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Searching for Truth in the Fast Day Sermons of 1812

Abstract

It is a vast generalization to say that all Federalists were anti-war, and that Federalist, anti-war feeling was centered in the Puritan northeast. It is equally an oversimplification to assume that all westerners and southerners were pro-war Republicans. But these assumptions were just as common at the time as they are today. The war of 1812, although not one of the most significant wars in the nation's history, is one of the most complex. Over the years, dozen of causes have been suggested for the conflict: American merchants' profits from the war in Europe, westerners' attempt to further expand the country's borders, or even a Napoleonic conspiracy against Britain. The simplified explanation is this: Despite avowed neutrality in the war between Britain and France, the United States was steadily being drawn into the conflict. American merchant ships traded with both countries and thus became the target of both the British and French navies. The British navy, suffering from a high desertion rate and desperate for sailors, began seizing American merchant ships and impressing American seamen to fill their ranks. A series of skirmishes with the British-backed Shawnee along the Canadian border solidified President James Madison's conviction that open conflict was necessary, and Congress declared war on Britain on June 18, 1812.

Searching for Truth in the Fast Day Sermons of 1812

AMELIA BENNER

In the summer of 1812 America was bitterly divided. The flush of success that followed the Revolution had long since faded, and war with Britain again seemed imminent. In response, several fast days were declared that summer, with local and national leaders calling on their citizens to set aside a certain day for prayer, repentance, and submission to God. These fast days provided American ministers with the irresistible opportunity to vilify the enemy and call for national repentance in their finest hell-and-brimstone style. From pulpits across the young nation, anti-war Federalist clergy condemned France as a bastion of atheism, Republican ministers sent out a call for arms against Britain, and both sides predicted a bloody civil war in their own country. Hundreds of these fast day sermons were printed and distributed in pamphlet form, and their apocalyptic language gives voice to the sense of impending disaster that gripped the nation on the eve of the war of 1812. However, attempting to piece together public opinion about the war from these sermons alone is problematic; a number of variables, from regional attitudes to print culture to historians' own doubts about the causes of the war, make the truth of the matter elusive.

It is a vast generalization to say that all Federalists were anti-war, and that Federalist, anti-war feeling was centered in the Puritan northeast. It is equally an oversimplification to assume that all westerners and southerners were pro-war Republicans. But these assumptions were just as common at the time as they are today.¹ The war of 1812, although not one of the most significant wars in the nation's history, is one of the most complex. Over the years, dozen of causes have been suggested for

¹ Reginald C. Stuart, *War and American Thought: From the Revolution to the Monroe Doctrine* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1982), 126.

the conflict: American merchants' profits from the war in Europe, westerners' attempt to further expand the country's borders, or even a Napoleonic conspiracy against Britain.² The simplified explanation is this: Despite avowed neutrality in the war between Britain and France, the United States was steadily being drawn into the conflict. American merchant ships traded with both countries and thus became the target of both the British and French navies. The British navy, suffering from a high desertion rate and desperate for sailors, began seizing American merchant ships and impressing American seamen to fill their ranks.³ A series of skirmishes with the British-backed Shawnee along the Canadian border solidified President James Madison's conviction that open conflict was necessary, and Congress declared war on Britain on June 18, 1812.

Instead of focusing on the murky political origin of the war, I have chosen to emphasize ministers' opinions about it; thus, I am writing about the effect rather than the cause. I recognize, then, that my argument was on shaky ground from the start. I have consulted a number of authors, each of whom presents a different thesis about the war, and they inevitably differed. By accepting the above oversimplified explanation, I have knowingly side-stepped numerous complications. I have also depended on the works of William Gribbin, who seems to be one of the only historians to focus on religious response to the war of 1812. If his work is at all biased, then mine will unintentionally propagate those same biases.

