Marcus Daniel. *Scandal and Civility: Journalism and the Birth of American Democracy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. ix + 386 pp. $28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-517212-6.

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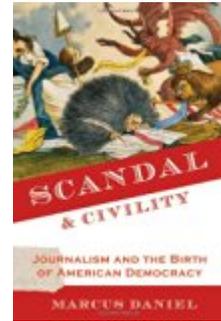
Always Already Vitriolic: The Political News of the Early Republic

Observers of contemporary journalism will readily note that character-based politics are as prevalent in the United States as jeremiads bemoaning the sorry state of such personalized political discourse. We should be talking about the *issues*, commentators insist, rather than about the "distractions" of politicians' personal lives. Marcus Daniel, a professor of history at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, has seen this story before in his work on the political journalism of the early American Republic, and challenges the idea that these laments–and the personalized politics they decry–are unique to the modern media climate.

In *Scandal & Civility*, Daniel aims to show how what he calls the "politics of character" played a crucial role in the formation of political discourse in the first decade of the U.S. government under the Constitution. In so doing, he hopes to enlighten discussions of contemporary politics that promote a golden age narrative, part of the "Founders Chic" that David Waldstreicher identified nearly ten years ago, in which the Founding Fathers, uniquely in American history, debated issues civilly and respectfully with a moral code superior to that of our own time.[1] Not so fast, argues Daniel: "political life in the postrevolutionary United States," he writes, "was tempestuous, fiercely partisan, and highly personal" (p. 5). As evidence, Daniel suggests that we look to those who produced and disseminated political news: the printers and editors of U.S. newspapers.

From this group, which numbered well into the hundreds by 1790, Daniel devotes a chapter each to six of the most prominent printers and newspaper editors of the 1790s. Three were Federalists, including John Fenno, publisher of the *Gazette of the United States*, an early attempt at a "court" paper; Noah Webster, who, though more famous for his speller, edited the *American Minerva* as a supporter of the national government; and William Cobbett, whose idiosyncratic writing in and editing of *Porcupine's Gazette* defied pure partisan labeling. Matched against these stalwarts of the Washington administration and national government were some of the most prominent printer-editors of the early Republican Party: Philip Freneau, the first to challenge Fenno in his role as editor of the *National Gazette*; Benjamin Franklin Bache, the grandson of the printer, scientist, and statesman, who made the *Aurora* a must-read for opponents of the late Washington and Adams administrations; and William Duane, who used his ink-stained pulpit to champion the 1800 presidential campaign of Thomas Jefferson.

Based on both archival research in the personal records of these editors and their associates as well as extensive analysis of their publications, Daniel uses these six men as representatives of key motifs of the hyperpartisan "politics of character" that pervaded during the 1790s. According to his typology, the six most important elements of this politics were nationalism, the invention of the Republican Party, desacralization, demoralization, personality, and infidelity. Each of these is paired with a printer to shape the narrative structure of each chapter.

At his strongest, Daniel uses his subject's biography to clearly articulate and illustrate both the nature of the period's political climate and its integral connection to the world of print. In the chapter on Cobbett and "the politics of personality," for instance, Daniel skillfully shows how Cobbett's disdain for and open flouting of the niceties of standard eighteenth-century editorial practices launched his career and drew a massive audience to his sensationalistic defenses of the Washington administration and attacks on both national Republican leaders and local officials in Pennsylvania. While this head-first approach to politics was enormously successful for a time, Daniel carefully narrates how Cobbett's attacks eventually backfired, drawing political prosecutions for libel at both the state and federal levels as well as a civil suit. Daniel's focus on character also leads him to pay careful attention to language, which opens up key insights into, for example, arguments about the use of the term "aristocrat" and Webster's appropriation of the idea of "demoralization."

Daniel fuses several strains of recent scholarship on the political history of postrevolutionary America, political journalism, sentimentality, and freedom of the press. First among these is the rich and rapidly expanding literature on the political press itself, including the work of Jeffrey L. Pasley, Waldstreicher, Todd Estes, Paul Starr, and such popular historians as Eric Burns, among others. Daniel pushes back at the structural narrative that underlies much of this work, which borrows heavily from Jürgen Habermas's social theory of the public sphere. He sees printers not as the infrastructure of a political movement or as part of a framework for politics but as gadflies operating on the margins of high politics who nonetheless had the wherewithal to push debates. In doing so, they deployed the language of sentiment and emotion, an aspect of the Revolution to which historians are granting a great deal of attention. Yet Daniel shies away from a narrative that he believes places too much emphasis on honor and civility. Politics, in his view, was not *simply* personal; the language and actions of political partisans during the period, he suggests, were based on real ideological concerns. Finally, Daniel argues that we must recalibrate our understanding of Americans' attitudes toward the press. Studying these men, he contends, demonstrates how rapidly the world of public and private collapsed in the political world, erasing distinctions that had long been key both to defending the freedom of the press and to prosecuting libel.

Although the life stories of these editors drive the narrative of *Scandal & Civility*, at times the book's structure limits the effectiveness of Daniel's analysis and underplays key threads that run through the life stories of his chosen subjects. For instance, the subjects he chose for the study interacted with one another a great deal. Fenno and Freneau did battle in the early 1790s with their competing newspapers, and Cobbett deeply influenced the political journalism of Fenno's son, John Ward Fenno. Duane found work in Philadelphia largely due to the influence of Bache, and when Bache died in the 1798 yellow fever epidemic, it was Duane who took up the mantel and masthead of the *Aurora* newspaper. Their interactions, as scholars such as Pasley have shown, had enormous implications for the development of political newsmaking in the 1790s. By dividing their stories from one another, we lose a sense of how the battles within the printing trade shaped and influenced the larger story told in the pages of newspapers.

More critically, the structure undermines two key themes: the French Revolution and the spread of nationalism. The "politics of character" as Daniel describes it functioned largely as a response to the events in France (and, on occasion, Haiti), in particular the Jacobin Terror of 1793-94. Such a transformative event asks for more than the divided attention it gets. This omission is all the more unfortunate because Daniel himself has clearly done extensive reading in and been strongly influenced by the history of the book and the press during the French Revolution. Similarly, Daniel does not sufficiently develop the leitmotiv of nationalism and national character, despite using it as the framing device for the first chapter on Fenno. By choosing to focus explicitly on these six printers and their political journalism, Daniel misses an opportunity to link the development of nationalism to the efforts of other printers and editors. Mathew Carey, among the most important printers and publishers of the postrevolutionary era, published the *American Museum* as an explicitly nationalist magazine for five years in the 1780s and 1790s. Others, in particular high Federalists, attempted to create a national literary culture through their clubs and publications in New York and Philadelphia.[2] Even Wesbter's efforts to create a national lexicon receive only brief attention in the chapter on his life. Nationalism was clearly on the minds of these printers and editors as they worked, and the issue could have been more deeply and fruitfully analyzed.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, in the final balance, *Scandal & Civility* is a strong contribution to scholarship on the postrevolutionary press. Daniel's insistence that we pay close attention to the language of the press in addition to its structure and economic circumstances is a welcome intervention. More important,

Daniel strikes a blow against the perception of politics as a high art practiced only by elites. These men of mostly modest heritage stood shoulder to shoulder, and occasionally toe to toe, with Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, Adams, and Washington.

Notes

[1]. David Waldstreicher, "Founders Chic as Culture War," *Radical History Review* 84 (2002): 185-194.

[2]. On this topic, see Catherine O'Donnell Kaplan, *Men of Letters in the Early Republic: Cultivating Forms of Citizenship* (Chapel Hill: OIEAHC, University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

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