fischer’s region-by-region accounts of “Speech Ways” (*Albion’s Seed*, 57-62, 256-264, 470-75, 652-55).

60. For germane commentary see the Editor’s Introduction, along with essays by Ned Landsman and J. G. A. Pocock, in *Union for Empire*, ed. Robertson, 1995.



#### IV. Union Redux: American Unity Declared, 1774-76

Into the 1770s, most British Americans appeared genuinely to desire reconciliation with the mother country. Even avid dissenters only sought redress of specific (usually economic) claims, while embracing the notion of closer unity with England. But a few influential colonists began to undermine the Parliamentary authority central to an incorporating union. Thomas Hutchinson's 1773 defense of the status quo before the Massachusetts House concluded with a familiar Ministry admonition: "It is impossible that there should be two independent Legislatures in one and the same state . . . the two Legislative bodies will make two governments as distinct as the kingdoms of England and Scotland before the union." John Adams, in his response on the House's behalf, subtly shifted the locus of unity: "Very true . . . and if they [the two legislatures] interfere not with each other, what hinders but that being united in one head and common sovereign, they may live happily in that connection[,] and mutually support and protect each other?"<sup>61</sup>

Adams and other colonial elites envisioned a loose arrangement, along Anglo-Scottish Union lines, of continued allegiance to the Crown along with free trade, American delegates in Parliament, and separate colonial judicial and executive authority. This expectation encountered ever-greater Ministry intransigence. Such a negative response was inevitable, though colonists may have misunderstood one underlying reason. For the British, a system of sovereignty jointly shared by king, Parliament, and American assemblies implied a return to a fully independent monarchy. England's unshakeable commitment to parliamentary superiority, hard-won in 1688, posed for colonists a stark choice between submission and revolution.<sup>62</sup>

Whether or not colonists recognized this dynamic at the time, London's actions in support of parliamentary power inflamed American opinion. Moreover, as the crisis proceeded, colonists became painfully aware of their subordinate position within the empire. T. H. Breen describes their "sudden realization" in the early 1770s

61. Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay* (3 vols.; Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1936 [1773]), 1: 269; Adams, "Reply of the House," Jan. 26, 1773, in *Papers of John Adams*, 1: 329. Other colonists soon followed Adams in writing Parliament out of the arrangement. Jefferson, in his legal history of English-American relations, explained that from the earliest "settlements . . . effected in the wilds of America, the emigrants thought proper to adopt that system of laws under which they had hitherto lived in the mother country, and to continue their union with her by submitting themselves to the same common sovereign, who was thereby made the central link connecting the several parts of the empire." "Draft of Instructions to the Virginia Delegates," July 1774, in *Jefferson Papers*, 1: 122-27 (emphasis added).

62. H. G. Koenigsberger, "Composite States, Representative Institutions and the American Revolution," *History and Theory* 28 (1989): 152. At the Virginia ratifying convention in 1788, James Madison similarly recalled that "the fundamental principle of the Revolution was, that the colonies were co-ordinate members with each other, and with Great Britain, of an empire, united by a common executive sovereign, but not by any common legislative sovereign. . . . A denial of these principles by Great Britain, and the assertion of them by America, produced the Revolution." *Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, ed. Jonathan Elliot (5 vols.; Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1836), 4: 589.



"that the British really regarded white colonial Americans as second-class beings, indeed, as persons so inferior from the metropolitan perspective that they somehow deserved a lesser measure of freedom." British promises of Anglo-American union, incorporating or otherwise, increasingly appeared hollow in the face of a string of policies and pronouncements seemingly designed to emphasize the degree of Americans' exclusion.<sup>63</sup>

As colonial resistance leaders slowly arrived at this conclusion in 1773-74, their vision of a united British Commonwealth was reduced to a "network of separate republics, held together because they all shared the same constitutional monarch."<sup>64</sup> Ministry officials continued to proclaim parliamentary sovereignty as late as 1776, as in Lord Howe's haughty mention in a letter to Franklin of "the King's paternal solicitude for promoting the establishment of lasting peace and union with the Colonies," with details to be determined by Parliament. Franklin responded with a telling figure, "that fine and noble china vase the British Empire": he warned that "being once broken . . . a perfect re-union of those parts could scarce even be hoped for."<sup>65</sup>

