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Oliver Wolcott Jr.: A Political Life

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by

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I am most grateful to my wife, Mia, whose sacrifices for our family made the completion of this work possible. This project is dedicated to her, and to Juliana and Logan, our beloved children.

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Abbreviations

The primary source collections found below are routinely cited throughout this project. The author has chosen to use the following abbreviations in footnotes to enhance their clarity and readability. Per the latest standards for proper Turabian formatting, the full citations will be provided for each source's first use, with footnotes thereafter using their abbreviated form. Please see the project bibliography for more information.

CT-PR	Forrest Morgan, Leonard Woods Labaree, and Charles J. Hoadly, *The Public Records of the State of Connecticut, with the Journal of the Council of Safety and an Appendix*, 23 volumes (Hartford: Press of the Case, Lockwood & Brainard Co., 1894).
Gibbs	George Gibbs and Oliver Wolcott Jr., *Memoirs of the Administrations of Washington and John Adams: Edited from the Papers of Oliver Wolcott, Secretary of the Treasury*, 2 volumes (New York: Printed for the Subscribers, W. Van Norden, 1846).
PJA	*The Adams Papers Digital Edition*, edited by Sara Martin (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008-2022).
PAH	*The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Digital Edition,* ed. Harold C. Syrett (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2011).
PGW	*The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition,* edited by Theodore J. Crackel (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008-2022).
PTJ	*The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition,* edited by James P. McClure and J. Jefferson Looney (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008–2024).
WJP	Oliver Wolcott Jr. Papers, Connecticut Museum of Culture and History, Hartford, Connecticut.
WFC	Wolcott Family Collection, Litchfield Historical Society, Helga J. Ingraham Memorial Library, Litchfield, Connecticut.

A Note on Spelling and Capitalization

Late eighteenth and early nineteenth century English is rife with spelling irregularities that are largely unknown to the modern reader. Where appropriate, I have taken the liberty of updating the spelling of primary sources in order to improve their comprehension. Conversely, in nearly all cases I have left unchanged the original authors' frequent capitalization of nouns; in so doing I believe a greater understanding of the intended tone of their writing is preserved. Any errors in judgement are my own.

Chapter 1: Wolcott in Historical Context

> *"…When the Public discards or neglects Talents and Integrity, united with meritorious past Services, it commits Iniquity against itself by depriving itself of the benefit of future Services, and it does wrong to the individual by depriving him of the reward which long and faith Services have merited. Twenty years of able and faithful Service on the Part of Mr. Wolcott, remunerated only by a simple subsistence, it appeared to me, constituted a Claim upon the Public which ought to be attended to."*[1]

Thesis and Research Questions

In May 1817 Oliver Wolcott Jr. travelled from his home in Litchfield, Connecticut to the seat of government in Hartford, to deliver his first speech as the state's newly elected governor. It would be the last leg of a long and arduous career for Wolcott; fifteen years had passed since he had held a government position in any capacity, and his prior service had occurred at the federal level in Washington—not in his home state. And yet, this—nor his ardent support for the War of 1812, a conflict reviled in Connecticut—did not impede his election. Connecticut residents revered his name and credited his family with the state's legacy; Wolcott's father and grandfather had both served in the same position to which he was now elected.

If the people of Connecticut held apprehensions about Wolcott's lack of executive experience or were worried that he would use his seat of power to stoke the flames of partisanship, his inaugural address to the legislature successfully alleviated these concerns. Wolcott's speech called for unity in the face of the ongoing party differences that had bitterly divided the state in previous years, and he otherwise advocated moderate and sensible reforms

[1] John Adams to Oliver Wolcott Jr., April 6, 1801, *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-4905.

that elicited few complaints.[2] With the wave of nationalism sweeping the country in the aftermath of the War of 1812, Wolcott surely knew that Federalist dominance over Connecticut was at an end. How—as a member of the new Tolerationist Party—would he guide the state forward into this new era of American history?

Wolcott's life in politics, and how he arrived at this critical moment in Connecticut's history, is a story worth telling. Until now, Wolcott has largely escaped the attention of early American scholars, to the detriment of those seeking a greater understanding of Connecticut's—and the United States's political history during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The reasons for this are clear. Biographies and monographs that center on the lives of the Founding Fathers dominate the political historiography of the Early National Period (1787-1815) especially, which unfortunately encourages a rather limited understanding of history—one grounded in the highly controversial "great man" thesis. Of the historical figures that elicit the most attention from historians, the lay person will recognize the most familiar names: Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison, and Adams. On the surface, this is appropriate. The actions of these individuals—more than any others—laid the foundation of America's first national government after the Constitution's ratification, and as such merit a significant level of scholarly attention. There is a drawback, though, to this singular focus on the major Founding Fathers. Many lesser-known historical figures also made valuable contributions to the growth and development of the United States during this period, and yet their lives have largely escaped the notice of this era's most prominent scholars.

[2] Oliver Wolcott Jr., "Legislative Address, May 1817," *WJP* (box 27, folder 17) *Connecticut Courant*, June 14, 1817.

As suggested above, this dissertation examined one of these neglected individuals: Oliver Wolcott Jr., a Connecticut politician active at the national and state level during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Given that no published biographies of Wolcott exist, and the attention he has received from historians is especially limited in scope, this project brought to light a previously untold story that adds value to one's understanding of the political history of Connecticut and early America.[3] As a brief overview of Wolcott's public life reveals, early American historians have erred in not devoting to him greater coverage.

Wolcott's actions dramatically influenced the course of national political during the 1790s, when he served in the Treasury Department under Presidents George Washington and John Adams. As the protégé of Alexander Hamilton (Wolcott eventually succeeded Hamilton as Treasury Secretary), Wolcott held a prestigious position in the hierarchy of the Federalist Party at its height during the last years of the eighteenth century. Unfortunately for Wolcott, with President Adams's defeat in the Election of 1800 his career in government suddenly appeared at an end.[4]

While this period of his life by itself warrants further examination, Wolcott's later career suggests to an even greater extent why a comprehensive study of his contributions was needed—one that would yield a greater understanding of Connecticut history during the first decades of the nineteenth century. After leaving the Treasury Department in 1800, Wolcott briefly served as

[3] Wolcott has only appeared as the primary subject in a handful of PhD dissertations. The most relevant to this study are Frederick Hugo Schmauch, "Oliver Wolcott: His Political Role and Thought Between 1789 and 1800," (Ph.D. diss., St. John's University, 1969), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; Bland, James Edward Bland, "The Oliver Wolcotts of Connecticut, The National Experience, 1775-1800" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1970), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; and Neil Alexander Hamilton, "Connecticut Order, Mercantilistic Economics: The Life of Oliver Wolcott, Jr." (Ph.D. diss., The University of Tennessee, 1988), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

[4] Connecticut Historical Society Museum and Library, "Biographical Sketch: A Guide to the Oliver Wolcott, Jr. Papers at the Connecticut Historical Society," accessed October 26, 2023, https://chs.org/finding_aides/finding_aids/wolco1833.html.

a federal judge in the newly created Second Circuit Court before the new President, Thomas Jefferson, disbanded it.[5] Left without a government appointment, Wolcott spent the next decade embarking on a successful business career in New York City where he engaged in international trade with China, and helped found the Bank of America.[6] During this time he continued to follow politics closely. Most notably, Wolcott broke with the Federalist Party by supporting the War of 1812, calling it a "just and necessary" war in defense of America's economic interests.[7]

After the war ended, Wolcott reemerged on the political scene in Connecticut when—to the shock and dismay of many of his former Federalist allies—he became Governor of Connecticut as a leading member of the new Tolerationist Party. Wolcott won reelection nine times, and while in office he presided over the ratification of a new state constitution and witnessed the Federalist Party's dramatic decline in influence over Connecticut politics. On the surface, the latter is notable because Wolcott once counted himself an ardent and committed Federalist.[8]

With this nearly forty-year career in public and private life as its foundation, this research project examined five primary research questions regarding Wolcott. The first, addressed in Chapter 2, concerns Wolcott's upbringing and formative years. Covering the years 1760 to 1789, Wolcott's early life—in particular, his relationship with his father, Oliver Wolcott Sr. (a signer

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[5] Linda K. Kerber, "Oliver Wolcott: Midnight Judge," *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* 32 (1967): 25.

[6] Connecticut Historical Society Museum and Library, "Biographical Sketch: A Guide to the Oliver Wolcott, Jr."; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 306-7.

[7] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Josiah Meigs, November 19, 1812, *WJP*; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 356.

[8] Connecticut Historical Society Museum and Library, "Biographical Sketch: A Guide to the Oliver Wolcott, Jr."; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott, Jr.," 394; Shaw Livermore, *The Twilight of Federalism: the Disintegration of the Federalist Party, 1815-1830* (New York: Gordian Press, 1972), 40-1, 79.

of the Declaration of Independence and future governor of Connecticut in his own right)—is of substantial importance. Moreover, the environment in Connecticut during this time—with its deeply religious, Puritanical society, and extreme Federalist politics—greatly impacted the young Wolcott. Tapping Reeve, the greater Federalist law scholar, instructed the latter to his students—including Wolcott—at his Litchfield Law School, the first of its kind in the country.[9] To best understand Wolcott's political ideology during his later career—beginning with his service in the Washington and Adams administrations—it proved essential to devote considerable research to his early life.

This project's second research question aims to assess the validity of historians' previous depictions of Wolcott during the 1790s, when he served in the federal government as a member of the Treasury Department in the Washington and Adams administrations. Chapter 3, spanning the years 1789 to 1795, examined Wolcott's impact as Auditor and later Comptroller under the tutelage of his mentor, Alexander Hamilton. Owing to Hamilton's purported influence, scholarly interpretations of Wolcott during this period are almost universally dismissive; Wolcott has often been portrayed as a minor figure with limited agency. In reference to his service as Treasury Secretary from 1795-1800—which is given extensive coverage in Chapter 4, one historian described Wolcott as a "career administrator" and an "uninspiring" politician of the "second rank,"[10] while another has suggested that Wolcott—because he lacked the ability to understand

[9] Andrew Siegel, "'To Learn and Make Respectable Thereafter': The Litchfield Law School in Cultural Context," *New York University Law Review (1950)* 73, no. 6 (1998): 1985-7, https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/faculty/644.

[10] Herbert E. Sloan, "Hamilton's Second Thoughts," in *Federalists Reconsidered,* edited by Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara B. Oberg (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 73.

the complexity of the country's newly implemented economic system—constantly sought out Hamilton for advice.[11]

Two other historians have insinuated that Wolcott failed to achieve greatness during this time because he possessed a "logic of subordination" in the face of greater men—Washington and Hamilton especially—whose character held a greater capacity for leadership and initiative.[12] Further still, other scholars have criticized Wolcott for the duplicitous behavior he exhibited within his own administration by rendering himself subservient to Hamilton's wishes at the expense of John Adams, his President. They credit Wolcott for assisting Hamilton in helping bring about Adams's defeat against Thomas Jefferson in the Election of 1800.[13] While it would be illogical to contend that Wolcott's legacy while serving in the federal government during the 1790s deserves equal footing with the major Founding Fathers, Chapters 3 and 4 of this project nonetheless challenges these previous historical depictions of Wolcott as a minor figure.

On one hand, it should be noted that Wolcott himself thought little of his own talents, especially when compared to his more famous contemporaries. While his potential appointment to Secretary of the Treasury was being considered by President Washington, Wolcott wrote to his father that while he would do his best to replace Hamilton, he would not be able to match his mentor's immense "skill and capacity."[14] Wolcott further commented that if appointed, little

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[11] Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 503-4.

[12] Stanley M. Elkins and Eric L. McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 628.

[13] John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1992), 334; David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 472.

[14] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., January 6, 1795, in *Memoirs of the Administrations of Washington and John Adams: Edited from the Papers of Oliver Wolcott, Secretary of the Treasury*, volume I (New York: Printed for the Subscribers, W. Van Norden, 1846), 178.

would be expected of him.[15] In spite of this, this project argues that Wolcott exceeded his modest expectations. As will be shown, on multiple occasions during his tenure as Treasury Secretary, Wolcott disagreed with Hamilton's advice and acted independent of his former boss. This strikes at the core of the general historical consensus regarding Wolcott's legacy.

Wolcott's life up until the year 1802 is appropriately characterized by steady employment in the federal government, and yet all of that changed when his federal judgeship ended with the Jefferson administration's abolishment of the Second Circuit Court. Uncertain of his future prospects, Wolcott moved to New York City and began a successful twelve-year stint in the private sector. The importance of this interregnum period of his life, almost entirely ignored by past historians, is the subject of Chapter 5 and this project's third research question regarding Wolcott's level of attention to politics during this time. This author contends that Wolcott—absent from the Federalist hotbed of Connecticut and observant of the growing popularity of Jeffersonianism throughout the country—developed a political ideology that was more moderate and pragmatic in its tone. This is best exemplified by Wolcott's support for the War of 1812, which stood in stark contrast to his Federalist contemporaries—especially in Connecticut. It is especially noteworthy that Wolcott took this dramatically unpopular position and yet emerged to win a stunning victory when he won the Connecticut governor's seat only years later. This suggests not only Wolcott's commitment to principles, but also the prioritization of nationalism over the interests of his home state.[16]

Wolcott's impact on early Connecticut history while serving as governor from 1817 to 1827 is the focus of this project's fourth research question. While past historians have given

[15] Gibbs, vol. 1, 178.

[16] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 357-8.

Wolcott's service in the Treasury Department during the 1790s minimal scholarly attention, they have been virtually silent on his ten years as governor of Connecticut.[17] Rectifying this is necessary for a number of reasons. The adoption of the state's 1818 Constitution—a document still in effect today—occurred with Governor Wolcott presiding over the ratification process. This event was significant, if for no other reason than at the time Connecticut was one of only two states prior to the ratification to still be operating on the same governing documents that were present during its existence as a British colony.[18] This project, in Chapter 6, examined the impact that Wolcott had on the contents of this new constitution, finding that his support for its ratification was instrumental in bringing about the political and societal reforms it initiated. Wolcott himself composed an initial draft, which included a declaration of rights, a loosening of church-state relations, and guaranteed suffrage to all white men. Much of these ideas would be reflected in the final document.[19]

Beyond this singular moment, evaluating Wolcott's impact on Connecticut politics, government, and society throughout his ten years as governor has merited further consideration. On the surface, Wolcott's reelection to the state's highest office indicates a level of popularity that had—up until that point—gone unmatched in Connecticut's history. Continuing in Chapter 6, this project presents further evidence demonstrating that Governor Wolcott's actions in the aftermath of the Constitution's ratification guided Connecticut into a new era—away from its old, Federalist roots and toward a more liberal and democratic future.

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[17] As referenced earlier, the historian who has devoted more the most significant attention to Wolcott's years as governor is Neil A. Hamilton, "Connecticut Order, Mercantilistic Economics: The Life of Oliver Wolcott, Jr." (PhD diss., The University of Tennessee, 1988), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

[18] Richard J. Purcell, *Connecticut in Transition, 1775-1818* (Washington: American Historical Association, 1918), 174-176.

[19] Wolcott Memo, Draft of State Constitution, n.d., *WJP* (box 27, folder 14).

This revelation regarding Wolcott's actions as Governor of Connecticut speaks to the final research question put forth by this project, and the one that addresses the widest gap in the historiography of Wolcott's career and that of early Connecticut history. For what reasons did Wolcott undergo a dramatic political evolution from his early years in the Treasury Department (when he identified as a radical, High Federalist) to a pragmatist at the head of a new political party known for moderation and compromise? Addressed in full within Chapter 6, the project's closing chapter, and the epilogue, the author argues that Wolcott did not, in fact, modify his political values as much as would appear at surface level. To the extent that Wolcott's views changed, it was largely because he correctly anticipated—in part because of his abandonment of the Federalist Party—how the political winds were shifting in the aftermath of President Jefferson's Election in 1800. While operating in the private sector for nearly fifteen years in New York City, Wolcott observed that—despite the Federalist Party's continued strength in Connecticut, its influence over national (and eventually state politics) would decline in importance over time. Wolcott also knew that his name carried considerable weight in Connecticut, and that by evolving politically he would be able to continue the legacy established by his father and grandfather, who both served as governors of the state.[20]

Historiography

As has been previously shown, the historical scholarship on Oliver Wolcott Jr. is noteworthy for its lack of coverage. Nonetheless, the relevance of this project can only be justified through an evaluation of the present historiography. Of greatest significance is that no biography on Wolcott has ever been published, nor has he appeared as a major character in any

[20] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott, Jr.," 391.

American history monograph set during the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. The earliest work of note regarding Wolcott, *Memoirs of the Administrations of Washington and John Adams: Edited from the Papers of Oliver Wolcott, Secretary of the Treasury* (1846), by George Gibbs, Wolcott's grandson, is a collection of letters between Wolcott and his contemporaries, along with added commentary. Due to the exclusive access he had to Wolcott's papers, Gibbs was able to organize these letters in a manner that he felt presented an accurate narrative of his grandfather's contributions to the growth of the national government during the 1790s while he served in the Treasury Department at the height of power for the Federalist Party. Gibbs credits Wolcott for his admirable performance (if ultimately in vain) to save the country from President Adams's "egregious vanity and egotism" and "his obstinacy and vacillation."[21] It should come as no surprise that despite Gibbs's *Memoirs* remaining a valuable source, it is in its sum, decidedly one-sided with regard to Wolcott's legacy.

More than one hundred years would then pass before historians chose to reexamine Wolcott in depth. In the absence of a standard biography of Wolcott, the appearance of a handful of unpublished dissertations written during the late 1960s to the late 1980s represent to date the most comprehensive look at Wolcott's life and career. Frederick H. Schmauch's "Oliver Wolcott: His Political Role and Thought Between 1789 and 1800" (1969), following in George Gibbs's footsteps, analyzed Wolcott's contributions during the Early National Period prior to the Election of 1800. While Gibbs's work was largely one-sided in its praise of Wolcott, Schmauch—owing to his examination of far more of Wolcott's papers than those that were included in *Memoirs*—intentionally takes a far more objective approach. Schmauch was the first historian to take advantage of the resources available at the Connecticut Historical Society,

[21] Gibbs, vol. 2, 508.

which houses the bulk of Wolcott's papers and those of other early Connecticut political leaders. (All future scholars investigating Wolcott would follow Schmauch's lead.) Schmauch's work is a detailed narrative of the national political scene during the 1790s, and his balanced perspective allows the readers to decide for themselves how to assess Wolcott's legacy during the time he served in the federal government—especially with regard to the actions he took to undermine President Adams.[22]

Writing just one year after Schmauch, James E. Bland in "The Oliver Wolcotts of Connecticut, The National Experience, 1775-1800" (1970) provides additional insights into the origins of Wolcott's political ideology. Bland accomplishes this by first examining Wolcott Sr., whose experiences in conservative, Puritan New England would inform his views as a member of Connecticut's political elite, and also have a considerable influence on his son's career. Wolcott Jr. deserves recognition, according to Bland, for his "steady" leadership in the Treasury Department and for the actions he took as "political mediator" between Hamilton and Adams as the divisions within the Federalist Party became more apparent.[23]

To date, the most significant research on Wolcott has been conducted by Neil A. Hamilton, who considered the entirety of Wolcott's political career—more so than just his time as Treasury Secretary—in his dissertation "Connecticut Order, Mercantilistic Economics: The Life of Oliver Wolcott, Jr." (1988). While Wolcott's aforementioned time in the Cabinets of Presidents Washington and Adams are given extensive coverage, Hamilton goes further than his predecessors by examining Wolcott's ten years, from 1817 to 1827, as Governor of Connecticut. To do so, Hamilton examined Connecticut's official public records from the early nineteenth

[22] Schmauch, 333-4.

[23] Bland, 4.

century, as well as the archives of the state's most prominent historical newspapers, including the Hartford Courant. In his final analysis Hamilton argues that Wolcott's life was emblematic of the growing tension between nationalism and sectionalism that was constantly threatening to pull the country apart. According to the author, Wolcott—in the spirit of his mentor Alexander Hamilton—acted throughout his career in defense of mercantilism. America's prosperity, in short, was tied to the government's control over the economy. Hamilton presents Wolcott as a man of his time; like so many of his contemporaries, Wolcott was prone to "political paranoia," believing that his political enemies were out to destroy him and the country.[24]

Beyond these three dissertations, Wolcott received brief but notable coverage in monographs of the Early National Period, and in the biographies of other leading Federalists with whom Wolcott had significant contact during the height of the Federalist Party during the 1790s. In all of these works, discussion of Wolcott is limited to his service in the federal government in the Washington and Adams Administrations, with Wolcott's time as Treasury Secondary under Adams receiving the greatest coverage.

The first work of note is Gerard Clarfield's *Timothy Pickering and American Diplomacy, 1795-1800* (1969). As the title suggests, Clarfield's work examines Pickering's career and its impact on American foreign policy during the end of the nineteenth century. Through more than five years of serving together as committed High Federalists, Pickering's time as Secretary of State put him in constant contact with Treasury Secretary Wolcott. Clarfield contends that President Washington, with the stark reality of his Cabinet's original members all departing, was "fortunate" to have Wolcott join his administration.[25] While not his primary objective, Clarfield

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[24] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott, Jr.," 422-4.

[25] Gerard H Clarfield, *Timothy Pickering and American Diplomacy: 1795-1800* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1969), 17.

was the first historian to utilize the official papers of other "secondary" political leaders—in this case, Pickering—to add to our collective understanding of Wolcott's impact on events during this time period. Clarfield's study of Pickering serves as a "proof-of-concept" for this project's objective in examining Wolcott.

In partial contrast to past historians, the characterization of Wolcott in John Ferling's *John Adams: A Life* (1992) is largely negative. He is also the first historian in the modern era to address the nature of Wolcott's relationship with Alexander Hamilton, who played a significant role in fostering the growth of Wolcott's career in the federal government. For this reason, Ferling depicts Wolcott as being subservient to Hamilton. Moreover, Ferling writes that Wolcott's "penchant for scheming" was highly useful in supporting Hamilton's larger efforts to undermine Adams and—in his mind—save the country and the Federalist Party.[26] Writing more than a decade later, Ferling in his *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (2004) added that Wolcott's "devotion" to Hamilton continued "unabated" for the duration of the Adams Presidency; during that time Wolcott frequently corresponded with Hamilton in order to receive his "marching orders."[27] David McCullough in his Pulitzer Prize winning, *John Adams* (2001) would also affirm Ferling's interpretation of Wolcott as subordinate to his "leader" Hamilton; According to McCullough, Hamilton was the most important figure in the "anti-French, pro-British wing" of the "extreme Federalists," of which Wolcott was a dedicated member.[28] Ferling and McCullough make copious use of Adams's public papers and private

[26] Ferling, *John Adams: A Life*, 334.

[27] John Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 102.

[28] McCullough, 472.

correspondence, which provide additional insights regarding Wolcott. As Adams biographers, it is perhaps not surprising that they affirm past depictions of Wolcott as a Hamilton crony.

A more balanced approach to the issue of Wolcott's relationship with Hamilton is put forth by Stanley M. Elkins and Eric L. McKitrick in *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800* (1993). The authors portray Wolcott as an able administrator who modestly thought little of his own talents, and as such deferred to his political allies whom he felt possessed greater ingenuity —especially Hamilton. Wolcott was devoted to Hamilton, but not—as suggested by past historians—for nefarious reasons. According to Elkins and McKitrick, Wolcott's position as Treasury Secretary enabled him to play a vital role in the federal government under Washington and Adams, but the vast majority of the period's seminal events were not born of ideas that originated with him.[29]

Ron Chernow has produced the most detailed analysis of Wolcott's relationship with Hamilton. In his highly acclaimed biography *Alexander Hamilton* (2004), Chernow argues that Hamilton did not seek to exert influence over the Cabinet, but that it was Wolcott especially who was persistent in requesting his help in managing the Treasury Department. Relying extensively on the numerous letters that were exchanged between the two men, Chernow suggests that Wolcott was incapable of grasping the intricacies of the Hamiltonian economic system, and as such turned to its creator for advice throughout the duration of his time as Treasury Secretary.[30] Hamilton, in short, was not a villain pulling the strings of his disciples—as charged by most Adams biographers—nor was Wolcott merely Hamilton's puppet.

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[29] Elkins and McKitrick, 626-8.

[30] Chernow, 503-4.

Beyond the works previously mentioned, Wolcott's impact on American national politics during the 1790s—especially during the Adams administration—is given coverage in a number of issue-specific monographs. Despite its age, the best work on America's conflict with France at the end of the decade is Alexander DeConde's *The Quasi War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War With France, 1797-1801* (1966). DeConde successfully captures the growing tension between Wolcott and President Adams when the former, as Treasury Secretary, struggled to find the funding necessary to create a standing army capable of meeting the impending French threat.[31] Adams would later write of this critical moment of his presidency that he and Wolcott met for "consultation after consultation" over this issue—an indication of the great extent to which Adams relied on his Treasury Security.[32]

Born out of Wolcott's struggle to pay for the Quasi War with France came the Federalist-controlled Congress's enactment of higher taxes, which in turn precipitated Fries Rebellion of 1799-1800. Often forgotten in the context of the more widely known tax revolts that preceded it (Shays Rebellion and the Whiskey Rebellion), this seminal event encapsulated the political fervor and polarization that defined the national political scene in which Wolcott operated, according to the historian Paul Douglas Newman. In his *Fries Rebellion: The Enduring Struggle for the American* Revolution (2004), Newman writes that Wolcott took advantage of the greater authority afforded him by the crisis with France to appoint Federalist allies to newly created tax assessor offices.[33] Such actions reveal Wolcott's ardent devotion to the Federalist Party at a time

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[31] Alexander DeConde, *The Quasi War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War With France, 1797-1801* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 191-2.

[32] "From John Adams to James Lloyd, 21 February 1815," *Founders Online,* National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6415.

[33] Paul Douglas Newman, *Fries Rebellion: The Enduring Struggle for the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 78.

when the opposition Republicans, as evidenced by the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts, were viewed as enemies of the state.

To the lay person, a cursory look at Wolcott's life suggests his career ended with the Federalist defeat in the Election of 1800. This was not the case, however, as a handful of historians have documented. While Wolcott's career after 1800 has garnered far less historical attention, it has received moderate coverage in the context of Connecticut history. It is through this lens that Wolcott's role as Governor of Connecticut from 1817 to 1827 has been assessed—albeit in terms too brief to be considered comprehensive. Richard J. Purcell's *Connecticut in Transition, 1775-1818* (1916) remains—despite its age—an authoritative look at the evolution of Connecticut politics and society. The state's "transition" away from Federalism culminated in Wolcott's election to the governorship in 1817 as a member of the new, moderate Tolerationist Party. Despite many newspapers referring to Wolcott as a "political apostate" due to his perceived betrayal of the Federalist Party, as someone who shied away from "orthodoxy" Wolcott was nonetheless the "ideal" leader to bridge the gap between "the old order and the new" in Connecticut.[34] To accurate depict the views of Connecticut residents during this time in the state's history, Purcell examined the archives of more than half a dozen nineteenth-century newspapers.

Evidence of Wolcott's political evolution is documented in "Connecticut Political Patterns, 1817-1828 (1962)," historian Alan W. Brownsword's through examination of the political scene in Connecticut during Wolcott's ten years as governor. Brownsword notably highlights Wolcott's growing disinterest in offering patronage to prominent members of the Federalist Party, a marked change from his earlier behavior during the 1790s when he served as

[34] Purcell, 334.

Treasury Secretary. Perhaps sensing that with the party's declining influence, supporting Federalist individuals and causes generated minimal, if any, political benefits. Wolcott's appointed many Republicans (to the dismay of the remaining Connecticut Federalists) during his ten years as governor. The most notable of these was in 1823, when the ardent Republican Henry W. Edwards replaced the recently deceased Elijah Boardman in the US Senate.[35]

While works that have documented Wolcott's actions as governor are scarce, an older work that retains considerable value is Jarvis Morse's *A Neglected Period of Connecticut's History, 1818-1850* (1933). Morse portrays Wolcott as a bold and principled leader, willing—for example—to consistently employ executive vetoes in the face of popular opposition from the state legislature. Wolcott's use of the veto is notable since this power had only been granted to the governor a few years earlier, through the Constitution of 1818.[36] In his final analysis Morse renders the most laudatory conclusion out of all scholars who have assessed Wolcott's legacy. Above all "a plain and practical man," writes Morse, Wolcott was "a valuable public servant" that possessed "a vigorous mind and a spirit of enlightened patriotism."[37] To the extent that this characterization is accurate, it must be noted that the aforementioned historian Neil Hamilton rendered a far more ambivalent conclusion regarding Wolcott's legacy as governor, referring to Wolcott's ten years as the state's chief executive as filled with "disappointment and frustration" as a result of the legislature ignoring his policy prescriptions.[38] Regardless of his successes or

[35] Alan W. Brownsword, "Connecticut Political Patterns, 1817-1828." Ph.D. diss., The University of Wisconsin, 1962. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

[36] Jarvis Means Morse, *A Neglected Period of Connecticut's History, 1818*-1850 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), 58-9.

[37] Ibid., 82-3.

[38] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott, Jr.," 411.

failures Connecticut residents would miss Wolcott dearly, argues Morse, in the aftermath of Wolcott's defeat in the governor's race of 1827.[39]

A broader and more national approach to the political evolution occurring throughout America in the early nineteenth century was taken by Shaw Livermore in *The Twilight of Federalism: the Disintegration of the Federalist Party, 1815-1830* (1972). According to Livermore, Wolcott was an example of one of many former Federalists who felt the party had lost its way in the years after the Election of 1800. Livermore argues that by leaving the Federalist Party, Wolcott was willing to put up with the "grief" and "indignation" that was inevitably to follow such a decision. According to Livermore, Wolcott saw that reform was needed to ensure Connecticut's future prosperity and standing within the country at large, and that it would be irrational to remaining in the Federalist Party when it had lost its way over the past dozen years.[40]

Further research was conducted into the attempts made by Connecticut's Federalist elite to preserve the state's old order by Andrew Siegel, in his article "'Steady Habits' Under Siege: The Defense of Federalism in Jeffersonian Connecticut" (1998). Siegel contends that throughout this period Connecticut possessed the strongest pocket of Federalism still remaining in the country, and this was due to a number of factors including voter disenfranchisement and a society that preferred cultural stability.[41] The conclusion of the War of 1812, however, coupled with the coming Era of Good Feelings foreshadowed a new age for Connecticut. Running as a

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[39] Morse, 82-3.

[40] Shaw Livermore, *The Twilight of Federalism: the Disintegration of the Federalist Party, 1815-1830* (New York: Gordian Press, 1972), 41.

[41] Andrew Siegel, "'Steady Habits' Under Siege: The Defense of Federalism in Jeffersonian Connecticut," in *Federalists Reconsidered*, edited by Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara B. Oberg (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 200-1.

political moderate from a storied and well-regarded family, according to Siegel it was no surprise that voters ultimately found "comfort" in Wolcott's candidacy for governor.[42]

It is clear from this historiographical overview of Wolcott's career that considerable gaps in the scholarship are present. As such, the author conducted research in a number of different areas, starting with Wolcott's years in the Treasury Department during the 1790s. While this period of time in his career has been well-covered, Wolcott has too often been depicted as a background character in the stories of John Adams and Alexander Hamilton. Wolcott's story, with his actions as the focus are given greater focus—as previously noted—in Chapters 3 and 4.