Anti-war Federalist ministers emphasized two main points; first, that the conflict was unjust and unprovoked, and second, that by fighting Britain, the U.S. was lending indirect support to France. Fast day sermons tended to focus more attention on the first objection, with ministers predictably dwelling on Biblical teachings on the evils of war. The older generation, including many church leaders, believed

² A.L. Burt, "The Nature of the Maritime Issues," in *The Causes of the War of 1812: National Honor or National Interest?* ed. Bradford Perkins (Holt: New York, 1962), 11; Louis M. Hacker, "The Desire for Canadian Land," in *The Causes of the War of 1812*, 46; Roger H. Brown, *The Republic in Peril: 1812* (New York: Norton, 1971), 162.

³ Burt, "Maritime Interests," 12.

that an unprovoked war, made on the basis of national interests, was immoral and inhumane; for them, the only justification for war was a direct threat by an enemy.⁴ For Federalists, Britain's actions were not sufficient to justify an attack, and ministers drew frequent comparisons between the Revolution—which they regarded as a just war in defense of their God-given liberties—and the present war, which seemed unprovoked:

We are not convened this morning to unite in supplication for protection against an invasion of our country....We cannot use the language of our fathers, and the pious friends of our country, in their appeals to Heaven, at the commencement of the revolutionary war....Our fathers could appeal to Heaven for the justice of their cause. They did appeal to Heaven. They cried unto God, and were delivered. But who dares appeal to God for the justice of this war?⁵

In the afternoon portion of his "Discourse in Two Parts," delivered for the Massachusetts state fast day, clergyman Reuben Holcomb offered an unusual analysis of the situation:

We have doubtless treated the Indian tribes with injustice in the want of punctuality in fulfilling our contracts with them. But we do not believe, that, though we have been defective, and even sinful in this respect, the savages have a right to murder, and destroy our frontier inhabitants, with their property.⁶

Thus, Holcomb implies, Americans have a right to lash out against Britain in retaliation for their "defective, and even sinful" behavior toward American citizens and property.

Anti-war ministers also argued that France, not Britain, was America's true enemy. To New England Protestants, France represented the double threat of Catholicism and atheism. The French Revolution, and that nation's subsequent experimentation with secularism, were still fresh in Americans' memories. In contrast, anti-war Protestants identified British missionaries as allies in the ongoing battle

⁴ Stuart, *War*, xiv.

⁵John Smith, "An Apology for the Friends of Peace" (*Early American Imprints*, microfiche, second series, no. 26755), 3-4.

⁶Reuben Holcomb, "A Discourse in Two Parts" (*Early American Imprints*, microfiche, second series, no. 25671), 17.

to Christianize the world.⁷ Napoleon's imperialist ambitions were an additional concern, and American Federalist clergy drew inspiration from the book of Revelation to caution their parishioners against the Gallic menace. For years Protestant ministers had labeled the Pope as the antichrist; now, the title was increasingly applied to secular governments, specifically that of France.⁸ "The armies of Atheism will tread down the earth; already they are a million men, fierce as tigers, and terrible as demons," warned Massachusetts minister Elijah Parish.⁹ Holcomb's vision of French domination was less abstract:

Let the navy of Great-Britain be removed from the ocean, and no longer be the terror of the French Emperor; I have no doubt that in less than six months from this day, our country should be filled with Frenchmen of all denominations. . . . And then instead of the pure religion of the Gospel. . . our country would be polluted with all the corruptions of popery, and heathenism united, and the ministers of the meek and lowly Saviour, be driven into exile, or fall a sacrifice to Gallic insolence and madness.¹⁰

Smith put it even more bluntly, insisting that Napoleon was "the antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son," and that to fight Britain would be to join the armies of darkness.¹¹ For many Americans, British naval power represented the world's last defense against French imperialism.

But did the opinions of all these ministers reflect the attitudes of their congregations? For American Protestants in the early 19th century, arguing about obscure points of theology and splintering into ever-more minute sects was practically a national pastime. After the "Great Revival" at the turn of the century, Americans began to take a more personalized approach to religion; if a certain minister's style or beliefs offended them, they were free to find a new congregation or start a new denomination

⁷ William Gribbin, *The Churches Militant: The War of 1812 and American Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 41.

⁸ Lawrence Delbert Cress, "Cool and Serious Reflection: Federalist Attitudes toward War in 1812," *Journal of the Early Republic* 7 (Summer 1987): 134.