By mid-1774, awareness was spreading through the colonies of just how shattered that British vase was. Twelve colonies sent representatives to the First Continental Congress, convened in September 1774 to "unite the colonies" in resistance to British "usurpation." Delegates stopped short of calling their collective body a union, preferring "the several colonies" or "the Association." But within months John Adams dismissed the idea of "union [as an] incorporation of all the dominions of the King," instead advocating "a union of the colonies . . . and an American legislature." In Parliament, members lamented that "there is an end of all union [with America]."<sup>66</sup>

In such a climate, the step to applying "union" to the colonists' own relations became more feasible psychologically as well as politically. By 1775 Americans widely urged intercolonial union, often in apocalyptic terms like Ebenezer Baldwin's: "A very little attention must convince every one of the necessity of our being united. If the colonies are divided or the people in the several colonies are very considerably divided, we are undone. Nothing but the united efforts of America can save us." The

63. Breen, *Ideology and Nationalism*, 28-29.

64. Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 1986), 70. Cf. James Wilson's "Considerations on Parliament," which advocated fealty to the king but rejected Parliamentary authority (in *Works of James Wilson*, 2: 722-46).

65. Franklin to Lord Howe, July 20, 1776, in *Franklin Papers*, 22: 520. On British response to the colonists' distinction between Parliamentary and monarchical sovereignty, see Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, esp. 225-29.

66. *Journals of the Continental Congress*, ed. W. C. Ford et al. (31 vols.; Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1904-37), 1: 63-80; "Novanglus," Mar. 6, 1773, in *Papers of John Adams*, 1: 310, 322; MP quoted in *Proceedings and Debates of the British Parliaments Respecting North America, 1754-1783*, ed. R. C. Simmons and P. D. G. Thomas (6 vols.; London: Kraus International, 1982), 3: 149.

unionist chorus was joined even by anti-nationalists like Patrick Henry, who told the First Continental Congress "I am not a Virginian, but an American. . . . All distinctions are thrown down. All America is thrown into one united mass."<sup>67</sup>

Some declarations of American union were still accompanied by appeals "that we may ever be united" to the Crown, a connection desirable not only for nostalgic reasons. Pauline Maier notes that restraint in advocating a separate union "seemed essential . . . to gain time for the forging of American unity, upon which, everyone acknowledged, the success of their cause would depend." In May 1775, the Second Continental Congress's "Olive Branch Petition" could still acknowledge the benefits of "the union between our Mother Country and these Colonies"—but entirely in the past tense. That same month, Edmund Burke declared in London that the "greatest" source of "sorrow" felt among Britons was that "there no longer subsist between you and us any common and kindred principles, upon which we can possibly unite."<sup>68</sup>

Colonists' renewed references to their union were not merely superficial evidence of more important political or economic changes. "[Americans] draw strength and courage from talk of Union," a Tory official in Pennsylvania darkly reported home in 1775. The conceptual displacement traced above had been overcome, and the rhetorical forging of national unity was underway. Colonists increasingly imagined themselves as mutually-dependent citizens, rather than as subjects of the King. This entailed an independent American state, with John Adams applying power-balancing theory in its defense: "apply unto France, Spain, [and] Holland" for assistance, "and our Union would prevent a division by [England], of our united [American] governments."<sup>69</sup>

By late 1774 American religious authorities also were again applying this potent term to political concerns, as churches sought to infuse the struggle against Britain with providential rhetoric. National unity was foremost among the "three ingredients necessary for [revolutionary] success" that Boston minister Charles Chauncy

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67. Baldwin in *Colonies to Nation, 1763-1789: A Documentary History of the American Revolution*, ed. Jack P. Greene (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 219; Henry in Alpheus Thomas Mason, "The Nature of Our Federal Union Reconsidered," *Political Science Quarterly* 40 (1950): 506. Prominent among countless like examples was a series of "Letters from London to a Gentleman," which ran in several colonial newspapers, and which featured repeated exhortations to "Let the Americans be united." The series is reprinted in *American Archives*, 2: *passim*.