There is an even greater need to examine Wolcott's later political career as Governor of Connecticut. While historians have identified Wolcott's 1817 election as a symbol of Connecticut's political and cultural evolution, the specific impact resulting from his actions has received little attention. Perhaps the most glaring omission concerns the ratification of the new state constitution in 1818. Ascertaining Wolcott's role in this process is of considerable interest. The author's research indicates that Wolcott played a vital role during the Constitution's ratification, a subject that receives extensive coverage in Chapter 6.

Project Goals

The primary goal of this project, as articulated by the aforementioned fifth and final research question, is to bridge the gap between these two distinct periods of Wolcott's life. Past historians have demonstrated little to no interest in Wolcott's ideological evolution from his years as Treasury Secretary, when he identified an ardent High Federalist, to his election as Governor of Connecticut twenty years later as a political moderate. The reasons for this change,

[42] Siegel, "The Defense of Federalism," 223-4.

which ultimately left Wolcott alienated from many of his closest political allies, are thus examined and evaluated by the author in the latter half of this project.

It is clear that by choosing to cover only one distinct period of his lengthy career, Wolcott's story remains incomplete; a comprehensive understanding of who he was—his character, values, and motivations—remains hidden. This project, by maintaining a broad scope with regard to research, avoids this oversight.

A few words should be provided about how the author conducted research. Given the subject, this project naturally grounded itself in a methodology that focused on national and state politics. Other historical approaches have been utilized, though, to obtain a full understanding of Wolcott's life. Considering especially his service in the Treasury Department during the 1790s, Wolcott's impact must be viewed through an economic lens. Playing a vital role in the Washington and Adams administrations, including five years as Treasury Secretary, Wolcott managed, oversaw, and rendered his opinions on the nation's most pertinent economic issues, including the funding of the National Bank and the financial support needed to create a standing army during the height of the Quasi War with France.[43] Moreover, this project also analyzed and evaluated the economic vision put forth by Wolcott during his ten years as Governor of Connecticut.

In large part because of the precedents set by the previous administration—where President Washington solicited the opinions of all members of his Cabinet regardless of issues—Wolcott as Treasury Secretary under President Adams also played a vital role in other areas beyond economics, including diplomacy. The aforementioned Quasi War with France dominated the national political scene during the last years of the nineteenth century, and during that time

[43] Schmauch, 216.

President Adams relied on his cabinet secretaries—including Wolcott—to provide advice on how to proceed with the looming French threat in the aftermath of the XYZ Affair.[44]

The threat of war with France during this time also enabled Wolcott to exert his influence over domestic issues pertaining to national security. Wolcott advocated strongly for the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts, believing them vital to quelling dissent among the administration's most dangerous political opponents. On similar grounds Wolcott supported the execution of the leading perpetrators of the Fries Rebellion, whom he believed were guilty of committing treason against the country.[45] These views should come as no surprise, as during this time period Wolcott participated in lengthy correspondences with a number of his Federalist contemporaries who were urging him to do what was necessary to defend the country from its perceived internal and external enemies. Fisher Ames, in one more notable letter, called upon Wolcott to used whatever influence and power he had to rid the United States from the "generation of vipers"—a reference to pro-French Republicans—that plagued it.[46]

The political climate facing Wolcott as Connecticut governor more than twenty years later was naturally far different, and his ability to exert influence over the internal affairs of his state far greater. As such, this project employed a comparative analysis of these two time periods with respect to Wolcott and domestic issues.

A final word on methodology must be said regarding Wolcott's personal life, especially as it pertains to a series of family tragedies that saw three of his five children die in infancy and another before the age of eighteen. Wolcott also lost his wife, Elizabeth Stoughton, to

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[44] Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson*, 106; DeConde, *The Quasi War*, 110-1, 191-2.

[45] Newman, 183.

[46] Fisher Ames to Oliver Wolcott Jr., March 24, 1797, *WJP* (box 9, folder 7).

consumption before the age of forty.[47] While sudden and unexpected deaths were not uncommon in the United States during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these tragedies are nonetheless worthy of further study; they impacted Wolcott's worldview, and in turn, his politics.

To compose a comprehensive political biography such as this one, this project's author consulted a wide variety of primary sources. These included public records and government documents from Wolcott's time serving in the Treasury Department and as Governor of Connecticut[48], archival newspapers[49], and the public and private papers of Wolcott and his contemporaries.[50] Where the latter is concerned, Wolcott's true feelings are often revealed by the lengthy correspondence he carried out with other prominent New England Federalists, including George Cabot, Rufus King, and Fisher Ames, among others.[51] Other revelations regarding Wolcott's life and legacy are found in the correspondence Wolcott engaged in with his son-in-law, George Gibbs, as well as other family members. Collectively, these primary sources have been instrumental in revealing the full history of a man who scholars have dismissively

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[47] Connecticut Historical Society Museum and Library, "Biographical Sketch: A Guide to the Oliver Wolcott, Jr."

[48] Wolcott kept copies of all records from the Treasury Department during his decade of service. These are located with his official papers at the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History (CMCH). Official government records from the State of Connecticut are located at the Connecticut State Library.

[49] Three notable examples are the *American Mercury,* the *Connecticut Courant,* and the *Republican Farmer.* The archives of each are located at the Connecticut Historical Society (CHS).

[50] The Connecticut Museum of Culture and History (CMCH) is the natural starting place for any historian conducting research on Wolcott. Oliver Wolcott Jr., Papers. 1614-1880, Connecticut Museum of Culture and History, Hartford, Connecticut. https://chs.org/finding_aides/finding_aids/wolco1833.html.

[51] Beyond the official papers of Wolcott's contemporaries housed at various libraries and universities in New England, important selections from Wolcott's most notable correspondents have been collected by his grandson in George Gibbs and Oliver Wolcott, *Memoirs of the Administrations of Washington and John Adams: Edited from the Papers of Oliver Wolcott, Secretary of the Treasury* (New York: Printed for the Subscribers, W. Van Norden, Printer), 1846.

characterized as a minor character in the stories of purportedly greater, more impactful individuals.

On the surface, and irrespective of whether or not his political life should be lauded, the historical record demonstrates that Oliver Wolcott Jr. merits a far more extensive analysis and assessment than he has previously received. It must be noted that it is insufficient to study only one distinct period of his decades-long career, as past historians have done. By maintaining a broad scope with regard to research, this project represents the first comprehensive study of Wolcott's political character —his ideology, values, and motivations. Moreover, the examination of the entirety of Wolcott's forty-year public and private career addresses a notable historiographical gap that existed in the political history of the United States during the 1790s, and of Connecticut during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Wolcott's political life paralleled, not coincidentally, some of the nation's most seminal moments during the first forty years of history. The author invites the reader to follow the story of Wolcott's journey in the pages to come.

Chapter 2: Wolcott Comes of Age (1760-1789)

New Haven, Tuesday 1775

Honored Father,

I take my Pen in hand to write unto you by this favorable Opportunity of my Health… I intend to prosecute with the utmost Diligence, being sensible with what great Joy it will give my Parents, and the exquisite Grief my Failure must occasion. With a lively Hope that the Lord will be your Deliverer, I subscribe myself your Obedient Son,

Oliver Wolcott Jr.[52]

A Young Man in Connecticut

As was true for the sons of so many of America's founding generation, Oliver Wolcott Jr. was too young to impact the events surrounding the colonies' separation from England. As will be shown, he would eventually follow in the footsteps tread by his father, Oliver Wolcott Sr.—himself a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a respected member of one of Connecticut's most prestigious families. But for now, Oliver Jr. would have to wait until later, when he would make his mark consolidating and building upon the work of this first generation of American leaders. Born in 1760, an adolescent Oliver Wolcott Jr. came of age in the midst of a nation in the throes of Revolution, and it was during these critical years—from 1770 to 1790—that his political worldview took hold. Environmental factors, as best-selling author James Clear has suggested, will dictate an individual's true nature more than any other variable. Clear attributes this to the "Law of Least Effort," which contends that a person's behavior and ideology

[52] A fifteen-year-old Wolcott wrote to his father during his first year at Yale University. Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., - 1775, in Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott: One of the First Settlers of Windsor, Connecticut, and of Some of His Descendants* (New York: A.D.F. Randolph & Co., 1881), 231.

will come to align with his or her surroundings, because it is the path of least resistance to affirm the beliefs of one's society.[53] Wolcott's environment in which he came of age, then, must be carefully considered if one is to understand the political views of a man who would come to make his impact on his state and country in subsequent decades.

From his vantage point in the northwestern Connecticut town of Litchfield, a young Oliver Wolcott Jr. would have observed that the colonies' growing tension with the British, and the Revolution itself, brought about few tangible changes in society, contrary to the drastic actions being called for by its most radical leaders. From one perspective, dramatic reform was not needed, as New England (including Connecticut) since its initial settlement in the early seventeenth century had developed a society and culture far more egalitarian than its counterparts in the Middle and Southern colonies. Owing in part to the tenets of Puritan ideology, the wealth gap between the upper class and the lowest rung of society was far less as well. These realities helped foster close-knit communities in New England that tended to be far more democratic; local governments prioritized the needs and desires of its citizens with greater success and efficiency than in the colonies along the Chesapeake and in the South.[54]

Other factors shielded Connecticut from the necessity of reform during the Revolutionary Era as well. Connecticut—along with Rhode Island—were the only two colonies that did require prospective legislation to be approved, as a final step, by royal authorities. While what became known as the British policy of salutary neglect ensured that all of the colonies enjoyed a significant degree of liberty with respect to the British Parliament and King in London,

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[53] James Clear, *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones* (New York: Avery, 2018), 149-151.

[54] Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North* America (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 159, 172.

Connecticut even more so developed as a colony under an environment that fostered insularity and self-government. As the Revolution approached, nearly all colonial leaders still considered themselves British, but in their mind this fact guaranteed them self-evident rights and privileges that could not be taken away—even by Parliament of the King. The colonists, in essence, held the right to the same liberties as their brethren in the home country.[55]

Religion provided another key variable that insulated Connecticut from change. With the exception of Rhode Island, by the end of the 1600s Congregationalism—in many ways an outgrowth of Puritanism—became the dominant Christian denomination throughout New England. Arising from the Puritanical principles ungirding its founding documents, towns in Connecticut were privy to a higher degree of spiritual control than their New England neighbors. Behavioral and cultural norms in Connecticut remained especially static during its 150 years as a colony, owing to its citizens' commitment to the homogenous and harmonious society ordained by Congregationalist church leaders. Marginal reforms to this social order, nonetheless, should be noted: concerns arose from leading public officials suggesting that Connecticut could lose its unique status as a charter colony and thus fall under royal control. If only for practical reasons, then, dissent from Congregationalism was reluctantly tolerated. In turn, the level of centralized governance regarding religion would decrease during the eighteenth century. The led to the growth of other Christian sects—most notably Anglican, Baptist, and Separatist churches—but despite that Congregationalism would remain the dominant Christian denomination in Connecticut well into the nineteenth century.[56]

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[55] Taylor, *American Colonies*, 285-6; James Edward Bland, "The Oliver Wolcotts of Connecticut, The National Experience, 1775-1800," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1970, 61, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

[56] Taylor, *American Colonies*, 340; William C. Daniels, *The Connecticut Town: Growth and Development, 1635-1790* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 75-6, 101-2; Christopher Collier, *Roger Sherman's Connecticut: Yankee Politics and the American Revolution* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1971),

Other factors made the development of Christian communities in New England unique. Due to the proximity of Harvard and Yale, religious leaders were always in abundance and recent college graduates seeking a life with the clergy were able to find prominent roles in communities all throughout Connecticut and its neighboring colonies. Across New England, a church could be found in every town (each community was required to have one), and practicing the Sabbath was rigidly enforced. Especially relative to those found in the Middle and Southern colonies, town meetinghouses were also always close by and easily accessible in New England. All of this fostered a mindset that reforms—to the extent that were necessary—would be dictated by decisions made from within by colonial leaders, rather than from external forces.[57]

With all this said, it is somewhat surprising that a young Oliver Jr. appeared to find little interest in the Church, nor was he a strict adherent to its mandates. It is possible this was manifested by his social class. While his family was far from exuberantly wealthy, all indications are his early life was a comfortable one, and as will be shown the social prominence of the Wolcott family afforded him opportunities not available to most of his peers.[58] While by no means definitive, the lack of struggle and tribulations experienced by Oliver Jr. as a young boy, coupled with the ability to pursue adolescent interests, may have contributed to his apathy towards the Church. Wolcott's autobiography—which he began during the remaining years of his life and regrettably never completed more than a handful of pages—offers some key insights regarding his faith. Wolcott reveals that at least since the age of thirteen "Sunday…was the most

104-5; Andrew Siegel, "'To Learn and Make Respectable Hereafter:' The Litchfield Law School in Cultural Context," *New York University Law Review (1950)* 73, no. 6 (1998): 1983-4, https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/ faculty/644

[57] Taylor, *American Colonies*, 340.

[58] Bland, 69.

uncomfortable day of the Week," owing to the severe restrictions imposed by his parents during the Sabbath day. His typical Sunday began by dressing in formal attire, which included stockings, breeches, a "Silk Vest" and a "Scarlet Cloth Coat with Silver Buttons" that in total were especially "confining." Once at church, Wolcott concedes that he did enjoy "loud preaching," but was often subjected to services that were "dull, monotonous, and very long." Forbidden to sleep during this time, his "sufferings were frequently extreme." After service ended, "new toils awaited" Wolcott at home, when his "Father read to the Family from Bible or some printed Sermon." After his father finished with him, Oliver Jr.'s mother "examined" him with the "Assembly's Shorter Catechism," which he learned to "recite…in self-defense." Most revealing of all with regard to Wolcott's faith later in life is that he admits that he "comprehended it [the catechism] as well then as at any time afterwards."[59] It is notable that Wolcott does not take the opportunity at this moment in his autobiography to acknowledge any change in his faith that may have occurred in later years. Decades later, this relative ambivalence with regard to religion would make Wolcott, as state governor, the ideal individual to shepherd Connecticut through its own dramatic social and political transformation. And for now, one can conclude that the young Wolcott—in spite of his apathy with regard to his own faith—approved of the society that sprung forth from the state's devotion to Congregationalism, and for its reputation as the "Land of Steady Habits."

Despite its desire to carefully maintain the "Steady Habits" and the "Standing Order" that provided the foundation of its communities, Connecticut nonetheless participated actively and decisively towards the cause of revolution. The initial push to do so was undoubtedly aided by the fact that only about five percent of the colony's residents counted themselves as loyalists.

[59] "Autobiographical narrative by Oliver Wolcott Jr.", *WJP* (box 29, folder 8).

This was substantially less than in Massachusetts, where the growing tension between Great Britain and its colonies was felt most strongly in Boston. Connecticut leaders—although they furnished little in the way of their own revolutionary writings—from the beginning of the conflict acted resolutely to stand in solidarity with its aggrieved northern neighbor.[60] Beginning in the late 1760s, political leaders from the eastern half of Connecticut—more rural, agrarian, and with far fewer ties to England than its western counterpart—seized control of the colony's government with the assistance of the Sons of Liberty. Ardently patriotic, and willing to publicly condemn the Parliament's tax policies, these leaders—Eliphalet Dyer and Johnathan Trumbull Sr. chief among them—ensured that the Connecticut in the years to come would become one of the loudest voices championing independence.[61]

As Oliver Jr. approached adulthood during the early years of the war, he and so many other Connecticut citizens—by virtue of an overtly pro-independence Governor Trumbull, and a General Assembly that was equally radical in favor of the "Patriot position"—could not have failed to see that anyone remotely sympathetic to the British cause faced "the full brunt of popular and official denunciation."[62] The environment that surrounded Wolcott during his post-secondary education ensured he would become a devoted followed of the movement for independence. This was perhaps best exemplified by his work in the army's quartermaster department, where Wolcott was responsible requisitioning and delivering supplies for the America's soldiers, securing payment for debts between various parties, and key record-keeping

[60] Bland, 61-2.

[61] David M. Roth and Freeman Meyer, *From Revolution to Constitution: Connecticut 1763 to 1818* (Chester, CT: The Pequot Press, 1975), 9-18.

[62] Ibid, 17.

activities. Importantly, this position allowed Wolcott to remain in Litchfield, which—as will be shown—was a vital center of intellectual and academic discourse.[63]

Despite Connecticut's ardent and unwavering commitment to the Revolution, the day-to-day lives of the vast majority of its citizens did not change with the war's conclusion. A quick assessment of Connecticut's history reveals that the scarcity of reform was not surprising. From its founding in the 1630s to the start of the American Revolution and beyond, a select group of elite families—including the Wolcotts—possessed control over nearly all aspects of Connecticut's government, politics, society, and culture. Known as the "Standing Order," these men earned their distinction not only as a result of their family name, but also through an "apprentice system" by which they gained experience and otherwise demonstrated their competency serving in local government positions, before moving on to more prominent roles at the state level.[64] This system inevitably led to four father-son combinations—Winthrop, Trumbull Griswold, and Wolcott—serving in Connecticut's two highest offices, governor and deputy governor. As will be shown, in the case of the Wolcotts (Roger Wolcott, Oliver Sr., and Oliver Jr.), their rule over the state would span three generations.[65]

Prior to 1800, in a given year less than ten percent of Connecticut's adult male population voted (representing about half of those individuals who were eligible), and yet its citizens nonetheless believed elections and representative government to be integral components of their

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[63] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott, Jr., "67-68; Peter C. Vermilyea, *The Hidden History of Litchfield County* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014), 29; Connecticut Museum of Culture and History, "Biographical Sketch: A Guide to the Oliver Wolcott, Jr. Papers at the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History," accessed February 15, 2024, https://chs.org/finding_aides/finding_aids /wolco1833.html.

[64] David Corrigan, "The Standing Order: Connecticut's Ruling Aristocracy, 1639-1818," *Connecticut Explored.* (Fall 2012): 26-7, https://www.ctexplored.org/the-standing-order-connecticuts-ruling-aristocracy-1639-1818.

[65] Ibid., 28.

government. Despite annual elections, disenfranchisement and an arduous, complicated voting process led to a consistently low voter turnout, and this undoubtedly contributed to the continued preservation of Connecticut's conservative and aristocratic social order.[66] In fact, an examination of the colony's elected officials from 1660 to 1776 reveals that its governors, deputy governors, and the members of the legislature's upper house earned reelection an average of fourteen times. In short, it is evident that once elected to office, only death or retirement ended one's political career—especially if he possessed membership within one of Connecticut's aforementioned elite families.[67]

America's separation from England, perhaps surprisingly, did not prompt Connecticut's constituents to call for major reforms to change the status quo. In spite of the vital role that Connecticut played in the Revolution, the vast majority of its constituents did not believe—as the populations of many other states did—that its successful conclusion demanded an upending of this existing social and political order. With Governor Jonathan Trumbull Sr. serving as the clearest example, Connecticut's most influential figures in government in the years prior to the Revolution retained the same level of power in its aftermath.[68] The consensus from Connecticut residents was that Parliament and the King had irrevocably violated their rights as Englishmen through its excessive, loathsome tax policies While this trigged the colony's necessary separation from England it did not lead to societal reform. Connecticut residents enjoyed its governmental and political structure, which by the 1770s was still strongly conservative and aristocratic in nature in comparison to the majority of its sister states. And yet—in what one historian has

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[66] Siegel, "'To Learn and Make Respectable Hereafter:' The Litchfield Law School in Cultural Context," 1983; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott, Jr.," 10-11.

[67] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 10.

[68] Roth and Meyer, 42.

described as "one of the great paradoxes of colonial politics"—Connecticut's government was overwhelming democratic as well.[69] In practice, the former appeared to supersede the latter, and together these two characteristics elicited the development of a static ruling elite that held immense popularity amongst the colony's residents.[70] For more than a century before the Revolution, Connecticut citizens had overwhelmingly exhibited contentment with their "Land of Steady Habits."

This sense of pride also manifested in a system of government that had remained largely unchanged during its first 150 years (and would continue to do so for the foreseeable future). Connecticut, unique among all of the thirteen original states with the exception of Rhode Island, did not participate in the great era of constitution-making that characterized the first decade after the Revolution.[71] It is in this environment that Oliver Wolcott Jr. would come of age, and he—like so many of his contemporaries—would be forever shaped by it.

Born in 1760 to one of Connecticut's elite families, the young Oliver Jr. enjoyed advantages not available to most adolescent boys, and yet his rise to political prominence in the state—and later in the federal government—was not due to this alone. An autobiography, begun during his final years of life and unfortunately abandoned before any discussion of adulthood, offers a few key details on his early life growing up in the town of Litchfield—in particular with regard to the educational opportunities available to its youngest residents. The young Oliver Jr. could read by the age of four, and by the age of seven his mother had apparently proclaimed that

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[69] Andrew Siegel, "The Defense of Federalism in Connecticut," in *Federalists Reconsidered*, edited by Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara B. Oberg (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 200.

[70] Collier, 24-8.

[71] Richard J. Purcell, *Connecticut in Transition, 1775-1818* (Washington: American Historical Association, 1918), 176.

his education had reached a capacity higher than boys many years older than him. It was not long after this that Oliver Jr. began to attend school, where he quickly distinguished himself in his study of Latin and with an otherwise excellent memory capable of internalizing a wide variety of subjects. By virtue of the twenty-eight educational institutions present in and around Litchfield proper, Oliver Jr. only had to walk a few hundred feet from home to his first school.[72]

At the time of Oliver Jr.'s birth, Litchfield held multiple identities. To any newcomer choosing to visit, the city retained the characteristics of a quaint rural settlement from an earlier age, in spite of its size and distinction as the largest city in the northwest region of Connecticut. Litchfield's citizens routinely gathered for social events along its centrally located main roads, and otherwise appeared to live comfortably amongst the beautiful natural landscape for which western Connecticut is known. Through another distinct lens, Litchfield served as an essential connecting point between New York and Boston and was also less than a few dozen miles away from Hartford, the state capital. This geographic reality ensured that the city received an extensive number of travelers, who undoubtedly brought news with them from elsewhere in the colonies. This, coupled with the presence of a robust library, its own newspaper, and a cultured that promoted scholarly discussions and debates, enabled Litchfield to possess one of the most highly literate and well-educated citizenries in Connecticut.[73]

These factors, which made Litchfield unique when compared with other Connecticut towns, should not be overlooked. For a young man choosing where to spend his childhood and formative years in order to pursue a career in service to his government, he could do no better

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[72] "Autobiographical narrative by Oliver Wolcott Jr.," *WJP* (box 29, folder 8); Siegel, "'To Learn and Make Respectable Hereafter:' The Litchfield Law School in Cultural Context," 1991.

[73] Siegel, "'To Learn and Make Respectable Hereafter:' The Litchfield Law School in Cultural Context," 1990-1; Daniels, 154.

than Litchfield. By good fortune, the young Wolcott was in an ideal position that—if he so chose—could exploit.

At only the age of 18, Wolcott graduated from Yale College as part of a highly distinguished class that included Noah Webster, Uriah Tracy and his cousin Alexander Wolcott, among others. In the years to come, all would attain political prestige and standing in Connecticut, and many would remain close with Wolcott after he left the state a decade later to join the federal government in the Treasury Department.[74] During his years at Yale, Wolcott gravitated toward the "moderate" wing of the ideological spectrum of the Revolution, which sought a balance between protecting the right of the people to protest against unjust government, while preserving the core foundations of society from the excesses of undisciplined mob action.[75] When Wolcott developed political power and influence as a member of the Treasury Department, this latter belief would become of increasing importance to him.

After Yale, Wolcott transitioned to the study of law at the Litchfield Law School (LLS), the first institution of its kind in the country. Opened in 1774 by renowned judge Tapping Reeve, the school instructed young men in the core principles of the English legal system through regimented and dynamic lectures. The instruction offered by Reeve—and by his eventual partner at the school James Gould—represented the best law training any young man could receive in the country. Beyond Wolcott, the LLS was responsible in its brief fifty-year history for educating

[74] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott, Jr.," 49.

[75] Ibid., 51.

over one hundred members of Congress, three justices of the Supreme Court, and countless state and local politicians, judges, and legal scholars.[76]

While little is known of Wolcott's time at the LLS, it is evident that much of what he came to believe about politics, society and government was learned or otherwise reinforced during his matriculation there. At the time of Wolcott's graduation from the LLS in 1778, the partisan conflict that would later divide the country in the aftermath of the Constitution's ratification was still more than a decade away, to say nothing of the uncertainty surrounding the country's own future. Despite this, Reeve's devotion to and optimism for the Patriot cause undoubtedly made a strong impression on his students, including Wolcott. Reeve foresaw a future American republic successfully led by individuals—educated, honorable, and selfless—from the nation's most respected families. This, not coincidentally, was exactly the group of young men Reeve devoted himself to educating.[77]

The LLS would go on to have a significant role in the nation's future, especially with regard to political partisanship. Its eventual impact in fostering one side of that political divide has led one historian to characterize the LLS as "a propaganda mill for the Federalist vision of the social order."[78] Tantamount to that vision was the education of young men from elite families, such as Wolcott, who would in the years are the Revolution serve as a bulwark against the growing "threat of licentiousness, irreligion, and democracy."[79]

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[76] Siegel, "'To Learn and Make Respectable Hereafter:' The Litchfield Law School in Cultural Context," 1998-1; Vermilyea, 85-87; "Tapping Reeve House and Litchfield Law School," The Litchfield Historical Society, accessed March 4, 2024, https://www.litchfieldhistoricalsociety.org/museums/tapping-reeve-house-and-law-school.

[77] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 69-70.

[78] Siegel, "'To Learn and Make Respectable Hereafter:' The Litchfield Law School in Cultural Context," 1981.

[79] Ibid.

The education of Connecticut's elite women is also noteworthy. Wolcott's sisters, Laura and Mariann, and many of his female cousins attended the Litchfield Female Academy (LFA), an institution founded to provide young women an education that was equally rigorous to what young men received at the neighboring law school. Most importantly the instructors at the LFA sought to foster the development of skills necessary for young women to be successful wives and mothers. The latter was especially essential, in that in addition to its obvious benefit to families, it was seen as fulfilling a vital political role. In essence, the LFA served as an integral balance and supplement to the LLS; the success of both institutions beginning in the 1780s ensured that Connecticut's most privileged families would not only continue to dominate the state's major social and political leadership positions, but that they would also be able to pass on the vital traits of piety, morality, and virtuousness to future generations of the state's citizens.[80] Only this—in effect embracing a strong Federalist vision—would protect America's communities from the threats of "vice" and sin emerging within the Democratic-Republican Party.[81]

It comes as no surprise that—beyond Oliver Jr. and his sisters—the LLS and LFA would come to play a vital role in the education of the Wolcott family. While Oliver Jr. was the first, more than three dozen members of his family—siblings, cousins, children, nephews, nieces, and more—would be trained at either the LLS or LFA over the next half century.[82]

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[80] Siegel, "'To Learn and Make Respectable Hereafter:' The Litchfield Law School in Cultural Context," 1996-7; Vermilyea, 80-82.

[81] Siegel, "'To Learn and Make Respectable Hereafter:' The Litchfield Law School in Cultural Context," 1998.

[82] "The Ledger: A Database of the Litchfield Law School and Litchfield Female Academy," Litchfield Historical Society, accessed February 18, 2024, https://ledger.litchfieldhistoricalsociety.org/ledger/students?page=0&qq=wolcott.

It was perhaps inevitable that Wolcott would come to marry a graduate of the Female Academy, one that he would routine laud—in keeping with the vision of the LFA—for her role as a loving mother to their children.[83] Oliver Jr.'s marriage to an eighteen-year-old Elizabeth Stoughton in 1785 was a union that few onlookers would have found surprising. Betsy, as she was known by friends and family, was a member of one of Connecticut's most prominent and well-respected families. As with Wolcott, she could trace her lineage back to the founding of the colony during the 1630s.[84] While indications are both Oliver and Betsy shared a genuine love for one another, these types of marriages—more generally, the coupling of two individuals from Connecticut's most elite families, and more narrowly marriages between Stoughtons and Wolcotts—were exceedingly common at this time.[85] Unions such as these were ultimately necessary in order to maintain Connecticut's Standing Order.

Oliver and Betsy's marriage also brought with it a tremendous number of personal tragedies. While deaths in early childhood were not uncommon during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a close look at their children's lives reveals that fortune in this regard seemed to be especially against him. The Wolcotts' first two children, both sons—John Stoughton and Oliver—died before reaching the age of two. A third son, Henry, would pass away after just three weeks, and two other children—Elizabeth and Oliver Stoughton—would die in early adulthood. Only a later son (a second) John Stoughton, and their daughter Laura, would go on to outlive their father. Before long, Oliver Wolcott Jr. would have to learn to cope

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[83] Their correspondence is found in Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott: One of the First Settlers of Windsor, Connecticut, and of Some of His Descendants* (New York: A.D.F. Randolph & Co., 1881), 240-242.

[84] Thomas Stoughton and Henry Wolcott were two of the five original colonists tasked with orchestrating the settlement of Windsor, the first English town in Connecticut. Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott,* 216.

[85] "The Ledger: Elizabeth Stoughton Wolcott," Litchfield Historical Society, accessed February 28, 2024, https://ledger.litchfieldhistoricalsociety.org/ledger/students/2845; Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott,* 216.

with these tragedies in solitude after Betsy herself passed away from consumption, at the young age of thirty-eight.[86]

It should also be briefly noted that in spite of Wolcott's affection for his wife—he once remarked that "you [Betsy] cannot…[do] any thing which is not praiseworthy"—a review of their surviving correspondence reveals little of substance with regard to political matters.[87] In a stark departure from the time period's greatest partnership in marriage, John and Abigail Adams, Wolcott did not seek or receive political counsel from his wife. Instead, he would come to rely on an inner circle of political allies and confidantes when the need for in-depth discussions regarding current events and the state of government arose.

The Wolcott Family Lineage

Beyond the considerable educational opportunities Oliver Wolcott Jr. benefitted from by coming of age in Litchfield, much must be said as well regarding the long history of the Wolcott family, which dates back to first decades of European settlement in New England during the seventeenth century. Windsor, Connecticut's first settlement, was founded in 1636 along the banks of the large river that would soon come to bear the colony's name. The Wolcotts hold the distinction of being one of the five original families—through its first New World resident, Henry Wolcott—that were responsible for the Connecticut colony's development and original government. Owing apparently to his dutiful service to the community, it wasn't long before Henry was considered, second only to the colony's official pastor, "the most distinguished man in Windsor.[88] Beginning in the late 1630s, Henry served as a member of the colony's first

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[86] Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott,* 216, 220; "The Ledger: Elizabeth Stoughton Wolcott."

[87] Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott,* 240-242.