⁹ Elijah Parish, "A Discourse Delivered at Byfield" (*Early American Imprints*, microfiche, second series, no. 26382), 20.

¹⁰ Holcomb, "Discourse," 18.

¹¹ Smith, "An Apology," 16.

altogether.¹² Thus, although it is difficult to say for sure, these ministers were probably addressing people whose anti-war beliefs aligned with their own.

Madison proclaimed a national fast day for August 20, calling for “a day of public Humiliation and Prayer.”¹³ Federalist reaction to Madison’s fast day proclamation was largely negative. New England churches had observed earlier fast days designated by state governors without complaint, but Madison’s nationalistic, pro-war language offended many.¹⁴ In his proclamation, Madison ordered that August 20 be set aside for

the devout purpose of rendering to the sovereign of the Universe, and the Benefactor of mankind, the public homage due to his holy attributes; of acknowledging the transgressions which ought justly provoke the manifestations of His Divine displeasure, of seeking His merciful forgiveness, and His assistance in the great duties of repentance and amendment; and, especially, of offering fervent supplications, that in the present season of calamity and war, he would take the American People under his peculiar care and protection...¹⁵

No one disagreed with that part, at least; this plea for repentance would be echoed from a thousand Federalist pulpits in the weeks to come. But anti-war clergymen found it impossible to comply with Madison’s next request:

...that He would guide their public councils, animate their patriotism, and bestow his blessings on their arms...that turning the hearts of our enemies from the violence and injustice which sway their councils against us, He would hasten a restoration of the blessings of Peace.¹⁶

Noah Worcester, who preached in Salisbury, New Hampshire, told his parishioners,

There are several things recommended in the proclamation which has called us together. With the most of them, I think I can cordially comply. There is, however, one thing,

¹² Gribbin, *Churches Militant*, 1.

¹³ *Boston Gazette*, 20 July 1812.

¹⁴ Gribbin, *Churches Militant*, 19.

¹⁵ *Boston Gazette*, 20 July 1812.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

respecting which, I *must be excused*—viz., praying that God would “bestow his blessing on our arms.”¹⁷

Ministers like Worcester could not justify praying for victory in a war they considered unnecessary, immoral, and dangerous to national unity.

But can we be sure that Worcester actually spoke these words on August 20, 1812? His sermon was subsequently printed in leaflet form by a Concord publisher, and he could have edited his comments before submitting them for publication. His use of the abbreviation “viz.,” which would be awkward in an oral address, makes this seem likely. Ministers sometimes prefaced booklets of their work with notices to the reader, like this rather self-effacing statement preceding a sermon by Hingham, Massachusetts, clergyman Joseph Richardson: “To the Reader: This discourse was not originally designed for the press, and is submitted for publication as it was delivered.”¹⁸ Worcester’s sermon carries no such disclaimer, and we have no guarantee that his congregation heard these exact words on August 20.

Like their Federalist brethren, pro-war Republican ministers used apocalyptic language in their fast day sermons. Their target, however, was not France but Britain. Although a healthy pro-war following did exist in New England, Republican sentiment proliferated on the country’s fringes, in the south and on the western frontier. Westerners and Southerners tended to belong to less-staid Baptist or Methodist sects; their emotional, self-sufficient strain of Christianity was in showy contrast to the stark, traditionalist Puritan, Episcopalian, and Congregational churches that made up the bulk of the New England anti-war movement.¹⁹ These frontier Christians lived in fear of attack by British-backed Native American tribes, and therefore tended to mistrust both Britain and the east coast “establishment.” Also,

¹⁷Noah Worcester, “Abraham and Lot” (*Early American Imprints*, microfiche, second series, no. 27608), 15.

¹⁸Joseph Richardson, “The Christian Patriot Encouraged” (*Early American Imprints*, microfiche, second series, no. 29660), 1.