68. Arthur Lee in Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 170 n.; *ibid.*, 284; *American Archives*, 2: 1870; *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford (12 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981-96), 3: 277. Burke-style regrets among English writers were reprinted in American newspapers for years to come. Papers from New Hampshire to North Carolina, for example, carried "Ludlow," writing in a 1778 *London Evening Post* that "A firm union and confederacy [with the U.S.] . . . would perhaps be more beneficial to this country, than if we were established in our former claims to superiority." *North Carolina Gazette* (Wilmington), March 6, 1778; *New Hampshire News-Gazette* (Portsmouth), March 7, 1778.

69. *Pennsylvania Evening Post* (Philadelphia), January 25, 1775; Adams to Boston Committee of Correspondence, Sept. 1774, *Papers of John Adams*, 2: 179.

saw as “bless[ings] of the Almighty.” Exulted his colleague Samuel West, “how wonderfully Providence has smiled upon us by causing the several colonies to unite so firmly together . . . though differing from each other in their particular interest, forms of government, modes of worship, and particular customs and manners, besides several animosities that had subsisted among them.” Even traditionally Tory synods like New York’s Presbyterians placed their religious “duty” to “maintain the union which at present subsists through all the colonies” ahead of loyalty to the Crown. Divine protection for colonists’ nascent political bonds was invoked by secular figures as well, from Benjamin Franklin to Thomas Paine.<sup>70</sup>

In arguments opposing “virtual” representation, Parliamentary supremacy, and eventually monarchical sovereignty, the justification for Pownall’s “grand united Empire” was dismantled. The one-vote rejection, at the First Continental Congress, of a Plan of Union put forth by longtime Franklin associate Joseph Galloway was the last point at which reconciliation was formally contemplated. Expunging that vote and then the Plan itself from the Congress’s minutes drove the point home. Franklin, by way of consolation, wrote Galloway that “I cannot but apprehend more mischief than benefit from a closer Union [with England].” Jefferson added to colonists’ catalogues of British misdeeds the “exercise of . . . dividing and dismembering [our] country,” a gross violation never before “occurr[ing] in his majesty’s realm.” By mid-1775 American Tories recognized the writing on the wall. Wrote Jonathan Sewall, shortly before fleeing to England, “It is now become too plain to be any longer doubted, that a Union is formed by a great Majority, almost throughout this whole Continent.” Daniel Leonard, writing as “Massachusettensis,” concurred: “The colonies . . . are not of the same community with the people of England. All distinctions destroy this union; and if it can be shown in any particular to be dissolved, it must be so in all instances whatsoever.”<sup>71</sup>

Shortly afterward came the first official American references since the 1750s to “United Colonies.” A notable example was the “Declaration of Causes of Taking Up Arms,” issued July 6, 1775, by the “Representatives of the United Colonies of North America.” The concluding paragraphs, drafted by Jefferson and John Dickinson, exhibit lingering effects of Britain’s rhetorical displacement: “Our [intercolonial] union is perfect,” they wrote, adding quickly “Lest this declaration should disquiet the minds of our friends and fellow-subjects in any part of the Empire, we assure them that we mean not to dissolve that Union [with the King] which . . . we sincerely wish

70. Chauncy and West in J. F. Berens, *Providence and Patriotism in Early America, 1640-1815* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 67-8; Clark, *Language of Liberty*, 359; Michael Zuckerman, “The Fabrication of Identity in Early America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 34 (1977): 210; Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969 [1791]), 87-90.

71. Franklin to J. Galloway, Feb. 25, 1775, in *Franklin Papers*, 21: 509; Jefferson, “A Summary View,” July 1774, in *Jefferson Papers*, 1: 123; Sewall in *Colonies to Nation*, 266; John Adams and Daniel Leonard, *Novanglus and Massachusettensis* (Boston: Hews and Goss, 1819 [1775]), 62.

to see restored.”<sup>72</sup> This conceptual dissonance was cleared up a year later, when in a more famous Declaration the Americans—now “United States”—announced all political connections to England null and void. Assertions of union with Britain were thereafter scarce among any but Loyalists in the former American colonies.