[88] Ibid., 20.

twelve-person General Assembly, before his election to the House of Magistrates, the upper house of the legislature. In this latter role, he served until his death in 1655 at the age of seventy-seven.[89] According to Jackson Turner Main, perhaps Connecticut's greatest colonial historian, the immense value of Wolcott's property acquired in the colony (5,000 pounds)—coupled with the significant capital he brought with him from England—facilitated the creation of one of southern New England's first family "dynasties."[90]

His sons, Henry Wolcott Jr. and Simon, continued their father's legacy with their own service to the colony. Henry Jr. spent nearly twenty years in the House of Magistrates and a reputation in the community illustrious enough to earn a reference in the official 1662 Connecticut Charter.[91] As one of its selectmen and the captain of the town militia, Simon playing a key role in the 1670 official incorporation of Simsbury, a growing settlement ten miles northwest of Windsor. While the reasons for its name are unknown, one cannot help but draw attention to the fact that the town's residents referred to Simon as "Sim." That the town was named after him is a distinct possibility.[92]

In their private careers, these earliest Wolcotts in Connecticut were widely successful merchants and farmers, and they used their growing wealth to continue acquiring considerable

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[89] Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott*, 16-21; Kristen Wands, "Founders' Series: Henry Wolcott," Windsor Historical Society, Windsor, CT, November 19, 2020, https://windsorhistoricalsociety.org/founders-series-henry-wolcott.

[90] Jackson Turner Main, *Society and Economy in Colonial Connecticut* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 332. In today's US dollars, Wolcott's property would be valued at approximately $1.56 million. See Eric W. Nye, *Pounds Sterling to Dollars: Historical Conversion of Currency*, accessed March 28, 2024, https://www.uwyo.edu/numimage/currency.htm.

[91] Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott*, 36.

[92] J. Hammond Trumbull, *The Memorial History of Hartford County Connecticut 1633-1884*, vol. 2 (Boston: Edward L. Osgood, 1886), 343; Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott*, 53-4; Kristen Wands, "Founders' Series: Henry Wolcott."

parcels of land, which only added to their prestige and influence in the infant colony. It is debatable whether or not the institution of slavery played a role in the Wolcott family's ability to acquire and hold wealth. Historical records suggest that the Wolcotts owned slaves till as late as the early nineteenth century, when Connecticut's emancipation movement began to grow. Until the 1700s, slavery in Connecticut was highly uncommon, and as such according to one scholar the institution did not have an impact on the colony's economy.[93] Unlike in many southern states, even by the start of the nineteenth century the institution had failed to become "an invariable symbol of status" or "an economic necessity" for those in Connecticut who could afford slaves.[94] It is perhaps no surprise, then, that no Wolcott family member was likely to have owned more than four at any one time.[95] The inevitable end of the Wolcott family's relationship with slavery occurred in the early 1800s, and was likely due to a combination of factors, including the impact of the Second Great Awakening and diminishing financial returns (already highly minimal), which made the possession of slaves morally and economically untenable.[96]

Future members of the Wolcott family would inherit the wealth established by these first and second generations but ultimately, they would need to rely on their own ingenuity and hard work to maintain and grow it. As will be shown, Oliver Wolcott Jr.'s life and career benefitted greatly from this family lineage, which ensured for him—should he ultimately desire it—a bright

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[93] Christopher Paul Sawula, "'The Hidden Springs of Prejudice and Oppression': Slavery and Abolitionism in Connecticut" (Independent research thesis, Boston College, 2008), 33, http://hdl.handle.net/2345/556; Main, *Society and Economy in Colonial Connecticut*, 176.

[94] Main, *Society and Economy in Colonial Connecticut*, 355.

[95] Sawula, "The Hidden Springs," 33, 37, http://hdl.handle.net/2345/556; Main, *Society and Economy in Colonial Connecticut*, 355.

[96] Kristen Wands, "Founders' Series: Henry Wolcott"; Sawula, "The Hidden Springs," 37.

future within government. The young Oliver Jr. was undoubtedly well-versed in the intimate details of his ancestral history, but more than just a descendent leeching off the family name, he did take genuine inspiration from the men in the Wolcott line from which he was directly descended: his grandfather, Roger, and his father, Oliver Sr. Without the influence of these two men, it stands to reason that Oliver Jr.'s political legacy would have been dramatically different—or even non-existent.

Little is known about the relationship, to the extent one existed, between Roger Wolcott and his grandson Oliver Wolcott Jr. The lives of the two men overlapped by only seven years, but it is possible that a young Oliver Jr. retained memories of his elderly grandfather, who would pass away at the age of eighty-eight in 1767. The historical record has left a number of clues that suggest Oliver Jr. found inspiration from the life and career of his grandfather, Roger Wolcott. One cannot help but pause to contemplate how grandfather and grandson shared interests and life experiences—both political and otherwise—that were strikingly similar. Born in Windsor, Connecticut in 1679 in the aftermath of King Phillip's War, Roger Wolcott would play an integral role in the politics and government of the colony for nearly half a century. Beginning as a town selectman in 1707, Wolcott over the next few decades held a variety of positions in government, including as representative in the colony's General Assembly, and as a Judge of the County Court, and later the Superior Court. Widely respected by his peers, the pinnacle of Wolcott's political career was his service at the colonial government's highest levels, which included ten years as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (1741-1750), a simultaneous ten years as Deputy Governor, and four years as Governor (1750-1754).[97]

[97] Connecticut Museum of Culture and History, "Biographical Sketch: A Guide to the Roger Wolcott Papers at the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History," accessed February 15, 2024,

The longevity of his grandson's career was equally impressive, and over a span of forty-five years from 1782 to 1827, Oliver Jr. worked in government for more than thirty of those years, both at the state and federal level. Beginning in his early twenties, he lived in Hartford in order to be close to the state capital, where he served in various positions managing the state's finances. This culminated in a two-year stint as Comptroller of the Public Accounts (1788-1789). Oliver Jr's federal career followed a similar trajectory. In the 1790s he served in the Treasury Department, as Auditor, Comptroller, and finally Treasury Secretary (1789-1800). At the start of the new century, he also served as a judge on the short-lived Second Circuit (1801-1802). And in near-identical career trajectory to his grandfather, Oliver Wolcott Jr's public service culminated in ten years as governor of Connecticut (1817-1827).[98]

The young Oliver Jr. possessed a love of poetry, which he retained throughout his life despite devoting his career to public service. In old age, he admitted that some of his earliest memories of childhood include listening to the "Hymns and Songs" of Dr. Isaac Watts, a noted English Congregational minister. More than seventy years later, Oliver Jr. proclaimed that he "shall ever consider them as among the best Poetry of our language."[99] This love of poetry he quite possibly inherited from his grandfather, Roger Wolcott. Oliver Jr's grandfather wrote poetry throughout his life and published one of the first collections to appear in Connecticut, *Poetical Meditations being the Improvement of some Vacant Hours.*[100] At the age of eighteen,

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https://chs.org/finding_aides/finding_aids/wolcr1767.html; "Roger Wolcott autobiography," in Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott*, 83-90.

[98] Connecticut Museum of Culture and History, "Biographical Sketch: A Guide to the Roger Wolcott Papers."

[99] "Autobiographical narrative by Oliver Wolcott Jr.," *WJP* (box 29, folder 8).

[100] Connecticut Museum of Culture and History, "Biographical Sketch: A Guide to the Oliver Wolcott, Jr. Papers at the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History," accessed February 15, 2024, https://chs.org/finding_aides/finding_aids/wolco1833.html.

Oliver Jr. wrote a longform poem titled, "The Judgment of Paris," about the pivotal character of the Trojan War in Homer's *The Iliad*. While his grandson George Gibbs would later opine that there was little noteworthy about this composition, it is perhaps significant that a young Wolcott devoted much of his time in these years to contemplating how individuals should be judged according to society and common law.[101] Such ruminations foreshadowed in the years to come the abiding concern he would have for his own professional reputation.

It is at this time, however, where it appears his interest in poetry began to wane. Despite the pleas of his close friend Joel Barlow, who argued that Oliver's demeanor was "exactly suited" for poetry and "the fine arts," and that it would be a tremendous "dishonor" to abandon it for the study of politics, Wolcott chose to follow to the course predetermined for him by his elite lineage.[102] In line with the choices made by his grandfather, a career in service to the government would take precedence over any leisurely, private pursuits.

In 1759, Roger Wolcott answered the repeated requests of Thomas Clap, President of Yale University, to write a history of the colony of Connecticut.[103] Apparently written only from memory, the work is a remarkable achievement by Wolcott–then eighty-one years of age. As a result of his personal connection to the colony's history, Wolcott is able to recount an accurate and detailed timeline of its most seminal events. While objective and unbiased in its tone and presentation, Wolcott–on rare occasions–does let his own commentary slip into the writing. Often, he betrays a sense of pride in how far Connecticut has come from its humble

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[101] "The Judgment of Paris, a Poem, by Oliver Wolcott Jr., 1778," *WJP* (box 58, folder 2); Gibbs, vol. 1, 18.

[102] Joel Barlow to Oliver Wolcott Jr., February 8, 1779, *WJP* (box 5, folder 5).

[103] Roger Wolcott, "A Memoir for the History of Connecticut," in *Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society*, vol. III (Hartford, 1895), 325.

origins.[104] These occasions warrant a close examination, especially when one considers the political ideology of his grandson, Oliver Wolcott Jr.

It is with certainty that the adolescent Oliver Wolcott Jr. read his grandfather's history of Connecticut, and–given his future political career–likely spent time contemplating some of the work's most notable passages. One stands out about all else: Roger Wolcott's staunch position on the vital role played by a nation's public treasury, and the dangers posed to a country if it is abused or neglected. Seeking to explain the prosperity the colony experienced during its early years, Wolcott argued that its citizens were more than content to pay their fair share of taxes to the government, because doing so was recognized as self-evidently for their "best advantage" and that of their growing community overall.[105] Commenting further on the critical relationship between citizens, public officials, and the tax revenue to be entrusted by the former to the latter, Wolcott writes:

> The public treasury is as the stomach to the body politick: it cant subsist but while nourished from hence, and while the public men supply it in a due manner and take care that what is put into it be duly digested for the health of the body it will be strong, but when they degenerate into an avaricious source to feed and enrich themselves, a commonwealth as strong as that of the Romans will soon sink.[106]

Wolcott's argument is clear. The public officials and administrators entrusted with managing the revenue of the state must possess a degree of honor, virtue, and humility strong enough to shield them from the sins of greed and self-interest that are capable of destroying society.

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[104] Roger Wolcott, "A Memoir for the History of Connecticut," 326-7. To demonstrate how successful government has done, Wolcott recounts an exhaustive list of actions taken by the colony's leaders to ensure its prosperity, and—perhaps most importantly—its moral and political legitimacy. He concludes this section of his history by exclaiming that "[p]osterity will hardly believe" that Connecticut's citizens, given all the challenges they faced, were successfully able to "assume… and maintain it [their new government] and do so much good within so long a time."

[105] Ibid., 327.

[106] Ibid.

It is impossible to say to what extent Oliver Jr. took his grandfather's message about the public treasury to heart when he first read it, but as will be shown it would not be the last time he would be exposed to these arguments—especially regarding the importance of virtuous leaders. As time would tell, by virtue of his management of Connecticut's finances during the 1780s, and—more significantly—his service to the federal government's Treasury Department in the 1790s—Oliver Jr. would come to devoutly believe in the message his grandfather espoused.

The infamous 1754 Spanish ship scandal, a seminal and unfortunate event which proved to be the culmination of Wolcott's public career, is also illustrative for the lessons which may have been imparted on his grandson, Oliver Jr. While governor of the colony, a Spanish ship ran aground along the Connecticut coast near New London, and shortly thereafter an unknown party stole its cargo. A formal complaint was thereafter issued to the Spanish ambassador in London, causing British leaders to order Connecticut to properly compensate the Spanish shipowner and its crew. Connecticut citizens quickly placed the full blame for the cargo's loss on Governor Wolcott, alleging that under his leadership he had allowed conditions in the colony to devolve to a point where an act as heinous as stealing the goods of another nation was possible.[107] By the end of the 1754 public sentiment had turned against Wolcott sufficiently enough to ensure his defeat for election, an outcome—the ousting of an incumbent with a well-respected family name—as previously noted, that was exceedingly rare in Connecticut's gubernatorial history.[108]

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[107] Fredrick Calvin Norton, *The Governors of Connecticut: Biographies of the Chief Executives of That Gave to the World the First Written Constitution Known to History* (Hartford, CT: The Connecticut Magazine Company, 1905), 82; Robert J. Taylor, *Colonial Connecticut: A History* (Millwood, NY: KTO Press, 1979), 37; Collier, 25.

[108] Taylor, 37. Throughout the colony's history up until that point, once an individual assumed elected office, he was nearly always reelected each year. Only "poor health or death" precipitated the need for a change in leadership

According to Wolcott, libelous rumors—suggesting he had spearheaded the cargo's seizure, and "had extracted vast sums" for his own personal benefit—were responsible for his downfall.[109] In spite of these attacks on his reputation and character, the General Assembly refused to allow Wolcott the opportunity to defend himself under oath, and its leaders—who "had [always] approved of the Governor's conduct"—demonstrated no interest in ascertaining the truth in the matter, preferring instead to "throw [him] down with a vengeance" in the following election.[110] To the General Assembly, Wolcott was "thought worthy of no more respect than a common porter."[111] Wolcott does concede, though, that after he had left public office "wise men" in the Assembly did eventually condemn this accusation against Wolcott "as foolish and dangerous."[112]

While the historical record is unclear on what exactly happened in the Spanish ship case, and to what extent Wolcott bore responsibility for the cargo's loss, the incident's significance transcends the end of the elder Wolcott's career in public office. To Wolcott, the actions of the General Assembly provided convincing evidence of the clear and inevitable danger that exists from a uninformed and unrestrained populace—one willing to ground their judgments in the fleeting sentiments of the day, rather than the principles of good government and civil society. Upon reading about the Spanish ship scandal, a young Oliver Wolcott Jr. must have felt strongly that his grandfather had been unfairly wronged. It would have been only natural for Oliver Jr.—

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[109] Roger Wolcott, "A Memoir for the History of Connecticut," 335.

[110] Ibid.

[111] Ibid.

[112] Ibid. It should be noted that it seems the original editor of Wolcott's work (or perhaps Wolcott himself) removed the section on the 1754 Spanish ship scandal from the manuscript. One wonders if, upon reflection, Wolcott or the editor felt this incident could not be discussed objectively given Wolcott's connection to it, and/or that it was beneath Wolcott to even address it in writing. See note at 335.

with thoughts of his own possible career as a public official one day—to contemplate how government could be reformed to shield virtuous leaders from the problems that arise in a society that has put too much faith in democracy. From his vantage point—and those of the vast majority of its citizens—Connecticut's prosperity over the past 150 years was due to the stable and efficient leadership that had earned it the nickname "the Land of Steady Habits." As the Revolution drew to a close, and a new federal government (and state government as well) began to take shape, it was generally accepted that the voice of the people had a significant role to play in the country's future. How much power, though, should the people hold in the new system of government to be created? This question, perhaps more significant than all the others that needed answering, would be taken up by the delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, beginning in 1787. Oliver Wolcott Jr., from his home in Hartford, would be a keen observer of these seminal events.

Like Father, Like Son: Oliver Wolcott Sr.

For all the influence that Roger Wolcott's life likely had on his grandson, it was Oliver Wolcott Sr. that played the most significant role in impacting Oliver Wolcott Jr's political career. While the archival record has unfortunately left few surviving letters written from Oliver Jr. to his father before 1789, more than fifty survive from the 1780s from father to son, saved carefully for posterity by Oliver Jr. Taken collectively, these letters reveal the intimate and close relationship both men shared with one another. Moreover, they demonstrate how Oliver Jr. attempted—through the guidance of his father—to embark on a political career consistent with the vaunted legacy of the Wolcott family in Connecticut.

By early 1783, Oliver Wolcott Sr. was a man to be admired. In the last ten years he had made his name as a staunch supporter of the American Revolution, and as a signer of the

Declaration of Independence. At this moment he was serving in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia as a representative of Connecticut.[113] Through familial patronage, the reputation he had acquired over his career gave Oliver Jr. clear advantages as he continued his early career in public service.

Whether he always wanted his father's help is uncertain. At this time Oliver Jr. was growing weary of his work at the state's Office of the Pay-Table, a position he received at least in part because of his family name. Wolcott's job consisted of largely menial and mundane tasks regarding the management of Connecticut's public treasury—service that brought little prestige or satisfaction to the young man. He thought similarly regarding his appointment as a state commissioner for settling Connecticut's public debts with the United States, a position he found so time consuming that he wrote to the state General Assembly requesting he be allowed to resign.[114]

It was during these years that Wolcott contemplated whether or not he should abandon public office and instead pursue a career in the private sector.[115] While his exact thoughts are uncertain, perhaps he considered starting his own law practice, in order to make use of the education he received from Judge Tapping Reeve at the Litchfield Law School. It appears though that through the advice of his father, Oliver Jr. soon abandoned these thoughts. Oliver Sr.'s letters to his son during this period are filled with expressions of fatherly love, philosophical

[113] Connecticut Museum of Culture and History, "Biographical Sketch: A Guide to the Oliver Wolcott, Sr. Papers at the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History," accessed February 22, 2024, https://chs.org/finding_aides/finding_aids/wolco1797.html.

[114] At his request the General Assembly dismissed him, but Wolcott remained a member of the Committee of the Pay-Table. Gibbs, vol. 1, 15-16; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 71-72.

[115] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., January 6, 1784, *WJP* (box 1, folder 3).

musing regarding the proper role of government, and what he expected of his son as Oliver Jr. began to make a life of his own.[116]

The central tenet ungirding Wolcott Sr.'s advice to his son during this period was to impress upon him the duty of public service that was the requirement of society's most qualified and virtuous individuals. The assumption of this burden by the nation's elite (including the leading men of the Wolcott family), believed Oliver Sr., was necessary because God had prescribed that doing so was right and just. A letter written much later to Oliver Jr. encapsulates this belief. Oliver Sr. reminded his son that men in their position must ground their behavior "conscious" of the reality that they "are always under the Inspection of the Almighty," and that they are required to "use the Powers which he has given them for the Purposes for which they were bestowed."[117]

In short, Oliver Sr.'s views reflected a proto version of Social Darwinism—a commitment to a static social order that necessitated a natural aristocracy to govern over the masses, who were incapable of governing themselves. These views had become entrenched as a result of Oliver Sr.'s experiences during the American Revolution, during which he saw an overwhelming number of lackluster men demonstrate their unsuitability for leadership through excessive egotism and vanity coupled with intellectual ignorance.[118] This in sum represented Oliver Sr.'s fear of democracy, as practiced by a uneducated citizenry who let their "passion[s]"

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[116] Alan Damarjian, "Oliver Wolcott Sr.: Connecticut's Aristocratic Republican," unpublished paper, n.d. Connecticut Museum of Culture and History. Hartford, Connecticut, 2.

[117] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., July 7, 1791, *WJP* (box 1, folder 8).

[118] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., February 19, 1783, *WJP* (box 1, folder 1).

dictate their beliefs.[119] This reality of human nature dictated the needed for qualified men—through their own commitment to public service—to restrain.

In one notable letter, he cautioned that devoting one's life to the service of the government was unlikely to bring about fortune or glory, but that it should be remembered that it is only the judgment of "the Virtuous few" in society that one should concern himself with, as these are the only men capable of evaluating others with objectivity and integrity.[120] By extension, Oliver Sr. was instructing his son to ignore the inevitable criticisms of those citizens beneath him—citizens who lacked the judgment and rationality to understand what was best for them. According to Oliver Sr., Only elite men from prestigious families had the means to ensure the security and prosperity of the new nation, and it would be wrong for his son or anyone else in their position to shy away from this great responsibility.[121] As will be shown, Oliver Jr. did not.

Beyond his father and grandfather, there is much that could be said regarding the other members of Oliver Wolcott Jr.'s extended family—many of whom had prominent political careers of their own. In the interest of brevity, only Alexander Wolcott—a cousin of Oliver—is worth mentioning. A fixture in Connecticut state politics for three decades beginning in the 1790s, Alexander Wolcott earned respect and admiration, even from his political opponents, due to his principled and steadfast leadership as a member of the minority Republican party in the state. In the early nineteenth century, Alexander Wolcott was perhaps most responsible for transforming the Republican Party in Connecticut into a political organization capable of challenging the Federalists—who were still the dominant political entity in the state after the

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[119] Damarjian, 4.

[120] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., January 6, 1784, *WJP* (box 1, folder 3).

[121] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., June 1, 1785, *WJP* (box 1, folder 4); Damarjian, 11.

Election of 1800.[122] An astute observer of the political actors around him, Oliver Wolcott Jr.—beginning from the time spent with him at Yale—would have been keenly aware of how his cousin's "independence of character and unshaken firmness of purpose" in supporting Jeffersonianism diverged dramatically from nearly all other members of his ardently Federalist family.[123]

As the Federalist Party began its dominance of American politics in the early 1790s, it is likely that Oliver Wolcott Jr. gave little sincere consideration to his cousin's political views. He had every reason to believe that the Federalist Party, led nationally by George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, and in Connecticut by his father Oliver Sr., represented the future of the young nation. The upstart Republican Party, led by national figures Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, was ultimately a temporary nuisance that would inevitably be quelled and suppressed as America's national identity took firm shape.

As will be shown, though, by the first decade of the nineteenth century, and in the aftermath of Jefferson's election to the presidency in 1800, the political winds in Connecticut would slowly begin to shift. Oliver Wolcott's own beliefs would slowly evolve during this time, as if in alignment with this broader transformation in the state. This would eventually place Oliver Wolcott in a tenuous political position—one where he would face a level of public criticism—much of it from former friends—with which he was highly unfamiliar. The example set by Alexander Wolcott, however, along with his cousin's growing reputation, would perhaps give Oliver Wolcott Jr. the courage and conviction to assume a leadership role greater than he would have preferred earlier in his career.

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[122] Purcell, 273-275.

[123] The quote is from John M. Niles, "a political admirer" of Alexander Wolcott and a fellow Jeffersonian Republican who went on to serve Connecticut in the US Senate. Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott,* 212.

For now, though, as the end of 1780s approached, the contentious debates surrounding the ratification of the Constitution provided the perfect encapsulation of the lessons Oliver Sr. had sought to instill in his son, Oliver Jr. By this time the younger Wolcott had already been witness to the turmoil surrounding Shays' Rebellion, a violent uprising of farmers in Massachusetts who rebelled out of anger from heavy taxes placed on their homes, which in turn led to widespread housing foreclosures. Lasting for six months during the autumn and winter of 1786-1787, the farmers' disturbance to Massachusetts society—which included raising an armed force of two to three thousand men, ignoring contractual agreements, and shutting down local courts—called into serious question the viability of the federal government under the Articles of Confederation.[124] Oliver Wolcott Sr. wrote to his son about the distress he felt over the affair, arguing that because society's leading men in government lacked the power to quell the rebellion, "the three demons of Pride, Envy, and Avarice" festered and grew, disrupting the state's peaceful communities until they reached their breaking point.[125] Wolcott believed that simply restoring the rule of law in Massachusetts was not a satisfactory resolution to the conflict; foreshadowing the need for a stronger national constitution, he contended foundational changes to the government were needed.[126] It is all but certain that Oliver Jr. agreed with his father, especially considering the aforementioned content of Oliver Sr.'s letters to his son during the 1780s, or Oliver Jr.'s behavior in the federal government during the 1790s.

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that once the Constitutional Convention began in Philadelphia in May 1787, one of the primary debates that occurred regarding the formation of a

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[124] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 79-82; Forrest McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution* (University of Kansas Press, 1985), 177.

[125] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., July 31, 1787, *WJP* (box 1, folder 6); Damarjian, 36.

[126] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., December 4, 1786, *WJP* (box 1, folder 5); Damarjian, 35-6.

new federal government centered on what role democracy would play in the law-making process. In keeping with the lessons imparted on Oliver Jr. by his father, and with Shays' Rebellion a recent memory, many of the Constitution's framers were weary of democracy and warned of a government that relied too heavily on the wishes of the people. Echoing the philosophy of David Hume (widely read by the Framers), these delegates to the Convention—including Alexander Hamilton, Wolcott Jr.'s future benefactor—believed that doing so jeopardized a nation's security and, specifically, individuals' property rights. This was owing to the natural inclination for men to descend into factionalism.[127]

It comes as no surprise that Wolcott Sr. found considerable reassurance with the new Constitution that was produced at the Philadelphia Convention. After the document was publicly delivered to the states for ratification by early October 1787, he wrote with satisfaction to Oliver Jr. that government would now be stronger and more "efficient," and capable of "guarding" against "public disturbance(s)," such as the one that took place in Massachusetts just a year prior.[128] His support for the Constitution aligned with the vast majority of Connecticut's ratifying convention, as the state in January 1788 approved the Constitution by a vote of 128-40, becoming the fifth state to do so.[129]

Over the next six months, more states continued to ratify the Constitution, until—with New Hampshire's ratification in June 1788—it officially became the governing document of the country. That winter, with the unanimous election of George Washington as the country's first president, many Americans celebrated the dawning of a new age and the promise of national

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[127] McDonald, 162.

[128] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., October 3, 1787, *WJP* (box 1, folder 6).

[129] Roth and Meyer, 48.

unity. The residue of political division, however, could still be felt from the preceding debates between the Federalist and Anti-Federalist factions that had—predominantly through the newspapers—passionately debated the issue of ratification during the preceding year.[130] Though defeated, the majority of the Anti-Federalists, weary of the wave of nationalism riding through the country, were not prepared to fade into political obscurity. They, along with a number of the Constitution's initial supporters who quickly became disillusioned with the direction Washington's administration was taking (Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, most significantly), would eventually combine to form a strong political network opposed to the federal government's antidemocratic leanings.

For now, though, this future could not be seen even by the most clairvoyant. It was in this seemingly harmonious environment during the autumn of 1789 that Oliver Wolcott would leave Connecticut to assume the position of Auditor in the Treasury Department as part of the new federal administration under President Washington—at present governing from the temporary capital of New York City. Wolcott had been convinced to write Washington of his interest in a job within the Treasury Department by his close friends—most notably Jeremiah Wadsworth and Oliver Ellsworth. Both Wadsworth and Ellsworth represented two of the most prominent and distinguished men in Connecticut, and Wolcott would have been heavily swayed by their opinion. Still, Wolcott worried about the effect on his professional standing that accepting such an appointment would provide, as even with "success," he could at best "only acquire the reputation of an honest, plodding fellow of little genius or ability."[131]

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[130] For the pro-constitution defense of the need of the federal government to protect against the dangers of factions, see James Madison, Federalist Papers: No. 10, The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, accessed March 1, 2024, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp; Kevin R. C. Gutzman, *James Madison and the Making of America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 145-149.

[131] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Jeremiah Wadsworth, August 15, 1789; Gibbs, vol. 1, 19-20.

Upon receiving the appointment from Washington and after his arrival in New York, Wolcott's initial fears were soon alleviated. He quickly concluded that "the prospect of [professional] advancement," while "remote," was far greater as a member of the new federal government than it was serving in Connecticut.[132] Similarly, he also saw signs that the move would be financially beneficially as well.[133] For the next twelve years of his life, Wolcott would come to depend on federal appointments in the administrations of Presidents Washington and Adams for his professional and financial well-being.

Before embarking on an analysis of (arguably) this most critical phase of his life and career, there is merit in returning to a moment from earlier in the decade that, on the surface, appears trivial. For all the lessons learned during the first twenty-nine years of his life, it is a letter he wrote to his father in 1783 that perhaps offers the greatest indication of the kind of service he would offer the federal government. In January of that year, Oliver Jr. wrote to his father about a conversation he recently had with an unnamed gentleman who saw a need for stronger copyright protections for authors and inventors. While a bill proposing just that being debated (and seemed likely to pass) in Connecticut's state legislature, Oliver Jr. sought his fathers' influence in securing these protections at the federal level. At that very moment, the Continental Congress was then in session with the senior Wolcott in attendance.[134]

Oliver Jr. argued that the widespread "diffusion of knowledge," necessary as it was to secure greater human progress, could only occur if the original arbiters of that knowledge were

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[132] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Laura Wolcott, September 24, 1789, *WJP* (box 8, folder 8).

[133] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Laura Wolcott, September 24, 1789, *WJP* (box 8, folder 8).

[134] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., January 14, 1783 (draft), *WJP* (box 1, folder 1).

properly incentivized to share their findings. This would never be the case unless they retained, at least for a limited time, exclusive rights to their work and creations.

In a note added later to his copy of the letter, Wolcott remarks that he believes his correspondence with his father was the first step towards fostering a greater national awareness of the need for copyright protections for authors and inventors. Years later, according to Wolcott, this awareness would lead to the inclusion of the Patent and Copyright Clause (Article 1, Section 8, Clause 8) of the US Constitution, which guaranteed the aforementioned protections in express terms.

Admittedly, Wolcott's self-ascribed attribution for the adoption of federal copyright protections is most likely charitable. This letter to his father nonetheless foreshadowed—somewhat unfairly—what was to become Wolcott's defining legacy. Especially in comparison with the leaders that he would soon work with in close proximity—Hamilton, Washington, Adams—Wolcott was a man where true innovation and original ideas did not come easily. He did not seem suited for, nor did he seem comfortable in, places of high leadership or situations where the public spotlight shown most brightly on him. To hold Wolcott to this standard—which we associate with the aforementioned titanic figures of early American history, though, is unfair—and is dismissive of his ultimate historical significance.

Moreover, as events would show, Wolcott compensated for this purported deficiency by being a highly effective communicator of others' ideas, a faithful collaborator, and a diligent and hardworking administrator in the service of others more suited to leadership. Wolcott appeared to recognize his own strengths in this regard, when he wrote as a final note on his copy of aforementioned 1783 letter to his father that his missive "is [of] no other importance than to show, how according to the natural progress of reason, opinions & principles are established in

free nations."[135] In essence, this note shows Wolcott humbly downplaying his own importance, while also intimating that men such as him are necessary cogs in any political machine seeking to secure its ideological agenda.

This is ultimately a fair assessment. Wolcott's strengths as a political actor, while perhaps less glamorous or memorable than those able to espouse their own dynamic vision—as Wolcott suggests—are nonetheless required by public officials if the business of government is to be conducted efficiently and successfully. As such, they should not be overlooked when one considers Wolcott's legacy—specifically his impact on the course of early American and Connecticut history during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

[135] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., January 14, 1783 (draft), *WJP* (box 1, folder 1).

Chapter 3: Ascension (1789-1795)

Litchfield, July 4, 1791

Sir,

I have been informed by the public prints that the President has been pleased to appoint you the Comptroller of the Treasury. This mark of approbation and confidence is highly honorable to yourself, and will have, I doubt not, a constant influence upon you to persist in that undeviating course of integrity… Let us ever act, conscious that we are always under the inspection of the Almighty, and that He justly requires of all his creatures that they use the powers which He has given them, for the purposes of which they were bestowed. …

Oliver Wolcott[136]

"A Man of Rare Merit:" Wolcott Joins the Treasury Department[137]

On a late June morning in 1791, before embarking on the many tasks pertaining to his job as Auditor that would occupy the majority of his time that day, Oliver Wolcott Jr. sat down in his Philadelphia office in the Treasury Department to glance at the news in the local papers.[138] Not one prone to express his emotions outwardly, that morning a half-smile indicating his satisfaction likely came across Wolcott's face. News that he had personally received in the weeks prior was now officially confirmed to the public: President Washington had appointed Wolcott to the position of Comptroller of the Treasury, replacing the recently deceased Nicholas Eveleigh.