¹⁹Gribbin, *Churches Militant*, 62.

according to historian Louis Hacker's "land hunger thesis," frontier Americans yearned to claim the vast expanse of Canada for themselves.²⁰

Whatever the reason behind their beliefs, most Republicans regarded the war of 1812 as a defensive measure against Britain, and the Republican sermons reflected this attitude.²¹ Unlike Noah Worcester and his fellow Federalists, Massachusetts clergyman John Hathaway Stevens had no reservations about following Madison's order to pray for victory. "We must implore His blessing on our arms by sea and land, that He would crown them with success...that they might not be vanquished, but shielded in the day of battle, be victorious, and conquer the enemy," he proclaimed on the state fast day in 1814, near the end of the war.²² Stevens railed at those who considered the war unprovoked:

What can be clearer evidence that the wisdom of men have [sic] perished and their understanding and prudence is hid, than to hear them say, England has done us no essential injury, that this war with that nation is unjust, unprovoked, and wicked...²³

In his fast day sermon, Samuel Knox of Baltimore did not offer any justification for the war, only a call to arms and an appeal to his listeners' patriotism:

While a portion...of our fellow-citizens are shedding their blood in the field, or, on the ocean—shall there be any found so base, so profligate, so disaffected, so unprincipled—I might say, so treasonable and rebellious, as wantonly to vilify and traduce the holy cause of defence, for which our brethren in arms, are expected to conquer—or to die?²⁴

In Knox's opinion, the war was not only politically justifiable, but also a moral obligation. "Go then ye citizen soldiers, and the God of those armies that fight in a righteous cause—and a righteous cause only,

²⁰ Hacker, "Desire for Canadian Land," 46.

²¹ William Gribbin, "The Covenant Transformed: The Jeremiad Tradition and the War of 1812," *Church History* 40 (Sept. 1971), 298.

²² John Hathaway Stevens, "The Duties of a Fast in Time of War, Illustrated" (*Early American Imprints*, microfiche, second series, no. 32861), 19.

²³ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁴ Samuel Knox, "A Discourse, delivered in the Second Presbyterian Church, in the City of Baltimore" (*Early American Imprints*, microfiche, second series, no. 25802), 32.

go with you,” he said.²⁵ Pro-war clergymen were certain that God would indeed bless American strength of arms, and anyone who thought otherwise was allied with the enemy.

But portraying anti-war Federalists as traitors to God and country was not the only rhetorical weapon these ministers wielded in the struggle for their parishioners’ souls. There was a second argument against Britain, which mirrored Federalists’ concerns about French atheism. Pro-war ministers were more likely to identify the Pope, rather than Napoleon, with the antichrist, and British church hierarchy, while not technically Catholic, seemed to them a very real threat.²⁶ On the national fast day in 1812, minister Ferdinand Ellis objected to the suggestion that Britain and America were united by a common faith, telling his listeners that an American defeat would enable the Church of England to exercise its power over the country.²⁷

Unfortunately, it is difficult to identify major themes in pro-war fast day sermons because comparatively fewer of them were preserved in print. According to historian William Gribbin, far more anti-war sermons appeared in pamphlet form because their Episcopalian and Congregationalist, New England-establishment audiences tended to be more highly educated and literate than their pro-war counterparts. The Republican fast day sermons that survive were mostly delivered on the east coast, where publishing houses were more common than on the western frontier.²⁸ Despite the assertion of multiple secondary sources that Republicanism was more common on the frontier, I was unable to find many sermons from that region and was forced to accept Gribbin’s explanation for this. Also, for whatever reason, the pro-war sermons preserved by the Early American Imprints collection tend to be from fast days proclaimed later in the war. Possibly, as the war dragged on without any definite victor, Republicans felt the need to stir up popular support, but this is mere speculation on my part.

²⁵ Ibid., 29.

²⁶ Gribbin, *Churches Militant*, 64.

²⁷ Ferdinand Ellis, “A Discourse, Adapted to the Present Situation of our National Concerns” (*Early American Imprints*, microfiche, second series, no. 25329), 10.

²⁸ Gribbin, *Churches Militant*, 62.