Along with the Declaration, reprinted in every Whig paper in the country, Thomas Paine’s hugely popular *Common Sense* did much to bury the old usage and popularize the new. Anti-British and religious usage inform the pamphlet’s stirring language. “‘TIS TIME TO PART,” exhorted Paine, denouncing Ministry promises of filial unity as “farcical . . . the words have no meaning.” “The time hath found us,” he declares at the work’s heart. “The glorious union of all things prove[s] the fact. It is not in numbers but in unity, that our great strength lies . . . the whole, when united can accomplish [independence].” And the colonists responded: before the year was out all colonial assemblies had substituted for the traditional “God Save the King!” first “God Save the United Colonies!” and then “God Save the United States!” Despite dissent (then as now) about the actual extent of colonial unity, it is clear that rhetorical devotion to union spread rapidly through the colonial leadership during 1775-76. Observing fellow members of the Second Continental Congress, Virginia’s Richard Henry Lee proudly affirmed that “all the old Provinces not one excepted are directed by the same firmness of union.”<sup>73</sup>

## V. Conclusions

These initial statements of political union among the colonies deserve careful attention. Americans had by no means simply returned, after a ten-year hiatus, to the weak self-defense understanding prevalent before the 1760s. Now the word was used to denote the whole American people, in affective ways formerly reserved for religious relations. “Union” had powerful political connotations from 1775-76 on, erupting from a mixture of anti-British and religious sentiment. The resulting conceptual conflict—Americans’ blatantly reasserting the term Britons had employed to insist on continued interrelations—was a key register of defiance. Union talk also

72. “Declaration as Adopted by Congress,” July 6, 1775, in *Jefferson Papers*, 1: 217. The first example in the Congress’s records of “united colonies” appears in May 1775, in a letter from the Massachusetts Provincial Congress imploring more collective action among the colonies. *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 2: 76.

73. Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1976 [1776]), 87, 65-9, 100-01 (cf. 83, 108, 122); Lee in *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789*, ed. Paul H. Smith (25 vols.; Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976-), 1: 337. Soon even perennial dissenter Rhode Island would instruct its delegates to Congress to pursue “the most proper measures for promoting and confirming the strictest union and confederation between the . . . United Colonies.” Bates, *Rhode Island*, 63. Georgia, the only colony failing to send delegates to the First Continental Congress in 1774, had dropped any pretense of neutrality a year later. “Believe us, great Sir, America is not divided,” the Georgia Provincial Congress wrote the King in July 1775. “The rigorous experiments which your Ministry thought fit to try on the Americans, have been the most effectual means . . . to unite them all as in a common cause.” In *American Archives*, 2: 1557.

helped the former colonists alleviate the anxieties of change, as countless Revolution-era statements attest. The new union was praised as perfect or sacred in one sentence, then in danger of imminent disintegration the next. "The management of so complicated and mighty a machine as the United Colonies requires the meekness of Moses, the patience of Job, and the wisdom of Solomon, added to the valour of David," sighed John Adams in April 1776.<sup>74</sup>

Such passing references to religious and philosophical eminences were as abstract as most early invocations of union ever got. The revolutionary elite rarely engaged in ruminations, of civic-republican, liberal, or other vintage, on unionist themes. This was partly because the problem of joining different states had been little addressed by British empire-builders, as seen above. Only the bare outlines of a conception of American union had emerged by the time war with England was joined, describing "the Union" and the means by which unity could be strengthened. The *purposes* of promoting national union were straightforward: to oppose British retaliation; to aid in differentiating Americans from their cultural and, in many cases, biological forebears; and to glorify the God whose "Agency" secured, as Samuel Adams had it, "this Union among the colonies and warmth of Affection."<sup>75</sup>