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[136] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr, July 4, 1791, *WJP* (box 1, folder 8).

[137] Alexander Hamilton's laudatory assessment of Wolcott's service to the Treasury Department after working with him for eighteen months. See: Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, April 17, 1791, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/ founders/ARHN-01-08-02-0238.

[138] The seat of the federal government moved from New York City to Philadelphia in 1790—a temporary location until the new capital along the Potomac River could be completed.

When the Treasury Department was formed two years prior, it had been this position that Wolcott hoped—and believed his experience and reputation warranted—he would be given.

With little leverage to suggest otherwise, he had reluctantly conceded to the less prestigious position of Auditor, despite considering it "[im]proper" for someone of his station.[139] The patience Wolcott had shown these past eighteen months, though, had now borne fruit. Through his impeccable conduct, industrious work ethic, and his aptness for fostering good relationships with his colleagues, Wolcott had ensured that this appointment had largely been an inevitable one. It did, however, come with some behind-the-scenes political maneuvering, which will be important to address in subsequent pages.[140]

For now, it should be noted that Wolcott served with distinction as Auditor since he arrived at the seat of government in 1789, often at the expense of staying more closely in touch with friends and family. This had become a necessary sacrifice, as upon his arrival in New York he found himself buried in an "unreasonable" amount of work, owing to major questions the department needed to address regarding the formation of the federal government and its relationship to the states as it pertained to its debt from the Revolution.[141] Writing just a few months after his brother-in-law Wolcott begun his work as Auditor, Chauncey Goodrich, himself recently elected from Connecticut to the First Congress, light-heartedly remarked to Wolcott that

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[139] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Jeremiah Wadsworth, August 15, 1789, Gibbs, vol. 1, 21.

[140] The sequence of events that led to Wolcott's appointment as Comptroller, to be discussed in future pages, is thoroughly examined in "Tench Coxe Seeks Office as Comptroller of the Treasury – Editorial Note," *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition,* ed. James P. McClure and J. Jefferson Looney (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008–2024), https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/TSJN-01-20-02-0050-0001; see also Hamilton, " The Life of Oliver Wolcott, Jr.," 125-128.

[141] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., February 1, 1790, Gibbs, vol. 1, 37.

his "… ambition… of doing everything better than other folks, and more than any body else" was the cause of his persistent "want of leisure."[142]

More than just an offhand compliment between close friends, Goodrich's assertion about Wolcott's work ethic rang true, and as events would show, he would quickly become indispensable to the Treasury Department's success. It must be conceded this was at least in part due to Comptroller Nicholas Eveleigh's persistent absences due to illness, which began only months after Wolcott arrived at the seat of government. By the summer of 1790, Wolcott found himself essentially performing the jobs of both Auditor and much of the work of Comptroller simultaneously, a reality that he came to accept—despite its immense challenges—as ultimately necessary, and one that took precedence over any other responsibilities.[143]

For his own part, after expressing an initial reluctance to join the Treasury Department—a reluctance eventually alleviated by friends Jeremiah Wadsworth and Oliver Ellsworth, and by Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton himself—only a month after arriving in New York Wolcott now believed he had made the proper decision for himself and his family.[144] From the moment of his appointment to Auditor in 1789, he had enjoyed the ancillary benefits his position in the federal government afforded him. First and foremost, Wolcott was pleased that his professional reputation, always vitally important to him, could be sustained and improved

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[142] Chauncey Goodrich to Oliver Wolcott Jr., March 23, 1790, *WJP* (box 2, folder 1).

[143] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, July 20, 1790, vol. 1, Gibbs, 49; Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Laura Wolcott, August 8, 1790, Gibbs, vol 1., 51; Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., September 6, 1790, Gibbs, vol. 1, 56-57.

[144] Oliver Ellsworth to Oliver Wolcott Jr., September 15, 1789, Gibbs, vol. 1, 22; Alexander Hamilton to Oliver Wolcott Jr., September 13, 1789, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Digital Edition,* ed. Harold C. Syrett (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2011), https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-05-02-0153; Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Laura Wolcott, December 21, 1789, *WJP* (box 8, folder 11). Wolcott's first instinct had been to decline the appointment because of the tedious work and lack of autonomy that it promised. Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Jeremiah Wadsworth, September 10, 1789, Gibbs, 21.

through hard work rather than through committing (and ultimately succumbing) to an unsustainable, ostentatious lifestyle.[145] This had been one of the primary reasons why he had initially vacillated on whether or not he should give up his relatively comfortable life in Connecticut for the uncertainty that came with accepting a job in the new federal government.

And while he was correct that there was much to his new job that was "merely mechanical," Wolcott had perhaps underestimated how rewarding the opportunity would be to work in close proximity to some of the country's brightest minds.[146] In particular, he quickly came to appreciate his growing relationship closely with Alexander Hamilton, the Treasury Department's Secretary. As will be shown, beyond relying on Wolcott to manage the inner workings of the department, Hamilton often solicited advice—both professional and personal—from his understudy.

The best example of the former is revealed in two letters that Wolcott wrote to Hamilton during their first four months working together in the federal government. The task facing the members of the Treasury Department upon its inception was nothing short of herculean. With the impotent and underfunded government that existed under the Articles of Confederation on his mind, Hamilton believed it was now paramount that they work to construct a national financial system capable of guaranteeing America's financial prosperity. The Constitution, he argued, now gave him the authority and mandate to do so. The most critical question facing Hamilton, and by extension Wolcott, was what to do about the large debts that had been accrued by the several

[145] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Laura Wolcott, December 21, 1789, *WJP* (box 8, folder 11); Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., February 1, 1790, Gibbs, vol. 1, 37.

[146] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Jeremiah Wadsworth, August 15, 1789, Gibbs, vol. 1, 19.

states during the Revolution. As one of his first tasks as Auditor, Wolcott examined each state's accounts in order to document the scale of the financial claims made against the government.[147]

Wolcott wrote a highly consequential letter to Hamilton on November 29, 1789, a mere four weeks after Wolcott accepted his post as Auditor, and about one month before Hamilton released to Congress his Report on the Public Credit. Wolcott also provided his detailed thoughts on many topics related to how the federal debt would be managed by the states. These included an interest rate of six percent per year to be accrued for each state's remaining balance with the federal government, and—to solve the problem of some states at present being in debt to one another from the Revolution—certain states would "be considered as creditors to the United States."[148] With the latter, Wolcott called for an elimination of the financial relationships between states, which was keeping with the spirit of the Constitution as interpreted by public figures who believed the future prosperity of the United States required a stronger central government. Wolcott, perhaps more than Hamilton, was apprehensive about imposing a large national debt on the country, but he understood it as necessary in its early years.[149]

Hamilton's economic program, bolstered by the aforementioned recommendations from Wolcott, faced significant attacks in the House of Representatives in February 1790, primarily from those congressmen who felt the plan encouraged dangerous speculation. Hamilton did not see it as such. He felt increased speculation would eventually transfer debt from the poor to the

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[147] Richard D. White, "A Tale of Two Bureaucrats: Joseph Nourse, Oliver Wolcott Jr., and the Forerunners of American Public Administration," *Administration & Society* 40, no. 4 (2008): 390, https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399708317168.

[148] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, November 29, 1789, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-05-02-0359;

[149] Stanley M. Elkins and Eric L. McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 627; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 111-2.

wealthy, who could use it to engage in investment projects that would ultimately prove beneficial for the country. In the end, the House ratified Hamilton's economic program.[150]

On March 1, 1790, Wolcott wrote a second letter of note to Hamilton, offering additional recommendations concerning how the Treasury should efficiently cope with the scale of the accounting that would now need to be managed by the department. Wolcott's ideas included empowering commissioners in each state to keep track of the necessary accounting, which he believed would "relieve the treasury from many minute details…simplify all calculations of the public debt [and] prevent forgeries…"[151] Wolcott's ideas to streamline the department's operations—assented to by Hamilton without objection—should not be discounted. The Treasury, in comparison with the other cabinet departments, was the largest and dealt with the most paperwork. While far from glamorous, for this reason the talent Wolcott possessed for fostering bureaucratic efficiency should be recognized.

Two other significant conclusions can be reached from this examination of Wolcott's letters, and of his first few months in the Treasury Department. First, while his official position in the department hierarchy would seem to regulate his efforts towards menial tasks only, Wolcott nonetheless—from the moment he arrived—was immediately given greater responsibilities by Hamilton in helping to shape the country's economic policy. Hamilton trusted Wolcott and found it natural to seek the younger man's counsel. Second, Wolcott's relationship with Hamilton blossomed into an impressive political partnership and friendship that would last until Hamilton's death in 1804. In an historical era where the Adams-Jefferson, Washington-

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[150] The interest on debt was lowered to four percent (instead of six). Elkins and McKitrick, 118-124; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 113-4.

[151] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, March 1, 1790, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-06-02-0174.

Hamilton, and Jefferson-Madison relationships (to name just the most notable three) have been examined and scrutinized ad nauseum, it demonstrates a valuable reminder that many other collaborations—included Hamilton-Wolcott –deserve scholarly attention.

From this early moment in Wolcott's federal career, it is not illogical to contend, then, that the traditional historical assessment of Wolcott's character and legacy—as a passive, largely inconsequential figure serving at the behest of Hamilton—should be reevaluated.[152] For now, a fairer conclusion is that Wolcott in these early months serving in the Treasury Department — through his creation of first modern government bureaucracy—proved himself to be the perfect collaborator to bring about Hamilton's financial vision for the United States.

Wolcott's views and role in the creation of the First National Bank are also noteworthy. His position aligning with Hamilton, Wolcott believed a national bank would grow and stabilize the American economy, and otherwise foster investment and development in mercantilist, manufacturing, and industrial pursuits. Undoubtedly shaped by his experiences as a New Englander, Wolcott saw first-hand the benefits of commerce as a student at Yale in New Haven. He contended that an economy that was solely based on agriculture had no chance of growing to its full potential, nor would it make that country a powerful one. Moreover, Hamilton's plan called for a sizable portion—seventy five percent—of the bank's stock to be possessed by private interests, which would create a strong link between the actions of the wealthy, aristocratic class and the prosperity of the country. In short, the men of greatest influence and capacity for

[152] The vast majority of early American history scholars have had largely unflattering assessments of Wolcott's character and legacy during his decade of service in the Treasury Department. See: John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1992), 334; John Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 102; David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 472; Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 503-4; Herbert E. Sloan, "Hamilton's Second Thoughts," in *Federalists Reconsidered*, edited by Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara B. Oberg (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 73.

leadership would have an undeniable "vested interest" in America's "survival."[153] Born into and educated by an influential, prominent family in his own right, this latter point aligned exactly with what Wolcott had always known and believed. The notion of a ruling elite of privileged, honorable men remained one of his core philosophical beliefs regarding how society should be structured.[154]

With the aforementioned arguments presented in the bank's favor, Hamilton's charter was debated in the halls of Congress beginning in the latter months of 1790. While many senators and representatives voiced their support for the bank, there were also loud voices of dissent. Ultimately, a debate emerged that was not dissimilar to the one regarding Hamilton's initial economic plan from earlier in the year.

Much of the arguments against the bank came from a faction of representatives—soon to be known as Republicans—aligned with Thomas Jefferson and James Madison (the latter himself served as representative at the time). They declared the bank unconstitutional, as in their mind its creation clearly violated the expressed powers granted to Congress in Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution. Madison argued in the House that the Framers understood implied powers to be incompatible with an objective reading of the Constitution; after all, the Bill of Rights was agreed to on the premise the rights contained therein could not be assumed—they had to be expressed in the document itself. Beyond the question of constitutionality, Jefferson and Madison also worried a national bank would marginalize the monetary interests of the yeoman farmer and legitimacy of state banks, provide benefits to only an exclusive class of investors, merchants, and stockholders, and lend further influence over the inner workings of the federal

[153] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 118.

[154] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 119-120; Gibbs, vol. 1, 67-8.

government to the Treasury Department. Jefferson, appalled at what he was seeing, wrote to James Monroe that "[w]e are ruined, Sir, if we do not over-rule the principles that 'the more we owe, the prosperous we shall be,' 'that a public debt furnishes the means of enterprise,' 'that if ours should be once paid off, we should incur another by means however extravagant."[155]

These arguments, however sound they may have been, ultimately lost out. Too many prominent men in Congress felt the Bank was necessary—regardless of the strength of Madison's strict constructionist arguments. In the first months of 1791, the bill chartering the bank easily passed the Senate, and in House by a surprisingly comfortable margin of 39-20. President Washington, after lengthy consideration (owing especially to protests from Jefferson) signed the bill into law after having been convinced by Hamilton to do so.[156] The chartering of the national bank—perhaps the most important cog in Hamilton's economic plan--constituted a major political victory for those wishing to lay the foundation for the United States to have powerful central government in the model of the British system.

Wolcott naturally supported this outcome, and later that year he crafted a response to a vital question regarding the national bank's operation: should its influence and scope be limited to the seat of government in Philadelphia, or should branches or departments be opened throughout the country? In a thoughtful letter that considered many potential counterarguments, Wolcott counseled Hamilton that there should no limitations on the range of the bank's operations.[157] He first addressed the question of whether or not, from a legal perspective, the

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[155] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 118; Elkins and McKitrick, 230-1; Chernow, 351-2; Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, April 17, 1791, *PTJ*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/TSJN-01-20-02-0051.

[156] Elkins and McKitrick, 230; Chernow, 351-3.

[157] Gibbs, vol. 1, 67.

bank's charter signed into law earlier that year might prevent this. Wolcott argued that "the establishment of departments" would not violate the law as long as "the debts due by the bank, in no instance exceed its credits." In short, the bank could not profit from "debts due *from* the bank," only from "debts due *to* the bank." This was a key difference; according to Wolcott the bank must have enough capital on hand to "refund [its customers] on demand" they request it.[158] The bank, therefore, would be prevented from engaging in dangerous and rampant speculation.

Wolcott then turned to the dual questions of whether or not additional departments for the bank would allow for greater profits, and whether they could be operated efficiently. He contended that additional departments would enable a much higher influx of deposits in the bank, as "in every community" one can find men in possession of money that is simply "unprotective and dead Stock." They will feel compelled to deposit this money, as long as "sufficient assurance is given" that they can access it if they so request. In other words, once the community's level of trust is guaranteed by "the most able and upright of administrators," the bank will now have access to a far greater pool of funds, which can then be utilized for safe and responsible investing.[159]

The bank's principal shareholders consented to Wolcott's plan, and eight additional departments were established in major cities around the country. His acumen and knowledge of the bank's organization, coupled with his proven experience in successfully managing the bureaucratic affairs of the Treasury, led at this time to an offer to serve as the bank's president. Preferring to remain in his current government post, Wolcott declined the offer—arguing that it would be unbecoming for a man of modest means such as himself, and of such a young age (he

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[158] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, September -, 1791, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-09-02-0210.

[159] Ibid.

only turned thirty-one that year), to accept. He was "insecure" regarding the certainty that his behavior would be dictated by "the property of rich men."[160] Because of this lack of independence, and the subsequent stain on his character, Wolcott was forced to decline the presidency.[161]

These were not the primary reasons, however. Wolcott had thoroughly enjoyed playing a significant role in the development of the Treasury Department (and by extension the federal government) during the past two years. For as much as he complained about the level of work that consumed him each day, he ultimately thrived on it. Wolcott also cared deeply for his department's work, and he did not want to see it be harmed through the incompetence of lesser men—with which he was evidently becoming all too familiar. Lamenting to his father that he was persevering without the services of an Auditor (none had been appointed in the months since Wolcott had been promoted to Comptroller), Wolcott contended that he hoped "the office may yet continue vacant, rather than be "supplied with a common character." He preferred to "suffer [the] temporary fatigue" of performing both jobs rather than deal with "the eternal vexation" of inept subordinates.[162]

Partisanship & Wolcott's Appointment to Comptroller

It is clear that by 1791 Wolcott had become perhaps the most integral piece of the Treasury's operations, a fact of which he was well aware. Hamilton, to be sure, served as the vital public face of the Treasury; he was the principal architect of America's new financial system, and it was only he who possessed the vision and fortitude to bring it into being. Given

[160] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., February 14, 1792, Gibbs, vol. 1, 73.

[161] Gibbs, vol. 1, 68; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 120.

[162] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., August 31, 1791, Gibbs, vol. 1, 68.

his immense talent for oratory, writing, and as well as the father-son relationship he held with President Washington, it only made sense that Hamilton be the star to which all others gravitated. Serving as the man behind-the-scenes, though, it was Wolcott who ensured the engine of the Treasury ran smoothly. The day-to-day operations of the department were his domain, and without him Hamilton's vision could not (and would not in the future) be realized. Knowing this, and as long as fortune and fate would have it, Wolcott planned for a future where—through continued dedication to public service—his professional reputation would grow in the eyes of his peers.

Wolcott's chance for advancement came quick—guaranteed by a letter sent from Alexander Hamilton to President Washington in April 1791. Hamilton wrote to Washington concerning the present vacancy in the Comptroller's Office as a result of the death of Nicholas Eveleigh, and to recommend Wolcott be promoted to the position from his current job as auditor. Taken in full, it is hard to imagine a letter more laudatory of an individual's conduct and character. Hamilton began by stating that in Wolcott's "conduct… has been that of an excellent officer. It has not only been good but distinguished." Wolcott was "a man of rare merit," and he possessed "all the requisites that could be desired; moderation with firmness, liberality with exactness, indefatigable industry with an accurate & sound discernment, a thorough knowledge of business & a remarkable spirit of order & arrangement." Most glowing of all, Hamilton conceded that he "owe[d] very much of whatever success may have attended the merely executive operation of the department to Mr. Wolcott," and that he had no doubts that he held "all the qualifications desirable in a Comptroller of the Treasury."[163]

[163] Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, April 17, 1791, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-08-02-0238.

One wonders how Washington could possibly object to such a glowing recommendation—in particular coming from Hamilton, and as one knows from history, he did not. Wolcott secured the promotion, but what exactly motivated Hamilton to come out so strongly in favor of Wolcott? As events have shown, his laudatory opinion of Wolcott's conduct and character were most certainly genuine; Wolcott had served with distinction, and he deserved credit for the Treasury Department's successful beginnings. During their first months together in New York the two men collaborated exceptionally well and came to rely on one another to secure their mutual professional objectives.

There is more to the story, however. The overwhelming confidence Hamilton expressed in Wolcott was not just born out of a desire to promote the most qualified candidate, or even to secure a more prestigious federal appointment for a friend—although their relationship had been a warm and fulfilling one from the moment they began working together. It is also clear that Hamilton wanted to dissuade Washington from considering any other individuals who may have declared their own interest in the position of Comptroller. There was one man who Hamilton knew of in particular who he was determined to deny: Tench Coxe, the current Assistant Secretary of the Treasury.

Coxe, who for weeks had been well aware of Eveleigh's impending death, coveted the soon-to-be vacant position of Comptroller. While their respective titles would seem to indicate Assistant Secretary was a higher, more prestigious position in the Treasury than Comptroller, it was the latter that held greater authority over subordinates in the department, and in comparison, had more autonomy of its own.[164] Hamilton informed Washington that after Eveleigh passed away, Coxe contacted him to indicate his interest in the vacancy. As delicately as he could,

[164] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 126.

Hamilton replied to Coxe that while he was "well convinced that the office under your direction would be in perfectly good hands… no man ought to be preferred to Mr. Wolcott on the score of qualifications for the office," which thus "gives him pretensions superior to any other person." Hamilton did not object, however, if Coxe still wanted to apply for the position.[165]

The matter perhaps should have ended there, but the conversation with Hamilton gave Coxe an inkling of hope further efforts might not be vain. He decided to seek the assistance of Thomas Jefferson, who was currently serving as Secretary of State. Coxe composed a letter of application to Washington and asked Jefferson that if he felt his candidacy had merit, would he please forward it to the President for consideration. Jefferson agreed to forward Coxe's letter to Washington, but he also included a portion of Coxe's private letter to Jefferson, which reiterated that Coxe had received Hamilton's consent to apply directly to the President. The historical evidence suggests that Jefferson acceded to Coxe's request because it was merely the courteous action to take. He chose to forward Coxe's private letter in addition to the application, so as to remove any suspicions that he was attempting to meddle in the affairs of the Treasury Department.[166]

Once Hamilton got wind of Jefferson's letter to Washington, he decided to tell a vastly different story. Jefferson, desiring a mole in his rival Hamilton's department, and apparently convinced of Coxe's Republican leanings, had agreed to help. Jefferson thus acted with malicious intent to circumvent Hamilton altogether from the process by writing to President Washington in order to gain his consent to appoint Coxe as the new Comptroller—and thus deny

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[165] Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, April 17, 1791, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-08-02-0238.

[166] "Tench Coxe Seeks Office as Comptroller of the Treasury – Editorial Note," *PTJ*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/TSJN-01-20-02-0050-0001.

Wolcott the position. This scheme was unsuccessful, of course, only through the care eye of Washington (who saw through Jefferson's scheme) and through Hamilton's unwavering support for Wolcott. These were the rumors that Hamilton chose to spread throughout Philadelphia that summer in an effort to damage Jefferson's reputation. Naturally, they appeared to have the desired effect with Federalists—who already were suspicious of Jefferson.[167]

Given the concerns Jefferson's held regarding President Washington's over-reliance on Hamilton's advice, there must have been an air of legitimacy to the story Hamilton was telling. His actions demonstrated the lengths he was willing to adopt in order to marginalize Jefferson's influence within the federal government, and to potentially damage his relationship with President Washington. Where the latter is concerned, Hamilton succeeded at least in the long term. Jefferson's influence with Washington would gradually depreciate over time, until Jefferson felt he had no choice but to resign from his post as Secretary of State in December 1793. Three years later, during the final months of Washington's second term, Jefferson and Washington had become permanently estranged; their once warm correspondence had come to an end due to the extreme bitterness of political division and faction that was plaguing the country.[168] For Hamilton, Jefferson's duplicitousness and lack of support for the administration needed to be exposed for the public to see. If it took distorting the truth to do so, so be it.[169] It is unclear what Wolcott thought about this scandal; given his own dislike of Jefferson, coupled

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[167] "Tench Coxe Seeks Office as Comptroller of the Treasury – Editorial Note," *PTJ*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/TSJN-01-20-02-0050-0001.

[168] Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 144-5.

[169] The historian Leonard D. White is largely credited for establishing as fact (only recently challenged) that Jefferson had meddled to advance Coxe's candidacy at the expense. White argued that much of Jefferson's bitterness towards Hamilton was the result of the latter overstepping his influence with regard to foreign policy—in his mind the purview of the State Department, not the Treasury. See: "Tench Coxe Seeks Office as Comptroller of the Treasury – Editorial Note," *PTJ*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/TSJN-01-20-02-0050-0001.

with his staunchly Federalist ideology, he may have actually believed Hamilton's gossip. During the summer of 1791, Wolcott received many letters of congratulations on the appointment from family friends, but he does not reference the scandal with Coxe and Jefferson in response.

While historians tend to focus on their political feud during the latter-half of the decade, or revolving around the Election of 1800, this situation reveals that as early as 1791, the working relationship between Hamilton and Jefferson (and James Madison) had been irreparably damaged. As for Wolcott, there was nothing in his background to predispose him to empathizing with the ideological perspectives of Jefferson and Madison, and he now more than ever possessed an unwavering loyalty to Hamilton, his benefactor and friend, that would continue until the latter's death.

As a brief but notable aside, the connection between Wolcott and Coxe would not end here. Years later, after Wolcott became Treasury Secretary, Coxe found himself dismissed from his new position as Commissioner of the Revenue by President John Adams, after Wolcott had recommended it. Coxe's role required him to serve at the behest of Wolcott, which he apparently did only sporadically. Coxe was a man who liked to "follow his own rules and system," and thus he did not submit to those of Wolcott directive's with which he disagreed. For Wolcott, who had always comported himself to a subservient role in the face of superiors (in particular during his time in the Treasury Department), he likely found Coxe's disdain for authority unbecoming, especially for those men engaged in public service. Wolcott's mindset regarding hierarchical leadership structures would soon be challenged, when other factors compel him to frequently work against the wishes of President Adams.[170]

[170] Elkins and McKitrick, 628.

More than six months into his new position as Comptroller, the year 1792 brought new challenges for Wolcott. Unfortunately for the United States and its people, the nation's financial system, as devised by Hamilton, did not always run as smoothly as initially hoped. In spite of the aforementioned warnings made during the previous year by Wolcott, overspeculation and the national bank's haphazard management of credit both contributed to what became known as the Panic of 1792. During the previous winter, William Duer, a bigwig in the New York financial scene, devised a plan with Alexander Macomb to artificially inflate the price of stocks by buying up as much federal debt as possible. This would in turn, they hoped, give them exclusive control over the securities market, through which they could dictate prices to other investors. To ensure the scheme's success, they extended their own line of credit as far as possible. Unfortunately for Duer and Macomb, the price of stocks did not rise sharply, forcing them by March of 1792 to cease making all payments on their many loans. This caused a cascading effect that led to a sudden 20% drop in the price of securities. Further damage to the economy occurred at this time due to the national bank (against Wolcott's wishes) doling out lines of credit far beyond its cash reserves. When this practice inevitably became unsustainable, the bank's sudden refusal to issue further loans—or renew present ones—exacerbated the panic. Wolcott complained to his father about the "mad speculation" and "ostentatious display" of wealth that was occurring—all "calculated to incite envy" among good men.[171] To Wolcott, Duer and Macomb had engaged in selfish behavior at the expense of their fellow citizens.[172]

[171] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., January 30, 1792, Gibbs, vol. 1, 72.

[172] Elkins and McKitrick, 278; Chernow, 379-381; David J. Cowen, Richard Sylla, and Robert E. Wright, "The US Panic of 1792: Financial Crisis Management and the Lender of Last Resort," *National Bureau of Economic Research*, DAE Summer Institute (July 2006): 17-8, https://users.nber.org/~confer/2006/si2006/ dae/sylla.pdf.

To expedite the market's recovery Hamilton and Wolcott took swift action, and by autumn of that year the panic had dissipated. Duer and Maccomb were both placed in debtor's prison by early April; Duer initially pleaded with Hamilton to "use for once your Influence to defer" his imminent arrest, but it was to no avail.[173] Hamilton replied that Wolcott had already issued the order, and that Duer's only recourse was to now—in a departure from his previous behavior—"act with fortitude and honor."[174]

In order to jumpstart the market and end the panic, Hamilton first instructed the Treasury to start buying government securities, using a sinking fund that had been set aside for such a crisis. He also recommended that the bank begin issuing loans once again, but at a higher interest rate than before so as to dissuade further dangerous speculation.[175] Hamilton's decisions had been at least partially informed by Wolcott's report on the current situation in the country regarding the value of state securities, and to what extent "fictious capital" had been used in their purchase during the preceding year. Wolcott concluded in the latter that this was not the case; he therefore suggested it would be "proper" to instruct the Treasury to make payments against the securities' interest, or to buy them outright.[176] These measures proved successful, and a panic that could have been far more detrimental to the nation's economy was averted.

Despite the panic's prompt resolution, dissenting voices once again emerged—now more loudly than ever—to protest Hamilton, his economic system, and the power wielded by the

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[173] William Duer to Alexander Hamilton, March 12, 1792, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-11-02-0099; Chernow, 381.

[174] Alexander Hamilton to William Duer, March 14, 1792, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-11-02-0108; Chernow, 381.

[175] Chernow, 382; Elkins and McKitrick, 279; Cowen, Sylla, and Wright, 24.

[176] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, March 10, 1792, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-11-02-0097.

Treasury Department. Jefferson and Madison stewed that Hamilton's actions to end the panic were only taken to benefit the same speculators who had caused it originally. A scheme to benefit the monied interests in the north, they thought, this was proof of Hamilton's corruption and further evidence of the unconstitutionality of the bank and his entire economic system.[177] The criticisms, it goes without saying, disgusted Hamilton and Wolcott. The latter lamented to his father that Jefferson's complaints were impeding the recovery from the panic, as his propensity "to cultivate vulgar prejudices… will do much mischief to [the] country by exciting apprehensions that the government will operate unfavorably."[178] As time would show, the words and actions of Jefferson and Madison, along with their Republican allies, would have a tremendous impact on the people's faith in the current and subsequent Federalist administrations.

In Defense of Hamilton: The Reynolds Affair

Through the actions of their political ally and friend James Monroe, Jefferson and Madison would soon take advantage of a serious mistake made by Hamilton to shake the people's faith. In December 1792, Monroe discovered Hamilton was having an affair, and that he may have been using government funds to keep it a secret. In order to avert disaster to his public image, Hamilton would rely solely on Wolcott for defense and counsel during what would become known as the Reynolds Affair—demonstrating that the Wolcott-Hamilton relationship is notable in ways that transcend their collaboration in the Treasury Department.

The story began over a year earlier. In the summer of 1791, Hamilton began a passionate affair with Maria Reynolds, a young married woman who had sought his help from her

[177] Chernow, 379, 383.

[178] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., February 14, 1792, Gibbs, vol. 1, 73.

supposedly abusive husband. Reynolds, who initially requested money so she could escape her precarious situation, shortly thereafter wrapped Hamilton into an ongoing carnal relationship. Hamilton, who one biographer argues possessed a lifelong propensity for exuding "flirtatious" behavior when it came to attention from women, could not help but succumb to Reynolds's charms.[179]

The affair would continue without interruption for many months, until Maria Reynolds's husband, James Reynolds, returned to the picture. He had discovered their affair, and demanding restitution, extorted Hamilton by threatening to reveal publicly the "speculative activities" and corruption in which his department had been engaged.[180] Reynolds insisted regular hush payments be delivered to him, and that he be given a job in the Treasury Department. Not wanting to bring scandal to Washington's administration (even if the charges were false), and especially hoping his wife Eliza would never find out about the fair, Hamilton agreed to the former. A posting in the Treasury Department, though, he did not follow through on.[181]

As the money to James Reynolds continued to flow over the following months, Hamilton found himself continuing his intimate relations with Maria at her husband's encouragement. By the summer of 1792 Hamilton was finally able to end things with Maria, but the payments to her husband continued. The situation suddenly changed that November when James Reynolds and his associate James Clingman found themselves arrested for committing fraud against the United States. While the charges against both men were eventually dropped on the promise that they would reimburse the government, during the investigation conducted by Wolcott (the arrest had

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[179] Chernow, 363-4.

[180] Elkins and McKitrick, 294.

[181] Chernow, 368-370, 410-3; Elkins & McKitrick, 294.

been initiated by the Treasury Department) Reynolds and Clingman intimated that Hamilton had been defrauding the Unites States in his own right through speculation, and that they had evidence of the payments he had been making to Reynolds to prove it. Reynolds and Clingman told this same story to Senator James Monroe and two other Republican congressmen who were also investigating. Taking the accusation regarding a leading member of the federal government seriously, the three men decided to confront Hamilton themselves to gauge his response. If they found Hamilton's defense unsatisfactorily, they would inform President Washington.[182]

Wolcott quickly relayed his findings to Hamilton, reporting that Reynolds had suggested that he could "make disclosures injurious to…[your] character."[183] While it is possible Hamilton confided in Wolcott many months prior, it is likely that this was moment Wolcott found out about the affair. What is evident is from that moment Wolcott played a significant role in being a pillar of support for Hamilton and otherwise defending him both publicly and privately from charges of corruption.