Although partisan debate over the war was bitter, there were points on which both pro- and anti-war ministers agreed. Clergymen on both sides of the issue placed at least some of the blame on the shoulders of their listeners. In American Protestant theology, war was regarded as one of many punishments God might visit upon a sinful nation.²⁹ In his anti-war sermon, Noah Worcester told his congregation:

As we are this day called upon to humble ourselves before God, in view of his awful frown in subjecting us to the calamity of War, it is highly proper that our minds should be deeply impressed with a view of the *magnitude of the evil*.³⁰

His pro-war counterpart John Hathaway Stevens outlined in detail the sins that had incurred the Deity's wrath: profanity, lying, intemperance, adultery, fornication, "vain amusements" such as the theater, pride, Sabbath-breaking, and a multitude of others. Tucked into this laundry list of sins is "speaking evil of rulers," an apparent jab at the anti-war party. "We are involved in a bloody war; this, God in his righteous judgment, has permitted to come upon us as a punishment for our sins," Stevens said.³¹ In an interesting variation on this theme, Massachusetts pro-war pastor Joseph Richardson told his congregation that their state was plagued by illness and hunger not as punishment for their sins, but because many Massachusetts citizens disapproved of God's just war.³² However, ministers assured their congregations, the nation could return to God's grace through repentance and earnest prayer.

Ministers on both sides also cautioned that the debate over the war could shatter the fragile bond between the states. To Americans of the time, the threat of civil war seemed almost as dire as the threat from Europe.³³ "Another judgment upon our nation is, division and party spirit, which rages to an

²⁹ Cress, "Cool and Serious Reflection," 134.

³⁰ Worcester, "Abraham and Lot," 7.

³¹ Stevens, "Duties of a Fast," 5-11.

³² Richardson, "Christian Patriot," 6.

³³ Cress, "Cool and Serious Reflection," 133.

alarming degree..." Stevens warned.³⁴ Clergymen urged their listeners to express their opinions about the war through democratic means rather than by violence. John Smith advised his congregation to "cling to the Constitution" in protesting the war and to pray for God's guidance.³⁵ Reuben Holcomb agreed: "You will, I trust, continue to maintain your constitutional right, of judging for yourselves, and conversing freely, upon that state, and condition of your country....This is not sedition; but a right which you may claim as your own."³⁶ Although American ministers' condemnations of Britain, France, and the nation's sin may have been presented in extreme language, many advised their congregations to protest peacefully and uphold the Constitution.³⁷ Civil war was avoided in America, at least temporarily.

Fast days of the war of 1812 involved more than just the "public Humiliation and Prayer" recommended by Madison. The sermons that churchgoers heard on these occasions reveal much about public opinion on the war. However, these sermons cannot be regarded as the entire truth of the matter. It is difficult to know to what extent these sermons reflect the beliefs of average Americans, and the proliferation of anti-war sermons that have survived the centuries does not necessarily indicate that most of the country opposed the conflict. The complexity of the political situation, both in America and in Europe, further complicates the matter.

But whatever their beliefs, it is apparent that Americans regarded the war as a turning point in history, one that would decide the future of their young nation. On July 23, 1812, Elijah Parish had this warning for his congregation:

A new era of American history now commences. Soon shall we be established as Mount Zion, or thrust down to ruin. The circumstances and characters of distant generations will be formed by measures now adopted. When they come to the present page of our miserable story, future historians will pause, for fear, that the truth should seem the effusion of falsehood or delirium and prevent the sale of their work. To write in a sober history, that a nation with more than a thousand miles of sea coast, adorned with a rich

³⁴ Stevens, "Duties of a Fast," 12.

³⁵ Smith, "An Apology," 22.

³⁶ Holcomb, "Discourse," 21.

³⁷ Gribbin, "Covenant Transformed," 300.

border of affluent towns and cities, without any commanding fort, or army, or navy, or any adequate defence, and with uncounted millions on the ocean, or in the hands of the foe, did in 1812, declare an offensive war against the most powerful nation on the globe, will bid defiance to all belief.³⁸

And yet, the calamity predicted by Parish and others never came to pass. The war muddled to a close with the Treaty of Ghent in late 1814, and life continued much as before. But the fast day sermons of ministers like Noah Worcester and John Hathaway Stevens survive as evidence of a quieter struggle: a war of words, waged from a thousand pulpits, for the soul of America.

³⁸ Parish, "Discourse," 22-23.