*Members* of the union included virtually anyone willing to help the revolutionary effort. For the most part, thorny issues of membership in other communities, whether a home state or a group based on shared interests, ethnicity, occupation, or gender, were muted. 'Loyalists vs. patriots' was the salient distinction. Common standing as Americans was advertised by political leaders, in attempts to foster direct social and political ties among the people. To be sure, few non-white males held full civic membership, and the darker sides of colonial communities—social exclusivity, intolerance, and the like—remained in abundant display. But women, resident aliens, American Indians and free blacks all made welcome contributions to the new republic, especially its war effort. New Yorkers sought "peace and amity" with all "Indians . . . willing to unite their efforts" with the revolutionaries, language replicated in federal treaties such as that the Continental Congress concluded with the Iroquois in 1775.<sup>76</sup> White women's efforts were extensive: they participated in consumer boycotts; raised funds for the army and quartered its men in their homes; spied on British troops and cared for American soldiers; articulated opposition themes in public statements, especially religious testaments; undertook virtually all "tasks normally performed by men" who were away at war; and, in several known

74. J. Adams to James Warren, Apr. 22, 1776, in *Papers of John Adams*, 4: 135.

75. S. Adams, "To a Southern Friend," Mar. 12, 1775, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 3: 199.

76. *Goodell v. Jackson*, 20 Johns. R. 693 (N.Y.C.C., 1823), at 712; *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 14: 104. See also, on Native Americans and the Revolution, Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

cases, served (in disguise) as soldiers.<sup>77</sup> Many free blacks also joined the war effort, and while revolutionaries' talk of universal liberty and equality seems hypocritical given the continued presence of slavery, Gordon Wood demonstrates that "Americans in 1775-76 began attacking [black slavery] with a vehemence that was inconceivable earlier."<sup>78</sup>

This relatively enlightened approach to membership in the new national union owed less to a spirit of liberal toleration than to an obvious difficulty in promoting ethnicity or culture as the basis for national union. The rebels' strongest animus was expressed toward the British, and revolutionary Americans—the vast majority of whom traced their heritage to England, a demographic fact that remained true for another century—could hardly denounce that "people" as an inferior race. Instead, many colonists adopted a comparatively cosmopolitan conception of unity in the new republic.

Less clear than the purposes and agents of union were questions of *process*—how the unity now widely considered desirable might be effected or sustained. Debates over an incorporating union with England had centered on matters of classification and principle: if the colonists and British government could reach accord on the location of sovereignty and on the character of colonial representation, a union based on the Anglo-Scottish example could be established. But efforts at purely American union presented novel institutional questions of establishing cooperation among an extremely diverse people, historically displaying little interest in joint governance, whose main common trait was membership in the British Empire. American thinkers were only belatedly beginning to contemplate the problem of political unity in earnest. As Edmund Burke said of "American unity" in 1776: "It is a condition that confronts you, not a theory."<sup>79</sup>

For the moment, precisely specifying the new union of states remained a future concern, with the immediate patriotic and martial mandate clear enough. These ends were sufficient to promote the term's spread well beyond American leaders in

77. Linda K. Kerber, "History Can Do It No Justice: Women and the Reinterpretation of the American Revolution," in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 18-29; Breen, "Baubles of Britain," 469; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Daughters of Liberty: Religious Women in Revolutionary New England," in *Women in the American Revolution*, 211-12, 235-43. On black women, see Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 196, 209-12. On women and other groups' civic membership in Revolutionary times, see Kerber, "History Can Do It No Justice," 29-42; Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 103-14; Linda K. Kerber, "A Constitutional Right to be Treated Like American Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship," in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda K. Kerber et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 24, 27-8.

78. Wood, *Radicalism of American Revolution*, 186-87; on African-American contributions to the Revolutionary war effort, and scattered support for black rights in response, see Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1668-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 301-04, 308-11, 342-74; Philip A. Klinkner with Rogers M. Smith, *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 16-23, 189.

79. Burke in Pole, *Idea of Union*, 55.



the months and years to come, providing a vital foundation for political development. No one concept's influence alone can account for the development of thirteen separate British colonies into a remarkably durable national union. But recounting that achievement without attention to the linguistic struggles and innovation surrounding this term ignores a critical part of the story—enough to leave modern historians muttering about “miracles.” Much as the Declaration helped many citizens overcome fears of “that frightful word, Independence”<sup>80</sup> and imagine themselves as a separate people, asserting colonial unity buttressed the sense of fraternal purpose necessary to wage war successfully.