A series of exchanges between Hamilton and Monroe culminated in a December 15, 1792, evening meeting at Hamilton's home in Philadelphia. At the gathering were Hamilton, Monroe, Monroe's two fellow Republican congressmen, and Wolcott—evidently present to not only serve as a witness, but simply because Hamilton wanted his loyal and trusted friend there.[184] Hamilton began by producing for the three congressmen letters exchanged between himself and James and Maria Reynolds, and thoroughly described the nature of the affair that had taken place

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[182] Chernow, 413-4; Elkins & McKitrick, 294.

[183] Wolcott's quote is found in Chernow, 413.

[184] Wolcott would later provide a certified letter to Hamilton documenting what he witnessed and what information he was privy to as a result of his attendance at the meeting. "Draft of the "Reynolds Pamphlet," [25 August 1797] with appendixes, Appendix No. XXIV: From Oliver Wolcott, 12 July 1797," *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-21-02-0138-0009.

during the past eighteen months. After Hamilton had finished, Monroe and the others were satisfied with what they had heard and agreed that there was no evidence Hamilton had engaged in government corruption. Moreover, they gave their sincere apologies for pressing Hamilton to reveal matters of such a private and delicate nature in order to clear his name. They further promised that the story of the affair would remain private.[185]

It appeared that the matter had been put to rest, and that is where the story would end. It came as no surprise, though, when Monroe soon shared the story with both Jefferson and Madison, his Republican allies. As is often the case with gossip of such a salacious nature, the story of Hamilton's affair would inevitably spread. In the years that followed the story would reach the ears of a far more nefarious individual, who was willing to weaponize it in order to damage Hamilton's reputation. The individual was James Callendar, a notorious hatchet man. In 1797, Callendar not only published the details of Hamilton's affair with Reynolds, but he also reinvigorated the initial accusations from five years prior that Hamilton had committed financial crimes against the United States. Hamilton raged at the shocking breach of trust that the Callendar publication revealed, as it only could have been James Monroe that leaked the story. Despite Wolcott counseling him against it, arguing "it will be best to write nothing," Hamilton decided to publish his own official refutation of the corruption charges, which in turn revealed, for all to see (including his wife, Eliza), the embarrassing details of his affair.[186] Wolcott undoubtedly hated to see Hamilton maligned in the press in such a severe way, but as Hamilton

[185] Chernow, 415-7; Elkins and McKitrick, 294; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 237.

[186] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, *PAH*, July 3, 1797, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-21-02-0076.

served as the Republican's favorite punching bag, it had been the norm for years.[187] For his own part, Wolcott could do little besides provide words of comfort. He joined with Hamilton in proclaiming his "astonish[ment] at the villainy of Monroe" and the man's desire to promulgate "base, false, and malignant" accusations.[188]

The story of Hamilton's affair with Maria Reynolds, along with its aftermath, revealed how the major public figures of the day were willing to use all means necessary to crush their political opponents. Attacking a man's private life was not out of bounds, especially if doing so would blacken his character in the public's eyes.

A Threat to Order: The Whiskey Rebellion

Despite this, the greatest ideological struggles of the day revolved around matters of public policy. The growing conflict between Federalist and Republican factions continued during Washington's administration; partisan tensions reached a new high as a result of a tax uprising that occurred in rural western Pennsylvania during the autumn months 1794. The reasons for its occurrence, in what would become known to history as the Whiskey Rebellion, trace back to the implementation of Hamilton's economic plan only a few years prior. At the time, public credit for the country had primarily been secured from the Dutch, but this had been unfortunately extinguished by the 1792 French takeover of the Low Countries.[189] This, the destabilization of the continental European economy, could have devastating effects on the American economy if swift action were not taken. In order for the federal government to shoulder the substantial debt it

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[187] The best account of the public reveal by Callendar of Hamilton's affair is in Chernow, 529-546. See also Elkins and McKitrick, 294-5; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 238.

[188] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, *PAH*, July 7, 1797, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-21-02-0084.

[189] Sloan, 64-65.

took on by assuming each state's debts from the Revolution, additional sources of revenue were needed. An excise tax on whiskey, in spite of the likelihood that it would draw unflattering comparisons to some of the most hated taxes of the pre-Revolutionary era, was deemed by Hamilton as the most logical means to generate the revenue required.[190]

Soon after its implementation in 1791, frustration began to permeate not just among the American populace most greatly impacted by the new tax, but also from within Washington's own cabinet. Jefferson wrote to Washington to protest the excise on whiskey, arguing that the inevitable "clamor" and "evasion" it would ultimately force the President to act "arbitrar[ily]" and precipitate the making of "war on our own citizens."[191] In western Pennsylvania, the refusal to pay the excise tax that Jefferson warned against reached its peak in 1794. Angry farmers and distillers—claiming the tax was unfair and well beyond what they could afford—burned down the home of the Inspector of the Excise, John Neville, and otherwise succeeded in driving away tax collectors throughout the year. The aftermath of the most calamitous protests saw two men killed and many others wounded. Reports reached Philadelphia that more than seven thousand men now counted themselves among the rebellion. As the summer ended the failure to collect the whiskey tax was total; zero revenue was raised from the western Pennsylvania that year.[192]

By that autumn and with all other options to resolve the conflict exhausted, Washington was ready to act. With the near universal consent from his cabinet,[193] Washington mustered a militia of more than ten thousand men and marched west from Philadelphia. Hamilton joined as

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[190] Chernow, 468-9.

[191] Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, May 23, 1792, *PGW*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-05-10-02-0268.

[192] Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson*, 63-4; Elkins and McKitrick, 462-3.

[193] Only Secretary of State Edmund Randolph cautioned Washington against sending troops, arguing that doing so would strength the rebellion into a more unified force. See Chernow, 471.

well, eventually leading the main force west from Carlisle after Washington decided his presence was no longer needed.[194] Before he left the seat of government, Hamilton instructed Wolcott to take up the mantle of Acting Secretary of the Treasury in his stead—confident in his protégé's "diligence and zeal."[195] Regulated to a mere passive observer of events, Wolcott nonetheless occupied himself as he always did with the never-ending business of the department. Judging from his impeccable record of challenging work over the past five years, more than anyone he was best equipped to manage the extra workload. Wolcott wrote to his father at the end of October—reporting what he likely already knew—that with Hamilton absent he was "of course uncommonly busy."[196]

Wolcott did find the time to express his own views on the uprising occurring in Pennsylvania. In numerous letters to his father and to his brother Frederick, he seethed over the conduct of the rebellious farmers. To Frederick, he wrote that the government had no choice but to wage "a contest with… madmen," who were "more ungrateful and wicked than their conduct" suggests. In spite of the great "expense" assumed by the federal government to protect the farmers on the frontier against the "Six Nations, Great Britain, and the Spaniards, every indignity and insult is offered," including the "absolute refus[al] to pay one shilling towards the public service." However unlikely, Wolcott hoped the whole lot of them would be "rejected from the union"—apparently a call for the rebellious Pennsylvania counties to be detached permanently from the United States.[197]

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[194] Chernow, 474-5.

[195] Alexander Hamilton to Oliver Wolcott Jr., September 29, 1794, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-17-02-0263.

[196] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., October 31, 1794, Gibbs, vol. 1, 160.

[197] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, July 26, 1794, Gibbs, vol. 1, 156.

In writing to his father on the subject, Wolcott reveals his anti-immigration sentiments, which were consistent with the beliefs of a Federalist Party that worried that many of its foreign-born residents were not loyal to the United States. Wolcott lamented that "[t]he conduct of these people is most unreasonable, but it is a specimen of what we are to expect from European emigrants."[198] He continued in a separate letter, outlining a grim future for the country if the rebellion went unchecked: "…the insurgents are proceeding to destroy the property and banish all those who are well disposed towards the laws. …I have no doubt that this insurrection proceeds from a faction which has long been aiming to shake the measures of the government."[199]

The factions that Wolcott spoke of were the Democratic-Republican Societies that had begun spring up throughout the country during the past few years, even though many of them ultimately denounced the revolt in western Pennsylvania. These societies could best be characterized as decentralized political groups comprised of mostly lower-class citizens, whose objectives included speaking out in favor of the natural rights of man, and against those entities which threatened those rights. In addition to being connected, fair or false, with the present revolt in Pennsylvania, Democratic-Republican Societies were also blamed for the rise in American's support for the French Revolution. Federalists especially feared would that this would embroil the United States in a wider European war, or—perhaps worse—lead to a violent overthrow of the current American government.[200] The broader issue of American foreign policy as it pertains

[198] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., July 27, 1794, Gibbs, vol. 1, 156-7.

[199] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., August 16, 1794, Gibbs, vol. 1, 156-7.

[200] Elkins and McKitrick, 462, 484-5.

to France, and how it threatened to split the country asunder, will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

In the end, the Whiskey Rebellion was over before any serious fighting actually took place. Aware that thousands of troops were marching their way, the vast majority of the protestors dispersed and returned to their homes, fled into the countryside, or simply surrendered when Hamilton and the militia arrived. Washington ensured that amnesty was granted to all but the worst offenders, and even two men that were initially sentenced to death for their actions he ultimately chose to pardon. Hamilton quietly voiced his disagreement about these decisions, fearing that Washington's leniency would precipitate future revolts. The President's word, of course, won the day.[201]

With the rebellion successfully eliminated, outwardly the country celebrated the quick, nonviolent end to the uprising, and applauded President Washington for his merciful conduct and action in managing the crisis. Behind-the-scenes, though, two of the nation's most influential political leaders accused the President and his subordinates of leading the country down a dangerous path. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, the symbolic leaders of the opposition Republican Party, charged Washington with hypocrisy; in their minds the chief executive had betrayed the principles of the Revolution by marching against the very type of people who represented the true America: the yeoman farmer. Increasingly, both men feared that the actions taken by Washington's administration would lead to a future where all power and money would be concentrated in the hands of an aristocratic few, and against the democratic will of the populace at large. To them, this was the antithesis of why the Revolution was fought.[202]

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[201] Chernow, 477-8.

[202] Ferling, 65.

In a state of quasi-retirement at Monticello, Jefferson also lamented that Washington had put the interests of his party, the Federalists, before that of his country. Placing the majority of the blame on Hamilton, Jefferson intimated that Washington had lost a step, and that as such the old man had come to rely on his faithful lieutenant to dictate all policy and to compose his speeches. James Madison, similarly, called the episode "perhaps the greatest error" Washington had made in public life.[203] If allowed the chance to respond to such charges, Washington would have had much to say—in spite of his abhorrence of partisan politics. Washington (as well as Hamilton and Wolcott—to an even greater degree) believed that now more than ever implementing the Federalist vision for the country was the only way to guarantee its future prosperity. Conversely, the existence of the aforementioned Democratic-Republican Societies, that many Federalists had claimed led to the Whiskey Rebellion, posed a perilous threat to the country.[204]

For his part, Hamilton contended that the farmers' mob action had been an attack on the Constitution and the principles of good government, and as such the swift military response to restore order, had been just. Despite the evidence that the Washington administration could not implement a domestic tax efficiently enough to cover the federal government's own costs—an increasing worry—quelling domestic dissent and protecting the legitimacy of the United States took precedence.[205] The largely positive reaction from the American public seemed to confirm this as well.

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[203] Chernow, 478.

[204] Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 224-6.

[205] Chernow, 472-3; Sloan, 65-6.

Ascension Complete: Wolcott Becomes Treasury Secretary

Upon returning to Philadelphia in early December, Hamilton, worn out after many weeks in the field, announced to Washington that he would be leaving his post as Treasury Secretary the following month. Retirement had been on Hamilton's mind for some time, and though he was conflicted, his inclination to leave the Cabinet had recently been exacerbated by personal tragedy. While on campaign in western Pennsylvania, his wife Eliza—struggling with a difficult pregnancy—had suffered a miscarriage. Hamilton blamed himself for the lack of attention he had given his family, and with his retirement he now planned to dedicate himself to changing that.[206] Hamilton's last day as Treasury Secretary was January 31, 1795.

At this critical juncture in the story, with his benefactor leaving the public scene (at least for now) it is necessary to pause and take stock of Wolcott's public career as the national political scene continued to grow more partisan and volatile. Five years earlier he had been reluctant to leave Connecticut to join the Treasury, fearing his future career prospects would be limited and that his reputation would suffer as a result. Wolcott could not have been more pleased to have been wrong. As has been shown, his quick rise in the Treasury was a testament to his impeccable work ethic and unique talent for managing the department's ever-growing bureaucracy. The men whose opinion mattered most to him, Washington and Hamilton, recognized Wolcott's vital role in the administration, with the latter acknowledging that the Treasury would see a dramatic decline in efficiency without Wolcott. Moreover, his friends and family back home—his father Oliver Sr., his brother Frederick, and his brother-in-law Chauncey Goodrich (to name just the most notable three) wrote often to praise Wolcott for his continued success, and to encourage him to keep persevering for the betterment of the country. This was

[206] Chernow, 478-9.

particularly true of the elder Wolcott, who routinely sent his son letters reminding him of his critical importance to the administration, such as the following: "The public finances are the anchor of the United States; if they should…be confused, the political vessel would suffer the most violent concussions."[207]

Where his service to the administration is concerned, it is also noteworthy to consider how Wolcott had evolved politically during his five years in the Treasury. What is clear is that Wolcott's actions, as well as his close proximity to the highly dynamic national political scene, had a significant impact on his views regarding the nature of government. This occurred as the country's ideological center continued to widen between two emerging political parties—one now known as the Federalists, and the other as the Republicans. It was perhaps never in doubt what side he would land on, but now more than ever Wolcott found himself strongly encamped within the radical faction of the former.

By 1795 Wolcott could best be described as a High (or Ultra) Federalist. He championed Hamiltonian economics, which included the initial proposal for the federal government's assumption of state debts, as well as the creation of the First National Bank. He favored investment in manufacturing and industrial endeavors over agricultural projects. Wolcott's time in the Washington administration had reinforced his nationalist views; he desired a powerful central government, let by a strong executive, who could maintain order. This was necessary to protect the nation against the dangers of mob rule, which all too recently reared its ugly head during the Whiskey Rebellion.[208] This belief also manifested in Wolcott's fear regarding the French Revolution; his anti-French/pro-British views to this end will be explored in greater detail

[207] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., February 19, 1792, *WJP* (box 1, folder 9).

[208] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 162-3.

in the subsequent chapter. Wolcott has refined these core values through his defense of Washington's administration, and more directly, the Treasury Department. What made Wolcott a High Federalist, as opposed to a moderate one, is the ardent level of conviction he held for each of these beliefs. For Wolcott, compromise—especially with the Republican Party of Jefferson and Madison—was highly dangerous and a guarantor of the country's demise. As we will see, this radical position would precipitate a major political schism the next president, John Adams.

It should be noted that these views towards government that Wolcott now possessed had also been refined during his formative years during the previous decade, in large part due to the ongoing correspondence he engaged in with his father, Oliver Sr. With his son serving in the federal government, the elder Wolcott was well aware Oliver Jr.'s star was on the rise; this not only gave him satisfaction and pride but also afforded him access to the inner workings of the Washington administration. Their later exchange of letters during the early 1790s reveals that Oliver Sr. clearly enjoyed the comfortable forum his son provided to speak his mind on matters of government and politics—and speak his mind he did.

In just a four-month span at the start of Oliver Jr.'s career in the Treasury Department in late 1789 and early 1790, the elder Wolcott expressed a number of extreme views regarding the relationship between states and the federal government, democracy, and political acumen of Thomas Jefferson. Wolcott first intimated a desire to dissolve the states in order "[t]o render the operation of the national government easy." He continued that "the states must be considered corporations only, and their laws strictly municipal."[209] In a similar vein, Oliver Sr. also contended that state militias should be rendered subservient to the federal government. This

[209] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., December 23, 1789, *WJP* (box 1, folder 7).

would best ensure "the primary principle of national defense," he thought.[210] Given his disdain for states' rights and his weariness of democracy, it comes as no surprise that Wolcott Sr. also thought extraordinarily little of Jefferson. He joked with his son that "Jefferson I thought…would have made a good school Master…nothing short of the inevitable Operation of Fate, will bring him on farther in public Life."[211] Perhaps realizing that much of what he was saying to his son might come off the wrong way, he concluded one of his diatribes with the following: "You will remember that I never re-draft any letters which I write to you; you will therefore regard them only as the momentary effusions of the mind."[212] In spite of how busy he was with the work of the Treasury, Oliver Jr. did his best to respond thoughtfully to his father regarding the nature of government. In most cases he kept a more moderate tone and tried to steer the discussion towards current politics.[213]

It is of course reasonable to conclude that Oliver Sr.'s ruminations render him far more extreme ideologically than his son. With that said, it can be argued that the elder Wolcott was the more open and direct of the two; Oliver Jr.—in an understandable effort to maintain cordial and professional relationships with those around him at the seat of government—had learned to be more guarded. Whatever the case, it is fair to assume that the elder Wolcott's views continued to hold some manner of sway over him as Wolcott entered this next critical phase of his public career. Still only thirty-five years old, this next period would see Wolcott grow more radical

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[210] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., January 28, 1790, *WJP* (box 1, folder 7).

[211] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., March 22, 1790, *WJP* (box 1, folder 7).

[212] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., January 28, 1790, *WJP* (box 1, folder 7).

[213] For a notable example regarding Oliver Jr.'s reasons for why the national government should assume all state debt, see: Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., March 27, 1790, *WJP* (box 1, folder 8).

politically. The close proximity to other High Federalists working at the seat government would bolster his confidence in the righteousness of his beliefs.

For Federalist supporters throughout America, Hamilton's sudden retirement was a major blow. President Washington and the rest of his administration would be left to persevere without its most talented and devoted member. For Oliver Wolcott Jr., the opportunity that now presented itself did not escape his thoughts. Attempting modesty, he wrote to his father that if it [the position of Treasury Secretary] is offered to me I shall accept it, and I shall conduct the mere business of the department in an orderly and proper manner."[214] Wolcott surely was lying about the 'if'—his appointment was only a matter of when. He also suggested that—in spite of his "skill and capacity" for treasury matters—no proper replacement for Hamilton would be found, because no one (including himself) possessed the same level of dignity and gravitas.[215] Despite these deficiencies, Wolcott knew he was honor-bound to accept the post.

He also knew it was unnecessary that an overly-laudatory recommendation letter be sent to Washington—such as the one that guaranteed his ascension to Comptroller four years prior—to ensure he would be called upon to serve as Hamilton's replacement. His ascension to the top post in the department was a foregone conclusion; since he first arrived at the seat of government in 1789, Wolcott had proven himself indispensable to the Treasury's success, and only he knew its inner workings well enough to ensure its present course remained in a manner consistent with Hamilton's economic vision—with which he fervently supported. While Washington would

[214] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., January 6, 1795, Gibbs, vol. 1, 178.

[215] Ibid.

always lament the loss of his most trusted and relied upon confidante, he undoubtedly conceded that Wolcott was the only man capable of succeeding Hamilton.[216]

For Wolcott, the years ahead would bring him considerable pressure, as he found himself at the center of a growing political divide that was threatening to tear the country apart. While Wolcott expected to be fervently "opposed and attacked," just as Hamilton had, official Senate records concerning his February 3, 1795 confirmation to Treasury Secretary do not reveal the extent to which discussion or debate took place concerning his appointment.[217] A vote to confirm Wolcott, if one was held, was not recorded.[218] It can be presumed, though—given Wolcott's reputation as a Hamilton lackey—that Republicans in the Senate found little optimism in his appointment by Washington. It should be noted that the avoidance of any public protest over Wolcott was likely twofold. First, strategic concerns prevailed: Republicans—possessing only 14 of 30 seats in the legislative upper chamber—simply did not have the votes to prevent Wolcott's confirmation.[219] More importantly, it is clear that even Wolcott's harshest detractors found him to be a man of "integrity," which made a public rejection of Washington's appointment an unbecoming and undignified choice.[220] At this point in America's early history no cabinet appointment had ever been rejected by the Senate; beyond an extreme hypothetical involving a candidate seen to have broken the law, to do so was no doubt seen outside the bounds of proper

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[216] Chernow, 479.

[217] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., January 6, 1795, Gibbs, vol. 1, 178.

[218] "Executive Journal [Ninth Session]," *The Ninth Session of the Senate of the United States, began November 3d, 1794*, 171, https://www.congress.gov/senate-executive-journal/congress-3-session-2.pdf.

[219] United States Senate, "Party Division – 3rd Congress (1793-1795)," accessed January 10, 2025, https://www.senate.gov/history/partydiv.htm.

[220] Bland, 233.

etiquette and a breach of the separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches of government.[221]

By serving under President Washington (and the future President John Adams), Wolcott's influence within the federal government would now reach its highest point—one that just a few years prior he (perhaps modestly) never thought was possible. Remembering the lessons instilled in him during his formative years, and with the examples of his father and grandfather to guide him, Wolcott was ready to perform his sacred duty to protect the Federalist vision for the nation's future. He would do this regardless of difficulty, and irrespective of the views expressed by the court of public opinion—no matter how much they may oppose him and his party.

[221] In fact, the Senate's first official rejection of a presidential cabinet appointment would not occur until 1844. United States Senate, "Cabinet Nominations Rejected, Withdrawn, or No Action Taken," accessed January 10, 2025, https://www.senate.gov/legislative/NominationsRejectedorWithdrawn.htm.

Chapter 4: Treasury Secretary (1795-1800)

> *"Having reflected upon the dilemma, I have concluded that as it respects myself, I was justifiable in continuing in office during the present year… the duty of preserving order in a branch of business which has been committed to my care, were the circumstances which should justly dissuade me from an abrupt resignation… To secure myself from the imputation of being concerned in a secret cabal, I have, however, thought it my duty to express my opinions and intentions frankly to my colleagues, in the same manner as I have done to my private correspondents. I am apprized that I shall by some be considered as factious; but the accusation is less offensive than the suspicion of cunning, or subserviency to measures which I seriously disapprove, and to which I should otherwise be opposed."*[222]

The Adams Administration: Day One

Oliver Wolcott Jr. woke up on the morning of March 4, 1797, to a day unlike any other in the young history of the United States. As he made the short commute down the Philadelphia streets to his office in the Treasury Department, he was filled with mixed emotions. Later that morning John Adams would be inaugurated as the nation's second president. Adams would not be able to adequately replace President Washington, but then again, who could? Adams had narrowly prevailed over Thomas Jefferson 71-68 in the Electoral College. This was the first contested presidential election in American history, with the nation's electoral votes split on strongly sectarian grounds. Adams won the Federalist strongholds of New England and New York, which secured a small victory over Jefferson, who had prevailed in the Republican

[222] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, September 3, 1800, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-25-02-0080.

South.[223] Despite the overwhelming evidence that the country's divisions were wider than ever in the aftermath of Washington's Farewell Address, in Wolcott's mind Adams's election was vastly preferable to the alternative.

First and foremost, Wolcott still had his job. He knew that Jefferson, had he been elected, surely would have dismissed Wolcott as Treasury Secretary. Even if he did not, he knew he could in good conscience work in any Republican administration. As someone who had spent nearly two decades in public service at both the state and federal level, Wolcott thought himself unprepared for what would come next in his life. So when the news came last December of Adam's narrow electoral victory, Wolcott breathed a sigh of relief.

Adams was also a committed Federalist, as reinforced by his ardent support for the controversial Jay's Treaty, and as such his views aligned strongly with Wolcott. In contrast, Jefferson's election would have brought the first executive reign of the Republican Party, spelling doom for the country. Crisis, not hyperbolically, had been averted with Adams's ascendency to the presidency.

And yet, Wolcott felt uneasy about his future. Adams had retained him as Treasury Secretary, along with the rest of Washington's Cabinet, and yet the nature of Wolcott's influence over this new administration was uncertain. Adams possessed a potentially hazardous independent streak, which would in some ways make him ill-suited to serving as leader of the Federalist cause. Self-servingly, would Adams often seek his Cabinet's counsel, as Washington had? This remained to be seen. Adams was a vastly different man in character and style than his

[223] Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 178.

predecessor. Adams was erratic, prone to volatile mood swings, and lacked Washington's natural leadership and eminence.

Perhaps most importantly, Adams held, in Wolcott's mind, an irrational deference to the members of '76 Generation—men who had been a part of the delegation that crafted the Declaration of Independence. Many of these men were now fervently Republican, and any counsel that Adams sought from them was highly dangerous, if not outright treasonous. Adams's friendships with Samual Adams, Elbridge Gerry, Benjamin Rush, and especially Thomas Jefferson (despite its recent cooling) concerned Wolcott.[224]

Adams, to be sure, had played a vital role during the most critical moments of America's early history, especially in securing the country's independence. For that Adams deserved praise, thought Wolcott, but he knew that would not necessarily translate to sound leadership at the presidential level. Questions remained, including: would Adams try to rekindle his famous Revolutionary collaboration with Jefferson, now serving as Vice-President?[225] To what extent would he choose to rely on other figures from the '76 Generation who threatened the future security and prosperity of the country by their membership in the Republican Party? As fate would have it, Wolcott would not have to wait long to receive an answer.

Washington's New Treasury Secretary

Before examining the first months of Adams administration it is helpful to consider Wolcott's first two years as Treasury Secretary, which were the final for Washington as president. Upon, Wolcott's official appointment in February 1795, his father wrote—as he was

[224] Ellis, *Founding* Brothers, 179-180.

[225] Under the original Constitution, the candidate finishing second in electoral votes for president was elected as vice president.

oft to do—to offer words of encouragement. Aware that his son often undersold his own abilities, the elder Wolcott exclaimed that the appointment was "a public testimonial of the merit of your services and your ability to execute the trust by those whose judgment will be fully confided in." He continued, adding that he was assured that his son's new post would be "executed…in such a manner as will fully evince the propriety of…[its] designation…" as the most "important and confidential" of "any single trust held under government, and consequently has the highest responsibility…"[226] The elder Wolcott added in a following letter that he had "full confidence" that "the duties of it [the office of Secretary of the Treasury] will be honorably discharged" by his son, and that in so doing "good acceptance of the public" will follow."[227] As with any son who desires the approval of his loving fathers, these words could only have served as a necessary comfort to help Wolcott Jr. persevere through what would prove to be a tumultuous next few years at the seat of the federal government.

As Wolcott settled into his new office as Treasury Secretary, he knew that the current challenges facing the country—and Washington's administration in particular—had their roots in the political polarization that had originated in the years prior. With this regard, one especially notable turning point for President Washington occurred with the resignation of Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson in December 1793. Jefferson had grown weary of his diminishing influence in the cabinet; in his mind Hamilton held a firm and unrelenting grasp on President's Washington's decision-making, which increasingly came at the expense of his republican ideals. Realizing that in his current role he could not a make positive difference in the interest of the

[226] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., February 16, 1795, Gibbs, vol. 1, 179-180.

[227] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., March 16, 1795, Gibbs, vol. 1, 181.

public good, Jefferson dismissed Washington's urgings to stay and left the seat of government for his safe haven at Monticello.[228]

For Washington it was a foreboding sign of things to come. His second term in office was made more difficult than the first by the constantly in-flux in his Cabinet. In the span of a little more than a year, the original appointees—one by one—departed the federal government. Besides Jefferson, these also included Secretary of War Henry Knox in December 1794, Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton in January 1795, and Jefferson's replacement in the State Department, Edmund Randolph, in August of the same year.[229] As the vacancies piled up by that autumn, Washington lamented to Hamilton the loss of "proper characters" from his cabinet, and the "arduous duty" that befell him to find appropriate replacements.[230] Hamilton counseled that it may be necessary to now accept that finding "first rate character(s)" was no longer a realistic goal; rather, "second rate" men who possess "good dispositions & barely decent qualifications" are now the only acceptable substitute to run the administration's executive departments.[231] For a time, Wolcott himself was under consideration for Secretary of State, before Hamilton's departure from the Treasury created a more "obvious" and "logical" position for him to possess in the federal government.[232] This fact should not be easily dismissed; Washington's view that Wolcott could be a viable candidate to lead the State Department reveals

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[228] Stanley M. Elkins and Eric L. McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 211.

[229] Randolph's controversial departure, along with Wolcott's role in it, will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter's next section.

[230] George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, October 29, 1795, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-19-02-0067.

[231] Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, November 5, 1795, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/ founders/ARHN-01-19-02-0074.

[232] Bland, 230.

that the latter's value to the administration went far beyond his bureaucratic talents with regard to finance. Indeed, as will continue to be shown, it was Wolcott's comprehension and advice concerning current affairs—both foreign and domestic—that would be called upon by the two presidents under which he served.

Eventually, after numerous individuals declined the President's appointments, the openings in the War and State Departments were filled by James McHenry and Timothy Pickering—men who evidently met Washington and Hamilton's minimal qualifications.[233] Pickering originally was selected to replace Knox in the War Department, before moving over to State. Wolcott, in a more optimistic take than Washington, believed that Pickering would be "found to be an able and respectable officer…[and] economical" in the administration of his department.[234] As will be shown, in the years to come McHenry, and Pickering especially, would play a significant role in Wolcott's story.

Despite Washington's feelings about the composition of his new Cabinet, the concerns he had only partially applied to Wolcott, and for reasons that were wholly unique. Wolcott's appointment to Treasury Secretary earlier that year stands out among the rest of the cabinet replacements made by Washington during this time, for a number of reasons. To be sure, in one sense it must be acknowledged that Washington believed Hamilton irreplaceable. Hamilton had always (and would continue to be even without an official federal government position) the most loyal of Washington's political confidantes, and the individual—perhaps even more so than Washington himself—most responsible for the government's present structure and the policies springing forth from it. Nonetheless, if Hamilton was going to leave the Treasury Department,

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[233] Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 504.

[234] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., January 6, 1795, Gibbs, vol. 1, 177.

Wolcott represented by far the next best choice. Wolcott had served with distinction as Hamilton's most valuable member of the Treasury for the past five years, and while he lacked Hamilton's raw talent—Wolcott admitted this as much to President Washington—his deep knowledge of the department's inner workings would ensure its proper operation for years to come.[235] Moreover, Washington was reassured by Wolcott's close relationship with Hamilton—nearly as strong as his own with the former Treasury Secretary. Wolcott, Washington knew, would not hesitate to consult with Hamilton if and when the need arose—just as Washington himself would. This thought gave a rare moment of comfort to the President; the operation of the Treasury Department thus would be the least of Washington's concerns during his final two years in office.[236]

The next five years would see Wolcott prove himself as the most indispensable and influential member of the Cabinet in the current administration, as well as in that of Washington's successor, John Adams. Wolcott's counsel, especially with Adams, had a direct hand in the policies and actions taken during this time in advance of Federalist Party beliefs. As will be shown in subsequent pages, it is necessary then for Wolcott's historical legacy to be reconsidered to reflect this reality.

The Growing French Threat

To any casual observer of national politics during the mid-1790s, it was clear that the political divisions in the country—thought negligible or insignificant only a decade ago—were now an inescapable reality. The Federalist Party, with control over the Congress and the

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[235] Wolcott wrote, "… If constant exertions and strict fidelity can compensate for such qualifications as I may not possess, I indulge in a hope that my services will receive your approbation." Oliver Wolcott Jr. to George Washington, February 4, 1795, *PGW*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-05-17-02-0332.

[236] Chernow, 503-4.

Executive Branch, seemed most likely to maintain their power for the foreseeable future, but the Democratic-Republican Party—with Thomas Jefferson (encamped at Monticello) viewed as its symbolic leader—was growing stronger in its own right. To many Federalists, including Wolcott, the Republicans posed a grave threat to the future of the country. All available measures, then, needed to be considered if the country and its people were to remain secure.

Wolcott, as with nearly all other Federalists, believed that America's greatest danger surrounded its relationship with France—at that moment plagued by a bloody revolution that had culminated in the execution of King Louis XVI. For the time being a group known as the Directory ruled over France, which left America's relationship with its European neighbor uncertain. The situation was complicated by the recent uproar concerning the arrival of Citizen Genet, a minister from France who had been seeking to gain American public support for "the cause of liberty" in France.[237] Genet positioned himself as an opponent of the Washington administration's current foreign policy, which Genet believed failed to acknowledge the deep ties between their two countries dating back to the American Revolution. His actions inspired many Americans (many of whose inclinations already favored France) to push for war with Great Britain, to the detriment of Washington's stated policy of neutrality in European wars.[238]

More significant was the recent passage of the controversial Jay Treaty in 1795, which in effect saw the United States make many concessions to France's enemy, Great Britain. The need for such a treaty stemmed from British condemnation of America's desire to trade with France (and all other countries) while Great Britain was at war with her neighbor across the Channel.

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[237] Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington*, 222.

[238] For a concise background on Citizen Genet, see Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington*, 222-3. For a more substantial account, see Elkins and McKitrick, 330-6.

The British, in short, wanted a near-exclusive trading relationship with the United States.[239] The Federalists, including Wolcott, believed that securing a strong and amiable relationship with Great Britain was paramount to its future security and prosperity. Conversely, it was proper and necessary to condemn the violent mob action that had plagued France during the past few years, which was ultimately a serious threat to orderly society. For those Americans choosing to express solidarity with the people of France (a direct result of Democratic-Republican leaders like Jefferson and Madison), they put the stability and safety of their own country at risk. Fisher Ames, writing from Boston, warned Wolcott that "Jacobins have been successful in prejudicing the multitude against the treaty" and that local meetings to discuss the matter were likely to be "marked with folly and violence."[240]

During the final week of June 1795 the Senate, by the narrowest of margins, ratified Jay's Treaty. Two-thirds of the Senate voted for approval—the exact percentage needed to secure ratification. Its members, however, included with their formal approval a list of instructions and questions for the President. First, the Senate wanted the inclusion of an additional article that negated much of Article 12, which severely limited American shipping in the Caribbean. In order to secure this loosening of shipping restrictions, the Senate further instructed Washington to engage immediately in renewed diplomatic relations with the British.[241]

For Washington, this addendum to the treaty's approval brought up a serious constitutional question: could he sign Jay's Treaty into law while bypassing the Senate's concerns? Washington sought out Wolcott's counsel concerning this matter by asking his

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[239] Ferling, *Adams vs.* Jefferson, 65-7; Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington*, 226-8.

[240] Fisher Ames to Oliver Wolcott Jr., July 9, 1795, Gibbs, vol. 1, 210-1.

[241] Schmauch, 119-120; Gibbs, vol. 1, 203-4.

Treasury Secretary directly to respond to two specific questions. Washington first asked, "Is, or is not that resolution intended to be the final act of the Senate, or do they expect that the new article which is proposed, shall be submitted to them before the treaty takes effect?"[242] The President wished to know whether or not the Constitution required him to consider the Senate's proposed new article before signing the treaty into law. Washington clarified his concerns with his second question: "Does or does not the constitution permit the President to ratify the treaty, without submitting the new article, after it shall be agreed to by the British king, to the Senate for their further advice and consent?"[243]

Wolcott replied promptly. He stated that the Senate's approval of the treaty was "a final act of that body," and that "further concurrence of the Senate" with respect to their new proposal for Washington to consider was not necessary. Wolcott further reassured the Washington by reminding him that "the constitution exclusively vested in the President" the "powers of commencing negotiations with foreign nations," and that as such the Senate's "advice and consent can be expressed only upon such propositions as are submitted to their consideration."[244] In this present case, Washington had already fulfilled his constitutional responsibilities by submitting Jay's Treaty for the Senate's deliberation and approval.

It is worth noting that while the evidence suggests Washington solicited the advice of his entire Cabinet regarding these questions, it is nonetheless notable that only Wolcott's views survive in the historical record.[245] One can reasonably speculate whether or not the President

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[242] George Washington to Oliver Wolcott Jr., June 29, 1795, Gibbs, vol. 1, 204.

[243] Ibid.

[244] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to George Washington, June 30, 1795, *PGW*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-05-18-02-0212.

[245] Ibid., note 1.

found the counsel of his Treasury Secretary more commendable that that of the other members of his Cabinet, which again calls into question the dismissive and negative depiction of his contributions during this period. In short, while other members of Washington's Cabinet may have, in fact, been second-rate, the characterization of Wolcott as such is inaccurate.

Shortly after receiving these reassurances from Wolcott, President Washington, while displeased with the particulars of the terms of the final treaty, chose to sign it in order to avoid a war that he believed would be disastrous for the United States. The British, to be sure, failed to recognize America's right to neutrality (in fact, Great Britain would now—officially at least—have a more exclusive trading relationship with the United States than it did before), or to condemn its impressment of American citizens. With that said, they did agree in the treaty to reimburse the United States for its financial shipping losses that were accrued over the past year due to British seizures. The British also, critically, agreed to remove its forces from the American frontier; their continued presence had served as a symbolic reminder that in spite of America's independence from its mother country, its supremacy over the continent was far from guaranteed.[246]

Despite the treaty's imperfections, Wolcott was "satisfied" with President Washington's decision to sign it.[247] Wolcott was likely influenced by New England's overwhelming dominance, compared with the rest of the United States, when it came to the country's trade with Great Britain. For Wolcott, the continued economic prosperity of the North demanded an urgency to maintain good relations with the British—the most dominant naval power in the

[246] Ferling, 65-7; Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington*, 224-6.

[247] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., June 27, 1795, Gibbs, vol. 1, 200-1.

world.[248] Wolcott gave his most concise thoughts on the matter to Jedidiah Morse, writing that the Jay Treaty "… proposes an adjustment of old disputes [with Great Britain] without contention… it [also] affords a new security for the enjoyment of privileges which before were had at the pleasure of either party. In some respects it removes the causes from which variance and war were most feared." In short, to Wolcott the treaty represented the only course of action in dealing with a "proud and powerful country" such as Great Britain, which had "good prospects of being able to influence the commerce of the world."[249]

It was during this contentious political environment over the Jay Treaty that in the autumn of 1795, Wolcott played a pivotal role in the ousting of Secretary of State Edmund Randolph, the last remaining Republican in Washington's Cabinet. Randolph who had expressed opposition to the treaty from the beginning, had made his criticisms of the Washington administration plainly known to the French Minister Joseph Fauchet. As the leading member of the State Department, Randolph met occasionally with Fauchet—ostensibly with the objective of fostering continued good relations between their respective countries. Unfortunately for Randolph, the British navy intercepted a sealed dispatch from Fauchet to the French government, revealing the specific contents of his conversations with Fauchet. Desiring the continued deterioration of Franco-American relations, the British turned over the dispatches to the American government. Wolcott, by virtue of a dinner invitation from the British minister who revealed the existence of the dispatches, was the first American public official to see the dispatches. Beyond the aforementioned criticisms of the administration's policy towards the British, Fauchet's letters also suggested that Randolph had accepted bribes for the information he

[248] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 179.

[249] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Jedidiah Morse, July 16, 1795, Gibbs, vol. 1, 212-3.

provided, and that he had agreed with Fauchet's characterization of Washington as a monarchist.[250]

In shock over these revelations, Wolcott responded quickly to what he saw as unmistakable evidence of treason on the part of Randolph. Entrenched as he was in his position that pro-French sentiments, a hallmark of Jeffersonianism, endangered the nation, Wolcott did not contemplate giving Randolph the benefit of the doubt. The political turmoil that gripped the country meant that severe measures needed to be taken in its defense, as had been the case with Washington's actions in response to the Whiskey Rebellion. Wolcott immediately shared the dispatches with Timothy Pickering, the current Secretary of War, who was fluent enough in French to produce his own translation. When the British minister's report appeared accurate, both men agreed that it was imperative that President Washington be informed of Randolph's treason at once.[251]

As soon as they were able Wolcott and Pickering showed the dispatches to Washington. While not as radical in his Federalists beliefs as his two secretaries, Washington was inclined to believe that the purported revelations of Randolph's corruption were true. That Randolph had expressed his opposition to the Jay Treaty had to have weighed on his mind. Washington decided to meet with Randolph at once, with both Wolcott and Pickering in attendance. Randolph would be shown the dispatches, and then Washington would gauge his reaction to ascertain his guilt. During the meeting, Randolph initially remained calm while he read the letters and expressed surprise over their contents. Randolph denied the charges that the dispatches implied, but as the meeting continued, he grew frustrated that his professional reputation was being called into

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[250] Oliver Wolcott Jr., "Notes Relative to Fauchet's Letter," no date, Gibbs, vol. 1, 232-3; Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 146-7; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 168; Elkins & McKitrick, 428.

[251] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 169-170.

question in such a demeaning and disrespectful way. Feeling overwhelmed and unable to defend himself, Randolph asked to leave the meeting with the request that in subsequent he might be able to produce a written defense of his conduct.[252]

In the end, it was high unlikely that Randolph engaged in corruption in his dealings with French Minister Fauchet. Wolcott admitted as much to his brother, Frederick, shortly after the crisis abated. He conceded, "the reports of [Randolph's] infidelity to the United States which are circulated, are not entirely true." What Wolcott was certain about, though, was that Randolph's conduct, had been highly unprofessional and undisciplined, and totally lacking in "integrity."[253] The disparaging remarks Randolph made against the Washington administration, coupled with his revealing of private conversations that took place in the Cabinet were unbecoming of a man of his station and at the highest rungs of the federal government. Faced with no immediate options to vouchsafe his character and actions, and perhaps sensing that there was no way to convince Washington of his innocence, Randolph resigned from his post as Secretary of State the day after his meeting with Washington, Wolcott, and Pickering. Unfortunately for Randolph, his decision to eventually publish a defense of his conduct did little to convince his former Federalist colleagues (or the public for that matter) that he should be exonerated.[254] Wolcott counseled Washington to not worry about public reaction to the Jay Treaty or to Randolph's publication,

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[252] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 174-6; Elkins and McKitrick, 426

[253] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, September 29, 1795, Gibbs, vol. 1, 248. It must be conceded that Wolcott's views on Randolph's guilt appear to have been fluid, as just two weeks later he wrote to his father the following: "Mr. Randolph, I have no doubt has been unfaithful to the government and has actually made treasonable or corrupt overtures to the late French Minister. See Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Oliver Wolcott Sr., October 13, 1795, Gibbs, vol. 1, 256.

[254] Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 147; Elkins and McKitrick, 430-1.

arguing that "[t]he great body of the people are firm and steady," and that those who were not are "among the lower classes of people… men who are governed by sudden impulses of reason."[255]

While one historian has claimed that Wolcott and Pickering "cleverly manipulated" the situation in order to "get" Randolph ousted from the Cabinet, this evaluation of their conduct implies a nefarious intent on their part—of which there was none.[256] Both Wolcott and Pickering genuinely believed that they acted in service to their country and in defense of the administration by delivering the dispatches immediately to Washington. To be sure, both men as High Federalists were blinded in part by their partisan inclinations, and in a belief that Randolph's presence in Washington's Cabinet, as a Democratic-Republican, did far more harm than good. This ensured that during the critical moment when Randolph was confronted, they were incapable of empathizing with Randolph's side of the story. With that said, for Wolcott his actions did not constitute a carefully constructed plot to rid the government of an enemy interloper, but rather extreme measures taken to expel a government officer who evidence has shown failed his country and president.

The most significant conclusion with regard to the Randolph/Fauchet Affair, as they pertain to Wolcott, involves further truths revealed about the composition of Washington's Cabinet. With Randolph removed from his post, there were no longer any Democratic-Republican voices that had the ear of the President. Washington's cabinet, in addition to the lack of "first characters" that existed during his first term, the cabinet is now more partisan and lacking in ideological diversity than ever. All of its members were now High Federalists, including Wolcott.

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[255] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to George Washington, September 26, 1795, Gibbs, vol. 1, 246.

[256] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 170.

What still remained true, though, was Wolcott's singular importance to Washington's administration, and what ultimately separated the Treasury from the other executive departments. It was not under his consideration to do so, but Washington knew that Wolcott was the one Cabinet officer who could not be replaced—due to his unique knowledge and skill set for managing the Treasury. This reality would become a critical factor in later years, when a schism in the Federalist Party would pit future President Adams against his Cabinet—including Wolcott.

Adams, Wolcott, and the High Federalists

The signs of the growing divide within the Federalist Party widened exponentially in the aftermath of Adam's razor-thin victory in the 1796 Presidential Election over Thomas Jefferson. As has been earlier suggested, the chief culprit of the political tension stemmed from the souring relationship between the United States and France, which had deteriorated even further in the aftermath of Jay's Treaty. From the moment Adams officially took office in the spring of 1797, the question of what to do with France would come to dominate the domestic and foreign affairs of his administration. During the last days of President Washington's final term in office, Adams had learned that the Directory—the current ruling authority in France—had dismissed the American ambassador, Charles C. Pinckney without even seeing him. Pickney had been ordered to leave the country at once. While Adams expressed frustration over this outcome, his entire Cabinet (which he carried over from Washington's administration), including Wolcott, reacted with outrage and indignation. According to Wolcott, James McHenry, and Timothy Pickering, French had villainously struck at American's reputation on the world stage.[257] Would President

[257] McCullough, 477; Ferling, 99-102.

Adams defend America's interests by responding decisively to this crisis? War with France must now be on table. Honor demanded it, thought Wolcott.

He would not have to wait long to find out Adams's decision. Just weeks after his inauguration Adams developed a new plan for dealing with the impending conflict with France. He proposed to send a new delegation to France to negotiate with the ruling government–the Directory, led by Talleyrand. In order to give the commission weight, and the appearance the American government was united in its commitment for peace, Adams wanted it to be bipartisan. When evaluating who to appoint for the diplomatic missions, Adams cared little for one's purported loyalty to the Federalist Party. On the contrary, Adams often demonstrated positive feelings towards Republicans who he had extensive personal experience with dating back to the Revolutionary Era. Past experience of having collaborated so successfully with them in those crucial years, when America's future lay in the balance, was the most reliable litmus test for Adams. It comes as no surprise, then, that Adams desired Jefferson (or if Jefferson preferred, his protégé James Madison) to lead the commission—trusting that their motivation for securing a fair and proper deal would be able to transcend politics. He naively assumed that the Federalist members of the commission would feel the same.[258]

While Adams knew he did not need the approval of his Cabinet to make this consequential decision, he wanted to begin this new relationship with Wolcott and the other executive Department Heads on amicable terms. As such, he consulted with them for their opinion on his proposal for a bipartisan, three-person peace mission.[259] In keeping with the deepest roots of political principles, Adams's proposal, in simplest terms, stunned Wolcott. Why

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[258] Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 184.

[259] John Adams to Timothy Pickering, March 1797, *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-1920

would the President entrust such a vital role to Jefferson or Madison–the leaders of the Democratic-Republican Party and—in his mind—confirmed enemies of the country? Francophiles to the core, Wolcott ardently believed, Jefferson and Madison were liable to throw away America's interests in order to cater to the mob that had violently overthrown France's monarchy.

During these tense first weeks of the Adams Presidency, Wolcott received a lengthy letter from his father, warning him about the danger that France posed to the country, and that he should be weary of the current "calm" that takes place before the "earthquake."[260] The elder Wolcott further expressed to his son that while he considered Adams an "honest man," it was imperative that the President receive sound counsel, or else his "great vanity" might doom the current government to failure.[261] Fisher Ames, writing from Massachusetts, sounded a similar warning about the "Jacobin" threat posed by those Americans who loved France.[262] Ames lamented the indifference shown by so many Americans in regard to the French threat, and urged Wolcott to do whatever he could in his current position to save the country from "this generation of vipers."[263] Other friends of Wolcott were more direct. Jeremiah Wadsworth, reporting on the public sentiment as it existed in Connecticut's state capital of Hartford, exclaimed that "[t]here is a general opinion in this state that France intends war, and I believe war is better than our present state."[264] George Cabot, in one of his many letters to Wolcott during this period, concurred. He counseled Wolcott that there can be no hope of success for any "attempted negotiation," and that

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[260] Oliver Wolcott Sr. to Oliver Wolcott Jr., March 16, 1797, *WJP* (box 1, folder 15).

[261] Ibid.

[262] Fisher Ames to Oliver Wolcott Jr., March 24, 1797, *WJP* (box 9, folder 7).

[263] Ibid.

[264] Jeremiah Wadsworth to Oliver Wolcott Jr., March 26, 1797, Gibbs, vol. 1, 478-9.

France will act in response to a new diplomatic mission by proposing terms that would cause further "dishonor," if the United States government were to accept them.[265]

It will come as a surprise, perhaps, to acknowledge that Alexander Hamilton expressed a decidedly different opinion concerning what should be done about France. Agreeing with President Adams, Hamilton wrote to Wolcott to indicate his desire for a new peace mission to be comprised of three individuals, with representation from both political parties.[266] Hamilton continued by suggesting that in addition to appeasing the belligerency of French leaders, such a move would "disarm" the enemies of the current Administration present within the country and give them little of substance to criticize.[267]

Even though Wolcott possessed the highest level of respect for Hamilton, he ultimately disagreed with his mentor. After receiving an order from President Adams to communicate his official position concerning the exact nature of a new diplomatic mission, Wolcott replied in a lengthy letter that any such group of envoys would not find success if any of its members were known friends of France.[268] This was assuredly a direct reference to Adams's original plan to include either Jefferson or Madison as part of the mission. Instead, Wolcott counseled, the American envoys sent to France must appear unified in their desire to uphold the honor of the country. Any treaty without this as the primary goal would be unacceptable.[269]

Adams ultimately sided with Hamilton—even if he was unaware that he was doing so. When both Jefferson and Madison were unwilling to join any diplomatic mission, and when such

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[265] George Cabot to Oliver Wolcott Jr., April 17, 1797, *WJP* (box 9, folder 2).

[266] Ferling, 102; Elkins and McKitrick, 544-545.

[267] Alexander Hamilton to Oliver Wolcott Jr., March 30, 1797., *WJP* (box 3, folder 4).

[268] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to John Adams, April 21, 1797, *WJP* (box 4, folder 5).

[269] Ibid.

a proposal itself was met with disdain by Wolcott and the rest of the Cabinet, Adams instead appointed Elbridge Gerry—an old Revolutionary friend and a man as unconcerned with partisanship as was Adams.[270] Gerry was a Democratic-Republican, and therefore seen by most Federalist Party members and their supporters, at best, as an inappropriate representative of the current administration. Even more so, the decision by Adams to appoint Gerry without consulting his Cabinet should not be overlooked. It was a signal to Wolcott, as well as to other key members of Adams's administration, that they would now no longer possess a strong ability to influence the federal government's policies as they had under President Washington.[271]

As will be shown, and in spite of the fact that it likely would have ultimately proved a futile enterprise, Adams would have likely benefited from making a greater effort to include his Cabinet, including Wolcott, in key policymaking decisions during his four years in office. To a fault, and in keeping with his philosophy surrounding the role of the executive, it was not in Adams's constitution to feel compelled to include his subordinates in decisions that he fervently believed he was best qualified to make. If Adams did in fact make it a point to desire the advice of his subordinates before rendering key administrative, as Hamilton had done with Wolcott during their time in the Treasury Department, in spite of their ideological differences it is most likely that the amiable Wolcott could have provided Adams sage counsel that accomplish two substantive goals. First, Wolcott would have ensured that more consistent messaging emanated from the head of the Federalist Party—something that in time would be clear to all it desperately needed. Second, Wolcott would have also enabled Adams to safeguard his what was most precious to him—independent governorship.

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[270] Cabinet members Wolcott, Pickering, and McHenry were so adamantly opposed to the idea of sending Jefferson or Madison they were willing to resign their posts in protest. Elkins and McKitrick, 543.

[271] McCullough, 485-486; Elkins and McKitrick, 556.

The first three months had provided a fateful lesson for Adams. While he was not unreceptive to contrary opinions, he now knew—if he did not already—that he and Wolcott had substantial ideological differences in regard to diplomacy and to the importance of political parties. In both Wolcott and Adams's mind, the extent to which these two men could overcome those differences remained to be seen. As the political divide within the United States continued to widen, coupled with a growing schism between radicals and moderates within the Federalist Party itself, a further falling out between Wolcott and Adams was all but inevitable.

Problematic signs were apparent even before Adams secured his narrow, three-electoral vote victory over Jefferson. Adams had decided he would begin his presidency by making what many historians contend was the most crucial decision in his four years in office. Although he certainly did not consider such a move controversial at the time, Adams chose to retain the entirety of Washington's Cabinet, including Wolcott as Secretary of the Treasury.[272] While the benefits of hindsight have perhaps proven that Adams made a fateful error in doing so, keeping the heads of the Departments in their current posts was logical. For one, there was no established precedent of incoming presidents selecting their own Cabinet. In addition, and most significantly, in keeping with his philosophy of the independent and disinterested chief executive, Adams did not feel he was beholden to relying on these men for anything more than carrying out his official directives.

Commenting on role of the president almost a decade after he left office, Adams thought that a chief executive should "not be wheedled or intimidated by factious combinations of senators, representatives, heads of departments, or military officers."[273] Differences of opinion

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[272] Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800*, 96.

[273] "John Adams to Boston Patriot, June 8, 1809," *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5375.

were fine, even preferrable depending on the context. But insubordination, especially that which in his opinion ran counter to what was best to protect America's independence and neutrality was unacceptable. For Adams this was likely a position reached as the result of hindsight, yet his actions suggest he held this belief before entering office. This philosophy contrasted strongly with that of Wolcott, McHenry, and Pickering, who all believed (perhaps self-servingly) that it was essential for members of the Cabinet to make known their disagreements with the president.[274]

Other more fundamental reasons contributed to a fractious relationship between Adams and his Cabinet. In the end, Adams did not have a high opinion of his Cabinet, and with the exception of Wolcott and the Treasury Department (owing to Adams's more limited understanding of running a national economy), he would not rely on them in the same manner than President Washington did; the latter whom especially valued listening to the opinions of his subordinates. Adams, on the other hand, more often than Washington communicated with his Cabinet through written letter. As will be shown later, this was due to Adams's all too frequent absences from the capital, which necessitated that he conduct the affairs of government from his home in Quincy, Massachusetts. Perhaps most critically, in spite of their mutual presence in the Federalist Party, ideological differences between Adams and his Cabinet. McHenry, Pickering, and Wolcott all counted themselves High Federalists, while Adams did not.

In short, Wolcott and the others were willing to do whatever was necessary to crush the Republican opposition, who they viewed as dangerous to the security of the country. Adams, while sharing some of their general concerns, thought it more prudent to seek out the most honorable and experienced men among the opposition, so that they may work together in the

[274] Clarfield, *Timothy Pickering and American Diplomacy*, 214.

country's best interest. After all, in Adams's mind this is what had worked so well two decades prior during the start of the American Revolution.[275]

It would take nearly a full year for the country to receive word on the status of Adams's diplomatic mission—his first major decision as president. Finally, during the early months of 1798, Adams and Wolcott learned that the three commissioners had failed to reach a deal with France. What is more, in what later become known as the XYZ Affair, Americans learned that in order for the three envoys to gain access to the French Court, they were told they needed to pay a significant bribe.

As had occurred in the previous year with Charles Pinckney, the diplomats were shown immense disrespect by the French Directory. For many Americans, especially those who counted themselves ardent Federalists, the affront to the honor of the United States was unacceptable. Moderates in Congress who previously did not align themselves strongly as either Republicans or Federalist at once began to support the latter's more pro-war position. [276] Declaring war on France, it seemed, was the only appropriate course of action now to take. Fisher Ames reported to Wolcott that he could finally see signs that a "political conversion" towards Federalist Party was taking place, assisted by elaborate and patriotic July 4th celebrations.[277] Stephen Higginson, writing from Boston, concurred with Ames and added an "open and active naval war"—in addition to sending a strong message to the French Directory—was the only means by which the supporters of France within the country would be made to understand the error of their ways.[278]

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[275] Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson*, 96-7; Chernow, 523-5.

[276] Elkins and McKitrick, 582-585.

[277] Fisher Ames to Oliver Wolcott Jr., July 6, 1798, *WJP* (box 9, folder 8).

[278] Stephen Higginson to Oliver Wolcott Jr., July 11, 1798, *WJP* (box 2, folder 11).

John Davis, almost writing to Wolcott from Boston, was impressed with "[t]he correct and manly tone" coming from the public, which in his mind would continue indefinitely.[279]

With this heated environment as the backdrop, Adams also felt persuaded to act more decisively in light of the failure of recent attempts at diplomacy with France. While the legislation did not originate with him, Adams eventually signed the controversial Alien and Sedition Acts that summer. The latter—universally condemned by Jefferson, Madison, and the Republicans as an attack on freedom of speech and on a rival political party—effectively criminalized criticism of the federal government. These concerns were not unfounded. By the end of Adams's four years in office his administration prosecuted nearly a dozen Republican operatives and newspapermen under the Sedition Act.[280] Why Adams ultimately signed the Acts has largely remained a mystery. The most convincing arguments are twofold: first, that Adams—popular for the first time in his life due to the national unity forming around the nation's president as a result of war fever with France—gave in to his self-admitted vanity. The second reason for his signing them may have simply been what many pro-Adams scholars struggle to admit: that he supported the restrictions on liberty and saw them as necessary for the country's protection.[281]

Wolcott, for his part, eventually had reservations about the new legislation, but only on the grounds that they could eventually harm the administration and the Federalist Party. Wolcott expressed frustration that opposition to the administration, as evidenced by the actions of the

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[279] John Davis to Oliver Wolcott Jr., July 16, 1798, *WJP* (box 2, folder 12).

[280] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 247-8.

[281] Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson*, 110-1.

Republican Party, appeared to be unifying around criticism of the Alien and Sedition Acts.[282] Wolcott was proven right, when shortly thereafter Jefferson and Madison drafted the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, which asserts the right of individual states to resist unconstitutional federal legislation.

Later that year, in the aftermath of the passage of the controversial acts, Wolcott wrote to Adams a series of policy recommendations to be discussed at the President's next address to Congress. Wolcott mused that while he did not think French leaders wanted to risk an "open rupture" with the United States, it was clear that they had no "desire for real peace." In a not-so-subtle reference to the critical necessity of the Sedition Act, Wolcott argued that the greatest "disadvantage" of not bringing the nation to war against France at that very moment what that "the intrigues of France, will be successful in producing [within America] a revulsion in public opinion" against the federal government. Yet, in Wolcott's final analysis he—perhaps surprisingly—counseled Adams away from war and toward moderation, acknowledging the present tumultuous events in Europe made it less likely that a French invasion was imminent.[283] For all of the bombastic rhetoric that passed back and forth between Wolcott's inner circle of High Federalists during these years, in the end he mostly concurred with Adam's goal of the need to ready the country for a strong defensive posture against a potential French threat.
To that end, beyond the enactment of the Alien and Sedition Acts, Adams felt he had no choice but to take other bold measures—those of a more military nature. In order to deter the possibility of a French army landing on America's shores, Adams created his prized Department of the

[282] Ibid., 249.

[283] Oliver Wolcott, Jr. to John Adams, November 26, 1798," *Founders Online,* National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-3214.

Navy that summer.[284] More controversially, Adams also ordered the creation of a provisional standing army. In part to mitigate charges of partisanship coming from Republican politicians (namely, that it would be used to quell dissenting political voices), Adams chose to appoint George Washington as head of the new force. As he had done in the past, it appears that Adams made this decision spontaneously and without counseling his Cabinet (or even Washington himself!). Adams was correct in anticipating that selecting Washington to head the new army would be a popular decision, especially among Federalists.[285] On this he received no pushback from Wolcott or the rest of the Cabinet. The controversy, however (one that Adams did not anticipate) surrounded the appointment of officers that would serve under Washington.

His appointment to head the new provisional army a surprise to him, Washington nonetheless agreed to accept, with the condition that his preference for which officers would serve under him be given "great weight."[286] What irked Adams was Washington's insistence that Alexander Hamilton be appointed Inspector General—Washington's second-in-command and de facto leader of the army. (Washington had indicated that he would prefer not to be directly involved with the management and upkeep of the army unless a French invasion was imminent, which in turn would leave day-to-day authority to Hamilton.) Hoping to avoid delivering to Hamilton such a prestigious and power appointment, Adams attempted to argue that the chain-of-command amongst the officers serving under Washington should be determined by the order in which they received their respective ranks during the American Revolution. In such an arrangement, this would allow Henry Knox and Charles Pinckney to rank higher than Hamilton.

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[284] Elkins and McKitrick, 595-596.

[285] Ibid., 601.

[286] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to John Adams, September 17, 1798, Gibbs, vol. 2, 93-99; George Washington to John Adams, July 4, 1798, *PGW*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/GEWN-06-02-02-0290.

It should not have been a surprise to Adams that his Cabinet, including Wolcott, sided with Washington. Pickering wrote to Wolcott in the midst of the controversy that he found Adams's views on the matter "strange," adding further than the President's wishes to appoint Republicans—namely, Aaron Burr—as some of the officers in the army must be vehemently opposed.[287]

Given his contempt for Hamilton, and his growing suspicions that he was having an undue influence on his Cabinet (to say nothing of Washington himself), Adams found this to be unacceptable. Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, relayed to Wolcott that he found the President's position "strange," and that other potential officials, such as Colonel Aaron Burr, should not be under consideration to serve in the new army.[288] It was left to Wolcott to be the one to make the case to Adams that it was in the country's best interest—given Hamilton's popularity and support within the Federalist Party—that Washington's request be approved without delay. Wolcott wrote to Adams that Washington was not intending to usurp the President's authority, but rather that Washington was merely given the impression that his wishes concerning the nature of the army—especially since he had been appointed to command without any prior consultation—would be given "great weight."[289]

Adams, while attempting to respond respectfully to Wolcott, nonetheless expressed relentless indignation in regard to Hamilton's character and his lack merit when it came to serving in such a high rank.[290] With all of that said, fearing he had no choice but to capitulate to

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[287] Timothy Pickering to Oliver Wolcott Jr., July 11, 1798, *WJP* (box 2, folder 15).

[288] Timothy Pickering to Oliver Wolcott Jr., July 11, 1798, *WJP* (box 2, folder 15).

[289] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to John Adams, September 17, 1798, Gibbs, vol. 2, 93-99.

[290] John Adams to Oliver Wolcott Jr., September 24, 1798, *WJP* (box 4, folder 6).