At least three lessons may be drawn from this early history of American union for those contemplating national community today. First, acknowledging that concepts have potent effects—that outcomes may depend on conceptual contests, as well as material interests or institutional orders—is essential to actors in any political project, as well as to fuller historical assessment. Conceptual change is not merely the realm of linguistic archaeologists: it deeply affected political participants in eighteenth-century America, including both colonists searching for resonant themes and British officials who well recognized the power of words. After 1776, war with Britain was a powerful encouragement to Americans of all backgrounds, including the many who paid no attention to union talk before the conflict, to imagine themselves as a united people. But the conceptual basis for unionist commitments was under construction long before armed hostilities began. J. G. A. Pocock once noted that “Men cannot do what they have no means of saying they have done,”<sup>81</sup> and the efforts of colonists to spur thought about unifying the colonies provided the rhetorical groundwork for American transformation from a British dependency to a separate Union.

If concepts and the rhetoric inspired by them can affect political development, it must also be said that such effects are highly complex. No single theorist or actor controlled the conceptual development of union. Awareness of the power of language, though essential to understanding events, rarely confers decisive power over outcomes. This seems a useful reminder for theorists contrasting “good” and “bad” (because progressive or malign) ways of understanding political unity or nationalism in the present.<sup>82</sup> When instantiated in practice, these ideal types often are transformed in unpredictable ways.

80. Congressman Josiah Bartlett (NH), in personal letter referring to his constituents' outlook, Jan. 1, 1776, in *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, 3: 88.

81. J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (London: Methuen, 1972), 122. Mlada Bukovansky notes that “The U.S. polity had to be conceived of as a whole before it could be used as a venue for the pursuit of various interests or aims. The process by which American identity was conceptualized—and its underlying ideas—was as critical to the constitution of state identity as the existence of the territory and the people”: “American Identity and Neutral Rights From Independence to the War of 1812,” *International Organization* 51 (1997): 210.

82. See, e.g., Kai Nielsen, “Cultural Nationalism, Neither Ethnic Nor Civic,” *Philosophical Forum* 28 (1997); Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 83–84, 163–67.



Second, political analysts wary of religious influences in public matters must recognize that even secular terms draw meaning—and strength—from this sphere. Though a demonstration is beyond my compass here, union's immense popular appeal from the late eighteenth century into the Civil War owed in important part to the religious overtones the term invoked, as speakers from Madison to Douglass, Lincoln, and Whitman evidently knew. Similar effects are discernable today. One hardly need mount a holy crusade to achieve the desired appeal: Madison or Lincoln's own religious views are still only poorly understood, but both drew on Biblical rhetoric to advance their visions of union. For those who deem religious references too dangerously illiberal to be sources of national unity, the point is that *some* connection to popular vernacular is essential to a concept's widespread purchase. Political theorists who instead construct ideal speech communities, or spin lapsarian tales of golden fraternal ages past, do little to engender stronger bonds among contemporary Americans—and meanwhile, as countless episodes in the nation's history testify, those bonds are constructed by others, often in cruelly exclusionary ways.<sup>83</sup>

If only implicitly, the framers recognized this danger, raising a third point. Americans were originally constituted as “one united people” largely without appeals to shared blood or other ethnocultural appeals. The reasons owed most to a natural difficulty in distinguishing colonists from their ancestors and relatives across the Atlantic, and to the pressing need for assistance in the independence effort from anyone willing to provide it. But it may hearten adherents of liberal nationalism to recall that the rhetorical foundations of national union were laid with scant reference to exclusionary themes. By no means, of course, did the independence period mark the end of struggles over union's meaning and purposes. At least one writer did suggest hopefully in 1776 that “the thirteen colonies [are] so happily united” that further tracts on the subject of national union were no longer necessary.<sup>84</sup> But for American unionists a long road, leading as often to disruptive differences as to closer and more inclusive bonds, lay ahead.

83. For a detailed accounting of ascriptive nationalist appeals from colonial times to the early twentieth century, see Smith, *Civic Ideals*.

84. Quoted in Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 267.