Washington, Adams—perhaps in part persuaded by Wolcott after all—agreed to allow Hamilton to serve as the second-in-command of the new army.[291] With the matter finally settled, Wolcott reported to Hamilton the news of his appointment, adding that this controversy while not entirely President Adams's fault, was allowed to continue because Adams was "greatly mistaken" about the course of events surrounding the creation of the provisional army.[292]

Now with the first two years of Adams's presidency as evidence, Wolcott must have come to the realization that while there was much fault to find in Adams's conduct concerning the crisis with France. To Wolcott, Adams was often misguided and not forceful enough when it came to responding to France's mistreatment of American diplomats, or when it came to quelling pro-French sentiment within the country itself. Nonetheless, in Wolcott's mind his own consistent opposition to Adams had been proven correct because thus far it had protected the national interest. Wolcott had largely been successful in getting his way on the majority of significant policy issues, including the creation of the new provisional army. In the latter half of Adam's one term in office, however, Wolcott would find it far more difficult to impart his policy initiatives on the President.

As the year 1798 came to a close, President Adams requested of Wolcott and the other members of the Cabinet their opinions on what he should emphasize in his upcoming annual message to Congress. Wolcott replied in a lengthy letter, arguing that the President should maintain a strong posture with France, which should include an escalation of defensive measures to deter possible French action. Most importantly, Wolcott also added that he felt any attempt at

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[291] Elkins and McKitrick, 605; Oliver Wolcott Jr. to John Adams, September 17, 1798, Gibbs, vol. 2, 93-99.

[292] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, October 10, 1798, Gibbs, vol. 2, 101.

another peace mission at the present moment would be an "act of humiliation" far beneath the honor of the United States.[293]

Writing to Wolcott from Massachusetts, Stephen Higginson went even further, suggesting to Wolcott that he recommend to President Adams that he push for an "open declaration of war" on France in his upcoming message to Congress.[294] Wolcott's close friend George Cabot agreed, arguing that "apathy," which ran so rampant in the country, would instantly dissipate if war with France was pursued.[295] It is here where an essential line of demarcation must be noted between Wolcott and his High Federalist contemporaries. Despite the pro-war messaging that Wolcott was inundated with, and with the strained relationship Wolcott held with President Adams, he largely concurred with the specific defensive measures that were being taken by the administration. Unlike his most radical peers, Wolcott did not support a push to bring the nation to war. Moreover, he felt an increase in the size of the new standing army was wholly unnecessary. In alignment with Adams's own views on the matter, Wolcott acted quietly during this period to withhold funding—against the wishes of Secretary of War McHenry—that would have led to the army's expansion. Given the army's "idle" state, he also used his control over the treasury to limit payments to those men currently serving.[296] Eventually, though, Wolcott's views on the matter would be silenced and "overruled" (along with President Adams's), as the combined weight of Washington and Hamilton's more pro-war views (backed by Wolcott's colleagues Pickering and McHenry), forced the administration's more aggressive

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[293] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to John Adams, November 8, 1798, Gibbs, vol. 2, 168-171.

[294] Stephen Higginson to Oliver Wolcott Jr., December 13, 1798, *WJP* (box 2, folder 11).

[295] George Cabot to Oliver Wolcott Jr., February 22, 1799, *WJP* (box 9, folder 4).

[296] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Fisher Ames, December 29, 1799, Gibbs, vol. 2., 316-7.

and militaristic policy towards France.[297] Always attuned to the political winds of the country, it would be wrong to dismiss Wolcott's (and Adams's) concerns to this regard. Wolcott undoubtedly knew that the funding and maintenance of a standing army, with seemingly nothing to do, was likely over time to become dramatically unpopular.[298]

Unbeknownst to Wolcott, the rest of the Cabinet, or other prominent Federalists, during the winter of 1798-1799 President Adams received intelligence from France that indicated a new diplomatic mission would be accepted by the French Directory, and that hope for a subsequent treaty was not an impossibility. Shocking Wolcott, the other members of his Cabinet, and certainly the country, President Adams acted by ordering another diplomatic mission be sent to France in February 1799. Believing that an honorable peace could be achieved, Adams had begun to question the aggressive measures he had taken in the previous year.[299]

Seeing this as a betrayal of principles they all held dear, the extreme members of the Federalist Party—including Wolcott—began to consider more drastic measures to curtail the actions being taken by President Adams. Senator Theodore Sedgwick, in the aftermath of Adams's announcement wrote to Wolcott to articulate his "astonishment" concerning the lack of attention that was being given to the formation of the new army.[300] Sedgwick was implying that as a result of the President's new peace overture with France, the chances of a possible war were fading. Moreover, Sedgwick and Wolcott would have also been displeased to find Adams appointing a substantial number of Democratic-Republican officers in the immediate aftermath

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[297] Bland, 294.

[298] Ibid., 293-6, 310. In large part because of the increased expenditures owing to the army's creation, by the year 1800 the federal budget had nearly doubled.

[299] Ferling, 118-119; McCullough, 523-525.

[300] Theodore Sedgwick to Oliver Wolcott Jr., May 8, 1799, Gibbs, vol. 2, 239.

of the announcement of the second diplomatic mission.[301] The minister Jedidiah Morse also informed Wolcott of his concerns, namely that President Adams had set the United States on a course that was not popular with the vast majority of Americans. Because of Adams's "pacific overtures" toward France, the country remained in "[t]he most trying period," with further "incalculable injury" likely to come.[302]

While it be many months before the new delegation left for France, President Adams's mind was set. Whether the new mission would be successful or not would remain to be seen, but in the interim Wolcott and his inner circle of Hight Federalists were growing increasingly impatient with the volatility and unpredictability of the President. After this bold step, Adams immediately left the capital in Philadelphia and returned home to Massachusetts. The President did not help his cause by choosing to remain sequestered at home in Quincy for more than seven months during this period, all the while his Cabinet was left to manage the seat of government by themselves.[303] As subsequent events would show, in this environment it can be argued that Wolcott and his inner circle were encouraged to take matters into their own hands.

An Absentee President

Historians have long been fascinated with John Adams as a historical figure; his volatile personality, coupled with his open, honest, and personable demeanor has always fascinated scholars. For all his many flaws and mistakes, Adams has found a way to endear himself to historians in the modern era especially. What has received far less attention is Adams's health,

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[301] William J. Murphy, "The Politics of the Additional Army, 1798-1800," *The New England Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (June 1979): 247, https://www.jstor.org/stable/364841.

[302] Jedediah Morse to Oliver Wolcott Jr., June 11, 1799, *WJP* (box 3, folder 10).

[303] McCullough, 526; Fred I. Greenstein, *Inventing the Job of President: Leadership Style from George Washington to Andrew Jackson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 29.

which is likely more responsible for the challenges experienced by the Adams-Wolcott relationship than any specific character traits possessed by either man. A notable and apparently overlooked study has suggested that Adams likely suffered from a severe thyroid condition, which rendered executive action requiring consistent communication and collaboration exceedingly difficult.[304]

By this the time he assumed the office of president, Adams had learned from decades of experience that the most proactive measure he could take to guard against these debilitating symptoms was to leave the public square entirely and return home to Quincy. He had mastered this practice while serving as Vice President, where he took every advantage of being able to return home when the Senate was out of session. One historian has noted that if Adams had been able to stay in Philadelphia, he might have had a greater influence on the Washington administration.[305] Regrettably, once president, Adams left the seat of government for months at a time, with the longest period extending to over half a year in 1799. Adams often claimed he was concerned about the health of his wife, Abigail, but this was likely only partially accurate. Rather, it was his own health that concerned him.

Adams justified his extended absences by contending that he was perfectly capable of performing his duties as president from his home in Quincy. To be sure, Adam was able to work diligently each day, and he regularly sent and received official correspondence to and from the principal officers of government, including the members of his Cabinet.[306] Communication was nonetheless delayed more than it would have been otherwise had Adams consistently resided in

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[304] John Ferling and Lewis E. Braverman, "John Adams' Health Reconsidered," *William and Mary Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (January 1998), 85, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2674324.

[305] Greenstein, 28.

[306] Ferling, *Adams vs.* Jefferson, 121.

Philadelphia with the rest of the government, and more significantly his increasingly disloyal advisors were incentivized to run the government as they best saw fit.

It is Adams's longest period away from the capital, across the majority of the year 1799, that bears further attention. In the aftermath of Adams's announcement of a second peace mission, the High Federalists in his Cabinet, including Wolcott, were becoming increasingly incensed at Adams's behavior and attitude towards France. In his role as Secretary of State, Pickering made every effort to delay and suspend the diplomatic team scheduled to depart that November. When in August Adams received indications that the French were serious about negotiations, he commanded Pickering to deliver final written instructions on the mission to Oliver Ellsworth and William Davie, in advance of their immediate departure.[307] Pickering chose to take his time with the directive from Adams, in the hopes that Adams would change his mind or that news from Europe would lend support to Pickering's contention that negotiating with France was a futile enterprise.[308] When news arrived that Napoleon had overthrown the Directory and taken control of France, Pickering further attempted to persuade Adams (to no avail), that a suspension of the mission war warranted.[309] While it seems evident that Pickering acted as the ringleader of this effort to subvert Adams's will, there is no doubt that Wolcott was a willing, if more subtle accomplice.

In the end, it was Benjamin Stoddert, Adams's Secretary of Navy and perhaps the one truly loyal member of his Cabinet, who informed the President—in so many words—of Wolcott,

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[307] John Adams to Timothy Pickering, August 6, 1799, *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-3852.

[308] Clarfield, *Timothy Pickering and American Diplomacy*, 206-207.

[309] Timothy Pickering to John Adams, September 11, 1799, *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-3964.

Pickering, and McHenry's duplicity. Stoddert wrote during Adams's longest period at home in Quincy, cautioning Adams that "artful designing men" were taking advantage of his extended "absence" by finding ways to avoid following Adams's "Instructions."[310] Stoddert warned that this was particularly dangerous, since in regard to managing the crisis with France these men [Adams's Cabinet] do not "inspire the same degree of confidence" because of their lack of diplomatic experience. It was imperative, according to Stoddert, that Adams return to the capital to deal with this deception.[311]

Taking his Navy Secretary's advice, Adams wrote to Pickering, ordering him to ready the departure of the envoys by the end October.[312] Then Adams quickly made his way to Trenton (the government had been temporarily moved there from Philadelphia due to the Yellow Fever epidemic), where he had a fateful encounter with Alexander Hamilton, who—with the apparent failure of the Cabinet to change Adams's mind—intended to implore Adams to reconsider the new diplomatic mission.[313] If one is to believe Adams's account of the meeting, Hamilton became visibly frustrated at his inability to convince the President of his arguments, which were suspiciously similar to those made by Wolcott and Pickering in the previous days' Cabinet meetings.[314] Perhaps in part because of Hamilton's presence, Adams was unmoving in his

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[310] "Benjamin Stoddert to John Adams, September 13, 1799," *Founders Online,* National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-3971.

[311] Ibid.

[312] John Adams to Timothy Pickering, September 21, 1799, *Founders Online,* National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-3991.

[313] One wonders if Pickering or Wolcott sought Hamilton's help in convincing Adams. As they were all present in Trenton at the time, it is possible they met him in person to suggest he speak to the President. See: Chernow, 597-599.

[314] Clarfield, *Timothy Pickering and American Diplomacy*, 210; for Adams's (and his wife Abigail's) account of the meeting, see footnotes accompanying the following: Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, October 21, 1799, *PAH*, https://rotunda-upress-virginia-edu.ezproxy.liberty.edu/founders/ARHN-01-23-02-0492.

decision to send the second peace mission. William Davie and Oliver Ellsworth would depart for France only two weeks later, to meet the third envoy, William Vans Murray, who was traveling to Paris from the Hague.

Adam's clash with Hamilton at Trenton in October 1799 would foreshadow a more severe conflict to come with Pickering and McHenry in the following year. Moreover, fueled by the reminder of his hatred for Hamilton, Adams realized he had grown more resolute and steadfast in his conviction that he should resist what he felt were the ploys and deceits of his advisors—all of them extreme Federalists. Coupled with the death of George Washington only two months later, Adams was now free to act the part of strong, independent executive that he always envisioned his presidency would be.

Wolcott Survives Adams's Cabinet Purge

By May 1800, Adams had reached his breaking point with his duplicitous Cabinet. The past three years had demonstrated to Adams that expressed greater loyalty to Hamilton than to the sitting President. Adams acted first with McHenry, calling him into a meeting on the fifth of that month under the guise of official business. While their interaction began cordially, in McHenry's words the conversation quickly turned hostile. After berating McHenry for his lackluster conduct at the head of the War Department, which included recommended a suspension of the most recent peace mission, and for heaping unfounded "praise" on Hamilton in hist most recent report to Congress. Adams, then—emotionally unhinged in the words of McHenry—compelled his Secretary of War to resign.[315]

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[315] James McHenry to John McHenry, May 20, 1800, Gibbs, vol. 2, 346-8.

Pickering, not surprisingly, did not go as easily as McHenry. When Adams wrote to request his resignation, Pickering refused, arguing that he did not feel it incumbent upon him to do so, arguing that in addition to his "useful[ness]" in his present position, leaving the State Department would cause an undue financial burden on himself and his family.[316] Adams not at all persuaded, then dismissed Pickering outright.[317]

Informed observers might have assumed that Wolcott's own dismissal was now imminent. Surprisingly, though, Adam decided to retain his Treasury Secretary. Why the President did not choose to fire Wolcott along with Pickering and McHenry remains an open question amongst historians. In many ways Wolcott was equally complicit in the conspiracy against Adams (and will continue to be in the months to come)—a fact of which the latter appeared to be well aware. Adams ultimately felt differently about Wolcott, though, for a number of reasons.

The first is that Adams respected Wolcott and his opinion to a far greater extent than either Pickering or McHenry. This can be seen in the number of times that Adams wrote to Wolcott during the past three years asking for his counsel, in comparison to his other two primary cabinet officers. Moreover, despite the stark ideological differences between the President and his Cabinet, Adams believed Wolcott accorded himself with a measure of respect and honor that was absent from Pickering and McHenry, or any of the other High Federalists that were in their orbit. More directly, as seen in Wolcott's support for Adams's hesitancy

[316] Timothy Pickering to John Adams, May 12, 1800, *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-4334.

[317] John Adams to Timothy Pickering, May 12, 1800, *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-4328.

surrounding the expansion of the army, must not have been lost on the President.[318] A review of the famous retirement correspondence between Adams and Jefferson confirms that Adams's bitterness regarding his time in office—a frequent discussion topic for Adams—did not extend to Wolcott, but instead to other purported conspirers who sought to undermine his administration.[319]

The most plausible explanation, though, for why Adams did not dismiss Wolcott is far more pragmatic. One historian has suggested that Adams's removal of Wolcott would have jeopardized his support from Connecticut in the upcoming election.[320] Given the popularity of the Wolcott name, inflated by the still relatively recent passing of Wolcott's father, Oliver Wolcott Sr., this is somewhat plausible.[321] It is hard to imagine Connecticut's electors with their strong Federalist roots flipping to support Jefferson, but they could switch their allegiance to Federalist Thomas Pinckney, which is what Hamilton of course intended. Conversely, the dismissal of Timothy Pickering, coupled with the appointment of his replacement, the Virginian John Marshall, could be seen as an attempt Adams to bolster his support from the South in the upcoming election.[322]

Perhaps the strongest reason, though, is simply that Adams thought Wolcott was irreplaceable in his current role. No one else could manage the affairs of the Treasury as

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[318] Bland, 315.

[319] In one notable letter to Jefferson, Adams writes: "It is true, I was sufficiently plagued by Ps and Ts. and Ss [Timothy, Pickering, Uriah Tracy, Theodore Sedgwick]. These, however, were but Puppets danced upon the Wires of two Jugglers behind the Scene: and these Jugglers were Hamilton and Washington." John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, June 30, 1813, Lester J. Cappon and John Adams, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 346.

[320] Ferling, 132-3.

[321] The elder Wolcott had been serving as Governor of Connecticut when he passed away in December 1797 at the age of seventy-one.

[322] Ferling, 133.

efficiently and effectively as Wolcott, and this was even more true as the Federalist agenda brought with it increasing pressure to fund its many legislative goals. James McHenry thought as much, when he wrote to his brother about Wolcott surviving Adams's cabinet purge: "Mr. Wolcott is retained for a while, only because, he [Mr. Adams] is afraid of derangements in the affairs of the Treasury."[323] Certainly, Wolcott had proven his worth in no uncertain terms in this regard, dating back to 1789 when Wolcott was first appointed Auditor. Despite the nature of Wolcott's relationship with Hamilton, Adams knew the Treasury Department would suffer from Wolcott's sudden loss to the administration.

This reality stands in stark contrast to Pickering and McHenry, who in Adams's mind, served little benefit to his administration. Their ideological differences aside, Adams was not impressed with the quality of their work or of their counsel. To the latter, Adams believed his knowledge and acumen for foreign affairs and issues of war (the issues upon which the Departments of State and War were based) was far superior to that possessed by Pickering and McHenry. Given Adams's public service dating back to the Revolution, which included his decade overseas in Europe as a foreign diplomat, this was a fair and reasonable conclusion. In short, beyond the aforementioned political considerations, Adams had no need for them.

Adams's decision to retain Wolcott also added an air of credibility to dismissing McHenry and Pickering. Adams's staunchest defenders could argue that the sudden changes in the President's Cabinet were born out of a desire to do what was in the best interest of the country and the administration—a claim that would have been undermined by removing the indispensable Wolcott. Moreover, rather than lashing out irrationally and with malice, Adams showed restraint and wisdom by retaining his Treasury Secretary, despite their fundamental

[323] James McHenry to John McHenry, May 20, 1800, Gibbs, vol. 2, 348.

differences in ideology. The latter, it could be argued, was not the impetus for McHenry and Pickering's dismissal—rather, Adams removed them for a variety of reasons: his inability to trust them, their incompetence, and the lack of value they added to the War and State Departments.

Summer, 1800: Wolcott Faces an Uncertain Future

In the aftermath of Adams's Cabinet purge, the Federalist elite, with Wolcott as one of the principal members, began to discuss the potential of replacing Adams in the Election of 1800. Taking the initiative more than anyone else was Alexander Hamilton, who felt personally wronged by Adams for purported comments made by the President that insinuated Hamilton was part of a "British Faction."[324] Writing to Wolcott, Hamilton reported on his activities in New England that summer, where he claimed more work needed to be done in order to convince local Federalist leaders of Adams's "unfitness" for office, and in turn to support Charles Pinckney for chief executive instead.[325] The same sentiments were also expressed by James McHenry a couple of months after he was forced to resign by Adams. McHenry wrote that Wolcott "needed to do his part" to "secure General Pinckney's election."[326] Another four years of Adams as President, McHenry remarked, would be the "greatest possible curse" that anyone could put upon the country.[327] George Cabot concurred, adding that Adams can no longer be trusted to govern with true Federalist principles, but that it may be difficult to convince the public of this, especially

[324] Alexander Hamilton to Oliver Wolcott Jr., July 1, 1800, *WJP* (box 3, folder 5).

[325] Ibid.

[326] James McHenry to Oliver Wolcott Jr., July 18, 1800, *WJP* (box 2, folder 7).

[327] Ibid.

when public acknowledgement of a necessary change could cause "disorder, discord, and turbulence."[328]

The pessimism associated with this anti-Adams faction of the Federalist Party reached a climax by August, when many started to believe that displacing Adams in favor of Pinckney was not going to be successful.[329] Hamilton, for his part, had now become increasingly paranoid, and Wolcott to a lesser extent was experiencing the same anxieties. Hamilton was increasingly downtrodden over his diminished influence on Adams and the administration, and now more than ever, he felt Washington's absence from the national political scene.[330] At moments like this, Hamilton thought, the great man's absence was all too apparent. Adams's dismissal of Pickering and McHenry, and especially his own dressing down by the President in Trenton, compelled Hamilton to act. For him, this meant picking up his pen. Hamilton had already written to Pickering after the latter's dismissal, requesting any information he might have that could be damaging to Adams. Pickering, while claiming he could not gain access to the confidential material necessary before he left his post, readily agreed to provide anything he could that would be of help.[331]

Hamilton then began to give serious thought to publishing an open letter of his criticisms of Adams—in part to make a last-ditch attempt to prevent Adams's election but more importantly to vindicate his own character. Both Wolcott and Hamilton believed that McHenry and Pickering's removal from the Cabinet alerted the country to the fact that the Federalist Party

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[328] George Cabot to Oliver Wolcott Jr., July 20, 1800, *WJP* (box 9, folder 5).

[329] Ferling, 143.

[330] Washington had passed away the previous December from a sudden illness.

[331] Alexander Hamilton to Timothy Pickering, May 14, 1800, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-24-02-0398; Timothy Pickering to Alexander Hamilton, May 15, 1800, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-24-02-0402.

was far weaker and more divided than anyone could have realized. Adams's bold move had caused a chain reaction that was leading to an ever-widening schism within the party. The High Federalists in particular were especially concerned, as they read this as an ominous sign that the Republicans—seemingly far more united than the Federalists—were going to emerge victorious in the upcoming presidential election taking place at the end of the year. While he had considered drastic action before this time, it was now that Hamilton began to think that something should be done to ensure Adams's defeat. There were obvious risks of fracturing the party even further, but Hamilton believed a Federalist Party led by Adams was not a true party at all. Wolcott concurred wholeheartedly. Hamilton broached his ideas with Federalist members of Congress, with McHenry and Pickering, and of course Wolcott—who remained as true a friend as ever. With his former colleagues' dismissal from the Cabinet Wolcott now held a uniquely close position to President Adams. It came as no surprise that Wolcott, still in service to the Adams administration as Treasury Secretary, was immediately willing to entertain Hamilton's scheming, with one notable exception: he would not provide Hamilton material evidence to which only Wolcott as a current member of the administration had access. Throughout their correspondence that summer and autumn, Wolcott intentionally "evaded" Hamilton's requests when pressed.[332]

Hamilton, while expressing concern for how his conduct behind-the-scenes might reveal Wolcott and others as his likely sources of information, asked the Treasury Secretary for his opinion on the matter.[333] Wolcott, while agreeing with Hamilton in regard to the "violent and inconsistent conduct" of President Adams, was especially hesitant to fully approve of an open

[332] Bland, 320.

[333] Alexander Hamilton to Oliver Wolcott Jr., August 3, 1800, *WJP* (box 3, folder 5).

letter.[334] To Wolcott, any such public statement by Hamilton—no matter how just—will be "attributed to personal resentment" while clouding the merit of the arguments made.[335] Wolcott reiterated a similar sentiment a month later as Hamilton readied his letter for publication. Sensing (correctly as it would turn out), that the letter would have a minimal impact on the election, Wolcott wrote that if the signs point to Adams as the popular choice among the Federalist Party in the upcoming election, then Hamilton's writing "ought to be suppressed."[336]

Wolcott's concerns seem to have been justified. While intending the letter to be disseminated only among an inner circle of important Federalists, its full contents were leaked and quickly became public to the entire country. Historians debate the full impact of Hamilton's letter, but it is now generally agreed that—in addition to greatly harming Hamilton's reputation—it at least somewhat contributed to Adams's defeat in the Election of 1800.

What can be said of Wolcott's role regarding the release of Hamilton's public letter denouncing Adams? Wolcott's vacillation and uncertainty reveals the delicate balance he attempted to strike a careful balance between loyalty to his own president and a desire to act through whatever means necessary, if it ultimately benefitted the country. With hindsight always acting as the best instructor, Hamilton would have done well to listen more carefully to Wolcott's concerns—if the fate of his own reputation and that of the Federalist Party was truly of greatest importance.[337] Where the latter is concerned Adams's defeat signaled the eventual end of the political careers of many prominent Federalists at the national level, including Wolcott.[338]

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[334] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, September 3, 1800, Gibbs, vol. 2, 416-418.

[335] Ibid.

[336] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, October 2, 1800, Gibbs, vol. 2, 430-431.

[337] Bland, 321-3.

[338] Elkins and McKitrick, 739-740; McCullough, 550-552; Chernow, 624-625.

Within a matter of months, the Federalist majorities in Congress would be gone and the strength of the party would all but be permanently confined to concentrated pockets in the New England states.

Like many others, Wolcott had sensed the inevitable defeat of the Federalist Party and the triumph of the Democratic-Republicans as the election season was drawing to a close in November 1800.[339] Unfortunately for the Federalist Party, and President Adams especially, the news of a treaty with France, finally agreed to that December, would come after the ballots for president had already been cast.[340] Before this became known, though, Wolcott made the fateful decision to step down from his post as Treasury Secretary. Several reasons working in conjunction compelled Wolcott's decision. The last two months had demonstrated to Wolcott that the Republican pairing of Jefferson and Aaron Burr were increasingly likely to emerge victorious over the Federalist ticket of Adams and Thomas Pinckney. What is more, the behind-the-scenes scheming that Wolcott had engaged in with Hamilton and others in order to secure Pinckney's election was highly unlikely to succeed. In other words, if the Federalists won the election Adams would retain the presidency. There were simply no possible outcomes that Wolcott could reconcile with the preservation of his character and honor. He saw trivial differences between an Adams or Jefferson victory; either man would undoubtedly bring harm to the country. Wolcott, in essence, wanted to leave the sinking ship while he still could, and return to a simple life in Connecticut away from the political infighting and intrigue that dominated the seat of government in Washington.[341]

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[339] Chernow, 625.

[340] McCullough, 552, 556.

[341] Gibbs, vol. 2, 443; Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Timothy Pickering, December 28, 1800, Gibbs, vol 2., 461.

It is interesting to note the manner of Wolcott's resignation. Both he and Adams found themselves in the capital during the first weeks of November 1800, and yet—despite just a short walk separating the Treasury Building and the President's Mansion—Wolcott chose to send a letter to Adams rather than tender his resignation in person. He may have thought a formal letter for such a decision was more appropriate than a conversation, or perhaps his relationship with Adams had soured to the point that he simply did not want to see him face to face. If the latter was true, Wolcott's resignation letter contained no indications that was the case. Rather, the language was filled with the typical cordiality and respectful language that Wolcott strived to afford all of his colleagues. He told Adams he wished his resignation to be effective at the end of the calendar year, "if agreeable to him," that he desired to be as flexible as he could so that Adams could find a suitable replacement, and so that Wolcott could "transfer the business of the department without injury to the public service."[342] Adams, who was struggling to come to terms with the increasing likelihood of his defeat in the election, responded graciously, and with little surprise that Wolcott had reached this decision. He accepted Wolcott's resignation with "reluctance and regret," noting that Wolcott was "the best and only judge" of such an important decision.[343] This brief yet civil exchange was another reminder that in spite of their ideological differences, both Adams and Wolcott still held a level of respect for one another—one that would come to bear fruit for Wolcott in the months to come.

By the first weeks of December, the election results became known. Adams had been defeated, having received only 65 electoral votes. The Republican candidates, Jefferson and Aaron Burr, were tied at 73. Who would become president between these two men, therefore,

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[342] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to John Adams, November 8, 1800, Gibbs, vol. 2, 443-4.

[343] John Adams to Oliver Wolcott Jr., November 10, 1800, Gibbs, vol 2., 444.

would now be decided by the House of Representatives. Hamilton, following the results closely, wrote to Wolcott to express his desire that Jefferson be chosen over Burr. Hamilton argued that he "shall continue to hope that our [the Federalist Party's] misfortunates are temporary," and that the party runs the risk of them becoming permanent if they openly support Burr. In effect, "the whole responsibility [for Burr's election] will rest with them." Conversely, if and when Jefferson fails as President, "the whole responsibility of bad measures will rest with the anti-Federalists (Republicans)."[344] Wolcott's response indicated he had grown weary of all of the intrigue, and that perhaps—after their failed attempts to bring an election for Thomas Pinckney to fruition—he no longer wished to have an influence over the future of the national government. Wolcott chose not to provide his own position (whether concurring or disagreeing with Hamilton about the danger of Burr's election); rather he merely reported that he had heard of "a prevailing and increasing sentiment" among the Federalist Party that they would support Burr over Jefferson.[345]

Unlike Hamilton, who endlessly absorbed himself in the nation's affairs without an official role in the federal government, and now despaired of the Federalist Party's tragic defeat, Wolcott relished the opportunity to get away from the public spotlight. The finality of his retirement had dulled Wolcott's interest in or care for what was to come next.[346] Writing to his wife Betsy, he exclaimed with satisfaction: "I was never better pleased with any act of my life, than with my resignation at the time and in the manner I did. …I will try to be contented hereafter [after I return home], and doubt not it will be in my power."[347]

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[344] Alexander Hamilton to Oliver Wolcott Jr., December 17, 1800, *WJP* (box 3, folder 5).

[345] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, December 25, 1800, Gibbs, vol. 2, 460.

[346] Gibbs, vol. 2, 487.

[347] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Elizabeth Wolcott, December 31, 1800, Gibbs, vol. 2, 462.

Whether Wolcott believed in the latter statement remains to be seen. His mind was likely more divided than he was willing to let on with friends and family. Wolcott had relished his role in the Treasury Department for the past ten years and believed that he had served his country faithfully and to the best of his ability. If circumstances had allowed it—the continued supremacy of a united Federalist Party, in particular—Wolcott would have preferred to continue as Treasury Secretary. With such an outcome no longer possible, he felt it best to no longer dwell on what could have been.

Instead, Wolcott could take solace in the knowledge that—from the moment he ascended to the top position in the Treasury Department—he had served for nearly six years as the most consequential member of the Washington and Adams's Cabinets. His bureaucratic talents and acumen for managing the government's financial accounts ensured that the Treasury Department ran smoothly, all the while supporting the Federalist agenda as advanced by the party leadership. This was no small achievement; events have shown that with the exception of Hamilton (and even he admitted that Wolcott as comptroller was integral to the Treasury's success) no other man possessed the qualities necessary to lay the foundations for the new federal government.

More than this, though, Wolcott influenced the direction of the country in other matters beyond those directly involved with the Treasury. In particular during the Adams administration, he held a greater level of influence over the nation's affairs than those of other colleagues in the Cabinet. As has been shown, Wolcott's most significant impact was felt in the administration's hawkish stance towards France, which manifested itself in the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts and the creation of a professional, standing army. This was all a credit to Wolcott's amiable and personal character, and the honorable way in which he comported himself. In short, Wolcott had a talent for engaging in productive relationships for the greater good—even with men who

were otherwise exceedingly difficult to collaborate with effectively (John Adams the obvious example.

While his resignation was effective on the last day of December 1800, Wolcott decided he would remain in the capital for a few more weeks thereafter in order to settle his affairs before returning to Connecticut.[348] Words of gratitude poured in from friends and former colleagues, lamenting Wolcott's decision to leave the federal government, but understanding why he felt that now was the right time. As the day approached when he would leave Washington, Wolcott's friends in Congress treated him to a public dinner to honor his achievements and service to the country.[349]

Wolcott ultimately departed the capital before the eventual triumph of Jefferson over Burr in the House of Representatives, in what the former would call the "Revolution of 1800." In the moment, though, Wolcott showed little interest in the outcome. Where his career was concerned, Wolcott was now resigned to an uncertain future; even though years ago he may have thought his career in the federal government had only just begun, he now believed his life in public service was likely over. As his carriage approached Connecticut, Wolcott looked forward to spending more time with his wife and family. He imagined quiet days on his small farm, able to pass the time liberated from the "snares and perils of public life."[350] To Wolcott's surprise, on route to his home a letter would arrive addressed to him that would alter his immediate plans to retire from public service.

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[348] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to John Adams, November 11, 1800, Gibbs, vol 2., 444.

[349] James Ross to Oliver Wolcott Jr., January 24, 1801, Gibbs, vol. 2, 477; Thomas Law to Oliver Wolcott Jr., no date, Gibbs, vol. 2, 478.

[350] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Elizabeth Wolcott, January 22, 1801, Gibbs, vol. 2, 468.

Chapter 5: Interregnum (1800-1815)

> *"It is impossible for this Country to recede from the principles which it has contended for, without ruin. … This will be the general sentiment of the Country; and no body of men who abet the claims of the British Government will be able to maintain their influence with the people. It is impossible to revive while the British system continues. Non-importation, or War, are our alternatives… that will be best for the Country in general."*[351]

A Brief Interlude: Wolcott as Federal Judge

The letter in question that Wolcott received enroute back to Connecticut was from President Adams. Wolcott must have found this curious, since his duties as Treasury Secretary had ended more than a month ago. What did the President want with him? Perhaps now he would finally feel Adams's wrath, despondent and vengeful as he likely was after falling from the seat of power. Adams may have been dense, thought Wolcott, but surely the old man knew the role Wolcott had played in trying to subvert his reelection—after all, he had not tried to hide his differences with Adams as many of his other Federalist allies did, a fact in which he took some matter of pride.[352]

In a move that must have elicited Wolcott's astonishment, Adams had decided to rescue his former Treasury Security's career in public by selecting him to serve as a judge on the new federal Second Circuit Court. Wolcott now held in his hand the commission that made it official,

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[351] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, May 3, 1811, Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott,* 339.

[352] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 303.

signed and dated February 20, 1801 – less than two weeks before Adams would leave office.[353] Wolcott had become one of Adams's infamous "midnight appointments"—the misleading moniker by which the President's last commissions—issued to devoted Federalists for service in the federal judiciary—would eventually become known to history. An appointment as a federal judge on the Second Circuit Court, especially coming from Adams (who Wolcott had every reason to believe did not favor him) was the last thing on his mind. As has been shown, Adams and Wolcott's working relationship during the past five years had been a difficult one; this had been made increasingly so by the highly polarized political environment in which each man found himself. In a sign that Wolcott was well-respected on both sides of the political aisle, even during the political calamity surrounding the Presidential Election of 1800 (and unlike the highly contentious judicial proceeding that are the norm in modern American politics), the Senate confirmed his appointment unanimously.[354]

While Wolcott's inner circle of staunch Federalists had long found fault with the actions taken by the President, this was not the case with the honor given by Adams to his former Secretary of the Treasury. Wolcott's closest friends and political allies were quick to congratulate him on his new post, with Representative Chauncey Goodrich writing immediately to inform Wolcott of the "agreeable" news coming out of Washington concerning his appointment. Upon taking up his service on the Second Circuit, any "embarrassments [Wolcott] may at first experience" due to his inexperience with practicing law, counseled Goodrich, would "soon be overcome."[355] Senator Uriah Tracy wrote that he could not "suppress" his "pleasure"

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[353] Linda K. Kerber, "Oliver Wolcott: Midnight Judge," *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* 32 (1967): 26.

[354] Gibbs, vol. 2, 494-5.

[355] Chauncey Goodrich to Oliver Wolcott Jr., February 18, 1801, *WJP* (box 2, folder 4).

upon hearing of the President's decision to appoint Wolcott.[356] John Marshall also wrote to congratulate Wolcott, suggesting that any tension that existed between him and the President could now be forgotten. Marshall exclaimed that he was hopeful that "a perfect reconciliation" might occur between Adams and Wolcott with the latter's acceptance of this appointment to the Second Circuit.[357] It should be noted that this subtle acknowledgment by Marshall of the conflict that had existed between Wolcott and Adams suggests that the President was not as oblivious to Wolcott's duplicity as some historians have claimed.[358]

As his friends expected, Wolcott would go on to accept the appointment as a federal circuit judge, effective March 28 when he was sworn in by Associate Justice of the Supreme Court William Cushing.[359] Around the same time Wolcott exchanged pleasantries with Adams upon the latter's return to Quincy following the conclusion of his administration. Upon receiving a gracious letter from Wolcott, Adams thanked his former Treasury Secretary for his "able and faithful service," writing that his "talents and integrity" as applied to his new role as a member the Judicial Branch would be indispensable in regard to the future success of the country.[360]

As Wolcott surely knew, according to the Article III of the Constitution, all judges maintained their service as long as they did so under "good behavior." This meant that judges could expect to serve for life, or as long as they desired. It is highly likely that during these first months of 1801 Wolcott believed that this new role in public service—although lacking in the

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[356] Uriah Tracy to Oliver Wolcott Jr., February 20, 1801, in Gibbs, vol. 2, 495.

[357] John Marshall to Oliver Wolcott Jr., February 24, 1801, Gibbs, vol. 2, 495.

[358] Most notably, McCullough, 563.

[359] Kerber, 27.

[360] John Adams to Oliver Wolcott Jr., April 6, 1801, *WJP* (box 4, folder 9).

excitement and influence of his years in the Cabinet—would carry him comfortably into the twilight of his life.

At least initially, the signs were promising for Wolcott. While he was always the first to apologize for his lack of experience in judicial matters, he continued to pride himself—as he had always done—on outworking his peers. Doing so, Wolcott knew, would ensure that with each case he heard his preparation could not be called into question. As a public servant, Wolcott believed this to be his most sacred duty. Per usual, Wolcott got along well with his colleagues on the bench, and he dedicated himself to putting forth "all the faculties" which he "possess[ed]" in order to do his job well.[361]

Unfortunately for Wolcott, a little more than a year after he took his seat on the bench President Thomas Jefferson and his administration disbanded the Second Circuit by repealing the Judiciary Act of 1801. According to one historian, Jefferson almost certainly had been motivated to act by a Second Circuit decision involving Wolcott, where the three-member team ignored the President's request to withhold payment to American naval officers who successfully seized a French ship during the Quasi War. Jefferson instead believed that further investigation would reveal that the funds should be returned to the French government. When the Second Circuit disagreed, they were now in Jefferson's crosshairs. When the Republican Congress acted in response, Wolcott suddenly found himself starting down unemployment once again, and this time—with the Jeffersonian Era continuing to gain more power and momentum, in contrasting to the waning influence of the Federalists—he knew no further government appointments were waiting for him.[362]

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[361] The quote from Wolcott is in Kerber, 27.

[362] Kerber, 27.

In order to protect his integrity and reputation (rather than seeking to persuade Congress to rescind their decision, which he considered highly improbably), Wolcott decided to not leave their posts quietly. Protesting alongside the many other Federalist judges whose livelihoods were now at risk, Wolcott penned a lengthy petition that contended that Jefferson's acted unconstitutionally by disbanding the bulk of the federal court system, including the Second Circuit, when the Judiciary Act of 1801 was repealed. In short, Wolcott argued the Constitution, with its clear messaging surrounding the separation of powers between the three main branches of government, protected the Courts from blatant acts of obstruction like the one in which Jefferson and his allies were presently engaged. Wolcott further charged Jefferson with hypocrisy; his claim that the outgoing Adams administration acted unconstitutionally and deceitfully by appointing dozens of new federal judges carried little weight when Jefferson's own vision for the judiciary, dating back to his views as expressed in his draft of the 1783 Virginia Constitution, which demonstrated that he believed that in any government system judges should be rendered subservient to that government's legislature. In short, even if it were conceded that Wolcott's appointment was made only for political reasons, it was Jefferson's response that was far more egregiously partisan.[363] Wolcott worried that Jefferson and his allies would not stop with the federal judiciary. He lamented that the "passion" of "the present faction" of Jeffersonianism would lead to further attacks on "state constitutions and thus the administration of justice and the respectability of the science of law, throughout the whole country…"[364] According to Wolcott, the Jeffersonians in Congress, in their efforts to crush their

[363] Kerber, 29; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 303-4.

[364] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to William Silghman, June 25, 1802, *WJP* (box 8, folder 3).

political opposition, had allowed their wildest imaginations to run roughshod by allowing such a "repugnant" act to trample over the Constitution.[365]

Wolcott's petition to reject the Jefferson administration's dismantling of the federal courts eventually made its way to Congress, where a pending vote held Wolcott's future career as a judge in the balance. With Republicans in firm control of the House of Representatives, Wolcott's petition did not stand a chance. In January 1803 it was shot down in a vote of 61-37, and with it his service to the federal government, lasting more than ten years, was officially at an end.[366] With this seminal event in his political journey, it is perhaps important to take stock of Wolcott's ideological leanings at this time. His aforementioned abhorrence of the increasingly powerful Jeffersonian Republicans, epitomized by his staunch held views that their takeover of the federal government represented a serious danger for the United States leads one to draw the conclusion that Wolcott remained as committed a High Federalist as he ever was, going back to the early 1790s. There were signs, though, that Wolcott—now that he had reached a key turning point in his career—desired to turn his attention and energy to other matters besides politics, if for no other reason that at the age of forty-two, he still had many years of his working life—and the door now appeared close to future public service.

To be sure, long before the final effort to save his public career had failed, Wolcott began to think about what else he could do in order to provide the necessary financial support for his family to subsist comfortably. As much as their existed a part of Wolcott that relished the thought of living a quiet and honorable life as a yeoman farmer (interestingly, a trait he shared in

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[365] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Roger Griswold, March 23, 1802, *WJP* (box 2, folder 10).

[366] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 305; Kerber, 29.

common with John Adams), this option was not realistic.[367] It was certain, Wolcott knew, that his modest family farm in Litchfield would hardly prove lucrative enough for his family's needs.[368] As Wolcott mulled over his seemingly limited options, fate intervened (in the form of an old friend) to present an exciting opportunity that would prove impossible to resist.

Financial Opportunities in New York

The friend in question was none other than Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton, in an August 1802 letter, outlined a potential commercial venture that would see Wolcott and two other business partners form what would become known as "Oliver Wolcott & Company." The venture would engage in the selling of stocks, the buying and selling of property and goods (domestically and perhaps internationally), and any other financial opportunities that could prove lucrative. The initial start-up money for the company would be provided by a handful of (not coincidentally) longstanding Federalists, including Hamilton, who all possessed significantly more liquid capital than Wolcott. It was expected that Wolcott would provide his own funds in support of the venture only when he was able. Significantly, Hamilton intimated that he and so many other of Wolcott's Federalist friends were aware of the financial sacrifices Wolcott had made in service to his country over the past decade and were thus not willing to hold that against

[367] The first letter ever exchanged between Adams and Wolcott involved the former making a metaphorical reference between Jay's Treaty and the tedious and deliberate process of putting "Lime…under Earth and Weeds and Mud and Straw to make manure." Adams's inclusion of the metaphor suggests that during their in-person interactions they may have bonded in a small way in their mutual understanding of the realities of New England farming. See: John Adams to Oliver Wolcott Jr., September 16, 1795, *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-21-02-0300.

[368] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to James Watson, February 16, 1802, *WJP* (box 8, folder 3); Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 306.

him. No one could argue that Wolcott profited financially through his many years of public service, and for him there was little else more honorable and gratifying.[369]

As a result of Wolcott's meager financial situation, in Hamilton's proposal Wolcott would receive a $3,000 annual salary (more than sufficient to support his family) and a share of the company's profits. In return, Wolcott would function as the exclusive manager. It should be noted that in an evident nod to Wolcott's undeniable administrative skill, it is clear that Hamilton and the other investors in question saw the latter parameter as essential for ensuring the company's success. Hamilton further argued that "when it should be known in Europe that certain characters were of the Company, it would attract a good portion of profitable employment." Hamilton ended his letter by urging Wolcott to not "lightly reject" this opportunity.[370]

The historical evidence suggests that Wolcott did not need long to consider Hamilton's proposal. In his response letter Wolcott acknowledged that he "must immediately engage in some active business, or wholly confine my expenses to the prospects of my family, to what can be produced from a small farm." Wolcott continued that his only reservation was the current "state of Mrs. Wolcott's health, & that of my children are a very tender age." Nonetheless, Wolcott agreed to travel to New York as soon as he was able, where in person Hamilton's proposal could be "maturely considered."[371]

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[369] Alexander Hamilton to Oliver Wolcott Jr., August 14, 1802, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-26-02-0001-0032; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 306-7.

[370] Hamilton implied that he would only contribute his own capital to the venture if Wolcott served as sole manager. See: Alexander Hamilton to Oliver Wolcott Jr., August 14, 1802, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-26-02-0001-0032; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 306-7.

[371] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, August 31, 1802, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-26-02-0001-0038.

The following month Wolcott reached a decision. Acting upon friend and mentor's advice, Wolcott made the fateful choice to restart his life in New York, where he readily admitted that the opportunities for engaging in entrepreneurship were higher than anywhere else in the country. Were he to enter into a private business venture—and no other viable financial options existed for him at that moment—New Work was the place to do it. In addition, it could not have escaped Wolcott's mind that by forming this new company, he gained the opportunity to practice what he had always preached with regard to his views on economic development. As one of the original devotees to Hamilton's economic vision for America, Wolcott continued to champion the growth of the nation's industrial capacity, including manufacturing, shipping, and commerce. He views these the proliferation of these industries as essential for ensuring the nation's future prosperity. Ideally the federal government would assume a leadership role in shifting the United States away from its agricultural foundation, but Wolcott was rightfully pessimistic that the Jefferson administration would do little where that goal was concerned. Nonetheless, Wolcott believed that Oliver Wolcott & Company had the potential to serve as an important template for other entrepreneurial individuals to follow.[372]

Finally, Wolcott also knew that moving to the country's largest city brought with it other important ancillary benefits. The time Wolcott had spent in New York during the first year of Washington's administration, where he quickly came to appreciate the high culture that existed in the city (in comparison to Connecticut) undoubtedly was a contributing factor in this decision. Moreover, dating back to his first years in the Treasury Department, Wolcott always found immense enjoyment in surrounding himself with like-minded individuals from America's most prestigious social classes. Wolcott knew he would not be able to find this at home in rural

[372] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 308.

Litchfield, where his inquisitive mind would be deprived of enlightened conversation on all-things politics, economics, and government.[373]

By the summer of 1803, Wolcott reported to his former Cabinet colleague James McHenry that while he did not anticipate becoming supremely wealthy as the head of the company, he had come to realize that his business partners would ensure that Wolcott and his family would want for nothing. They trusted and respected Wolcott unequivocally and were more than happy to deliver to Wolcott additional funds for the company's investment.[374]

After finding initial success, less than two years later Wolcott suggested the dissolution of Oliver Wolcott & Company so that a new venture could be formed that focused more directly on international trade. In what would become known as the "Litchfield China Trading Company," the faith in Wolcott that his partners always had soon secured an expansion of the new company, which saw considerable profits due to extensive trading in Europe, China, and India. Due to Wolcott's steady leadership, the company prospered through numerous trade voyages, bringing a myriad list of valuable items all across the world: silks, tea, cloth, spices, wheat, flour, and alcohol including wine and gin. By the following year, the growing enterprise began to attract new investors, including Wolcott's brother Frederick. Wolcott wrote to his brother Frederick exclaiming that it was "not reasonable for me to expect" your support "with my affairs," and—even though Wolcott knew Frederick would never suggest otherwise—that he let him know if his participation in the company was causing "too much trouble."[375]

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[373] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 307-310.

[374] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to James McHenry, May 30, 1803, *WJP* (box 2, folder 9).

[375] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, August 16, 1803, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19); Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 312-4. The Wolcott brothers had always been close, and their bond and devotion to one another would only grow stronger during this period. As will be shown, this cordial and respectful relationship would continue for the remainder of their lives.

Wolcott's business dealings in New York broadened further when he partnered with Hamilton again to found the Merchants' Bank, which shortly after incorporation made Wolcott its president. In what perhaps should not have been a surprise to Wolcott or Hamilton, it was this venture that prompted substantial attacks from political foes both and old new. Perhaps the most prominent of these men was Aaron Burr, Jefferson's vice president and a current candidate for governor in New York.[376] Owing to Burr's political clout, Wolcott came under criticism due to the reality that the Merchants' Bank had been formed without the granting of an official incorporation from the state. Wolcott and Hamilton suggested that they had done this in order to break through the political corruption that had always existed within the city, where government officials had always shown favoritism toward certain individuals and special interests.[377]

These arguments remained unconvincing to Wolcott and Hamilton's detractors, who countered that both men only cared for their own financial success, and nothing more.[378] By the spring of 1804, the New York state legislature passed a new law ordering all unincorporated banks to suspend essential operations. Feeling they had no other choice, the bank's board of directors (despite being comprised of longstanding Federalist colleagues), removed Wolcott from his role as president. Wolcott especially lamented what he saw were malicious attacks on his

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[376] Republican Governor George Clinton also played a major role in the attacks on Hamilton and Wolcott. In additional to controlling the governorship, the Republicans held majorities in both houses of the legislature and the Council of Appointment. The latter held the vital responsibility of making political appointments all throughout New York state. Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 322.

[377] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, February -, 1804, *PAH*, https://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-26-02-0001-0163; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 319-321.

[378] Critics of Wolcott and Hamilton included, naturally, the leadership of the Republicans in New York, but also from "anti-Hamilton" Federalists who believed both men's reputations had been irrevocably damaged to the point where permanent disassociation was most prudent for the party's future success. See: Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 319-321.

character, from longstanding politics enemies—and, shockingly—from individuals who he had once counted as friends. Wolcott would not have been surprised at Burr's criticisms, as he was well aware that Burr and Hamilton had carried a longstanding animosity towards one another, dating back nearly fifteen years. Despite arguably holding equal justification in feeling personally wronged by Burr and his allies, Wolcott never shared Hamilton's personal need for the vindication of his character and reputation. Nonetheless, few would have imagined, and surely Wolcott did not, that the Burr-Hamilton rivalry that summer would come to a sudden and tragic end—owing to each man's desire for justice.

The Death of Hamilton

The key turning points in the life of Oliver Wolcott Jr., up until the morning of July 11, 1804, could be best characterized by their substantive impact on Wolcott's career in public service. Whether these were of a more positive nature (his various promotions in the Treasury Department, culminating with his appointment as Treasury Secretary), or negative (his resignation from the Cabinet after the fallout from Election of 1800, or the disbanding of the Second Circuit Court by the Jefferson administration), all pushed Wolcott into a new phase of his life that he would not have reached had these events not occurred. On this July morning, another seminal moment in Wolcott's life occurred, this one far more personal than those aforementioned listed.

On the morning of July 11 Wolcott quickly learned that Hamilton had been shot in a duel with Aaron Burr. The prognosis was grim: Hamilton had been mortally wounded and did not have long to live. Wolcott immediately traveled to the home where Hamilton lay in agony, but he was prevented from seeing his friend for a final time. Wolcott quickly reported the news in a letter home to his wife Betsy, lamenting that now "has perished one of the greatest men of this or

any age." Wolcott learned that Hamilton had apparently chosen to accept his fate in the duel by deciding beforehand not to return fire, for "peculiar reasons which rendered it [the act of dueling] proper to him." Why Hamilton chose this moment for his end baffled Wolcott, and he expressed how his thoughts were "agitated" in part because of how "uncommonly cheerful and gay" Hamilton had appeared only the day before. Wolcott could not help but reflect on the impenetrable question of why brilliant men often carried with them such inexplicable flaws. He wrote of Hamilton's death, "This instance of the derangement of the intellect of a great mind, on a single point, has often been noticed as of the most common yet unaccountable frailties of human nature."[379] In a second letter to Betsy written two days later, Wolcott added that Wolcott's decision was incomprehensible given Hamilton's known abhorrence for dueling, and given that his eldest son Philip had died in a duel less than three years prior. For Wolcott, the only conclusion one could reach was that, for whatever the reason, "the most enlightened men are governed by the most unsound reasons."[380]

While the entire nation mourned the shocking news of Hamilton's death, as his immediate reaction indicates Wolcott's grief was far more personal than most who only knew of him through the newspapers. In the weeks after Hamilton's death, Wolcott did whatever he could to lend support to Hamilton's family by helping to manage his estate. In order to settle Hamilton's debts and to raise further funds for his surviving family, Wolcott raised $80,000 from prominent families all across the northern United States who had always shown their support for Hamilton. Wolcott appears to have been particularly persuasive when he astutely reminded

[379] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Elizabeth Wolcott, July 11, 1804, Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott,* 291-2.

[380] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Elizabeth Wolcott, July 13, 1804, Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott,* 292-3.

certain individuals of how their current level of financial success was due to Hamiltonian economics.[381]

To all Americans who admired Hamilton, Wolcott's great benefactor had left the world far too prematurely—before he had even reached the age of fifty. In addition to helping foster Wolcott's own advancement in public affairs, Hamilton had been a powerful influence on Wolcott with regard to the development and evolution of his political ideology, which at Hamilton's death remained firmly entrenched in the Federalist core values of nationalism, mercantilism, and otherwise strong central government.

Wolcott would never abandon these principles, which he viewed as non-negotiable where good governance was concerned. With that said, in many ways Wolcott becomes more of a moderate politically after Hamilton's death. The reasons for this are difficult to ascertain, but there were likely many contributing factors. First, one can observe that Wolcott's fiery spirit and commitment to the principles of High Federalism would diminish in the years to come, a transformation that can best be explained not only through the melancholy that came with his mentor's death, but also because of the aforementioned lack of support Wolcott received from Federalist elites during the Merchants' Bank controversy. Hamilton's passing, and the national mourning that occurred in its aftermath, also covered up a harsh reality that Wolcott likely would have struggled to admit. Hamilton was simply no longer an impactful national figure, and—had he lived, likely never was going to be again. One historian has commented on the respective reputations of both Burr and Hamilton by arguing that, on the eve of their duel, "history had pretty much passed them by."[382] If Wolcott was honest with himself—and Hamilton's death

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[381] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 325-6.

[382] Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 46.

would have given him ample reason to further contemplate his mentor's legacy—he would have realized that a reevaluation of his own political views, were he to remain relevant in the future, was necessary.

This, coupled with the aforementioned betrayal in the past year Wolcott had felt from Federalist elites, had an impact all its own. As will be shown, while Wolcott would always remain deeply interested in the key issues taking place on the national political scene, his desire for securing an ideologically pure Federalist vision for the country had severely dampened. Simultaneously, he began to contemplate whether or not the Federalist Party, in its current (and severely depleted) form, could serve as the appropriate vehicle for advancing the nation's core interests.[383] Lastly, Wolcott would now be able to fully envelop himself—along with his brother Frederick—in his business affairs, which continued to reap financial benefits for Wolcott and his family. This decision to partially abstain from all-things politics, coupled with the aforementioned feelings of betrayal, further caused his friendships with Federalist firebrands such as Timothy Pickering, Fisher Ames, and George Cabot to cool. As will be shown, Wolcott still had made much on his mind when it came to national politics, but at present he now resigned himself to having little to contribute where influencing the national political scene was concerned.

[383] Less than six months after Hamilton's death, the Federalists were soundly defeated in the Election of 1804, losing the presidency to Jefferson in a landslide, and even further ground in the Senate and the House of Representatives. Connecticut, it should be noted, was one of only two states to deliver its electoral votes to the Federalist candidate for president, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. Wolcott, less prone to adhere to irrational support of a political party at all costs when compared to his Federalist allies, may have further seen the light when it came to the political future of the United States. For further information on the Election of 1804, see: Dumas Malone, *Jefferson The President, First Term: 1801-1805*, vol. 4, *Jefferson and the Ordeal of Liberty* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1970), 433-4.

Family Tragedy and Perseverance

For the moment, Wolcott relished the chance to occupy his mind on matters outside of politics. Much of that had to do with his relationship with his younger brother, Frederick Wolcott. During this period of their respective lives their relationship flourished, as evidenced by their extensive and frequent correspondence. They discussed a wide variety of topics, including their own international business dealings (primarily with China, as discussed in the previous section), their families, and—of the most pertinent interest to this project—the major political stories of the day. It cannot help but be noticed that in so many of Wolcott's letters to Frederick, he requests his younger brother look after his family, his farm, and any other business interests back in Litchfield. Not only does this suggest the level of trust Wolcott had in his brother, but it also reveals that that Wolcott retained strong ties to Connecticut, both in his head and heart, which could not be easily severed merely by working and living in New York.[384]

Wolcott did not shy away from opportunities to visit his brother and his family in Litchfield, revealing in one letter in advance of a late autumn visit that he "wish[ed] to think as little as may be about business," so that he could enjoy the simple pleasures of family. In fact, while Wolcott lived in New York City his four children spent the majority of their time in Connecticut, living with their dear uncle.[385] All the while, Frederick hoped that it would not be long before his older brother would return home and "become [his] neighbor again."[386] To be sure, in the years to come, Wolcott's affinity for his hometown of Litchfield and his home state

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[384] For examples of letters from Oliver to Frederick that show the former asking the latter for assistance back in Connecticut, see: Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, August 16, 1803, December 27, 1806, and September 30, 1807, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

[385] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, November 28, 1807, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19); Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 351-2.

[386] Frederick Wolcott to Oliver Wolcott Jr., June 17, 1812, *WJP* (box 37, folder 6).

would dictate the last great political move of his long career. For now, though, returning to public service was far from Wolcott's mind.

Beyond the powerful fraternal bond between Wolcott and his brother, Wolcott's life came with many new challenges—the majority of them brought on by a series of personal tragedies. Unfortunately for the Wolcotts as a whole, deaths in the family would come to define this first decade of the nineteenth century. In the summer of 1805, the Wolcott brothers' sister, Mary Ann, married to family friend and fellow Federalist Chauncey Goodrich, passed away. Upon receiving the news, to his brother-in-law Wolcott wrote: "Bereavement has reached me at a moment, when my mind, unprepared for the Stroke, and susceptible only of Anguish, is agonized at the prospect of a similar Misfortune. …Though Clouds of adversity darken our Dwellings, yet we will not forget that we have duties to perform."[387] The latter point from Wolcott, that all individuals had a sacred responsibility to persevere in the face of tragedy for the betterment of their communities, was a hallmark of his what he believed most dear.

Wolcott's fear of "a similar Misfortune" was a reference to his wife, Betsy, whose health had declined dramatically over the past few years. Wolcott, in one of his final letters to his wife, revealed that he knew her life in this world was near its end. Despite the lack of corroborating historical evidence, much of his correspondence with Betsy indicates their relationship had always been warm and loving, despite the fact that Wolcott's career had often meant they had to spend prolonged periods of time apart. Wolcott prayed that his wife would "acquiesce [to her fate] with the serenity in the determination of Heaven," and that she never forgets that "Life and conduct must console [her] in respect to the untried Scenes of futurity." Then, in a near-identical

[387] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Chauncey Goodrich, March 18, 1805, Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott*, 295-6.

message to the earlier letter he wrote to his brother-in-law, Wolcott contemplated his own future: "I feel as if I had more weighty duties to perform, than at any former period. …I shall perform them in the best manner in my power."[388] Once again, Wolcott demonstrated his resilience by suggesting that not only would he strive to take care of his remaining family, but that to live in honor he must continue to dedicate his life for the betterment of others.

While early deaths were not uncommon in early nineteenth century America, it still must be speculated to what extent they could have an impact on the individuals of study in question. Even before his wife and sister passed away, Wolcott was no stranger to personal tragedy. Three of his children had died in infancy during the early years of his career in public service. For Wolcott, with respect to his outlook on his life, it must be emphasized again that in the aftermath of these family tragedies he remained as fully committed as ever to soldiering on through the anguish and despair that he knew inevitably came with the passing of time. With respect to Wolcott's political evolution, the effects are less easy to discern. As previously indicated, Wolcott's ardent and often unrestrained commitment to High Federalist principles—revealed most often in private letters, less so in person where he was universally considerable cordial—mellowed from 1805 onwards. Perhaps, upon reflection, Wolcott saw the futility of living constantly in indignation about the direction of the Federalist Party in the aftermath of the Election of 1800, and—furthermore, that it was more appropriate and rational to consider aligning oneself politically with other individuals and political organizations that stood a better chance of positively impacting the country. To the extent that Wolcott ruminated about this during this time in his life, his actions and correspondence in the lead up to the War of 1812

[388] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Elizabeth Wolcott, June 28, 1805, Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott*, 296-7.

intimate strongly that he was no longer the same man politically as he was during the height of Federalist power more than a decade earlier.

The Embargo Act and the Presidential Election of 1808

As the Presidential Election of 1808 approached, the major issue facing the United States was the fallout from the previous year's Embargo Act, a controversial piece of legislation signed into law by President Jefferson. As a response to the ongoing tensions with Great Britain and France (both countries at present were mired in conflict at the height of the Napoleonic Wars) the Embargo Act suspended the trade of all American exports to other countries. Jefferson had advocated for the radical policy as a response to the British's injurious and offensive practice of impressing American seamen into the Royal Navy.

With regard to the Embargo's impact on Wolcott's involvement in trade with China, he did not seem overly worried—for his own company or for his fellow New Englanders, who adamantly protested the legislation's passage and whose financial livelihood was now put at greater risk. He counseled his brother Frederick not to worry, writing that "No Merchants have failed, who were not insolvent before the Embargo." Wolcott further contended that there was "no immediate danger of War" between the United States and Great Britain, and that with regard to their own trading business, their "Ship & Cargo are fully insured against all risks, even War."[389] This ambivalent, perhaps even apologetic stance towards the Embargo Act is notable, as it placed Wolcott at odds with near all other Federalists, who condemned the legislation as especially ruinous to the New England states, who relied so heavily on shipping and trade

[389] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, January 24, 1808, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

overseas for their well-being.[390] To be sure, even in earlier years Wolcott had demonstrated an increasing propensity for deviating from High Federalist orthodoxy. After joining the initial chorus of criticism from the most ardent Federalist thinkers, Wolcott had eventually changed his mind on President Jefferson's landmark decision to purchase the Louisiana Territory from France. At first, his opposition to the Purchase had been almost solely political—he feared the resulting popularity that would come to Republicans would be devastating to the Federalists. (He was not wrong about this.) Over time, though, Wolcott conceded that the Purchase represented a monumental event sure to guarantee the country's growth and power, especially economically. Wolcott's only concern moving forward—one that he always held throughout his life—was whether or not Connecticut would benefit or be hurt.[391]

Naturally, then, Wolcott keenly observed Connecticut's reaction to the Embargo. Opposition to the Embargo Act was in fact strongest in Connecticut, where the state governor, Jonathan Trumbull, adopted the same states' rights argument put forth by Jefferson and Madison in their 1798 Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, who had so fervently protested the Alien and Sedition Acts (legislation that Wolcott had ensured was signed by President Adams). In response to a new law known as the Giles Act, which gave custom officers the authority to make use of state militias in order to enforce the embargo, Governor Trumbull declared the federal government's actions unconstitutional.[392] In a speech in front of the state General Assembly, Trumbull proclaimed:

> Whenever our National Legislature is led to overleap the prescribed bounds of their Constitutional powers, on the state legislatures, in great emergencies, devolved the

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[390] Jack Chatfield, "Guardians of the Commonwealth: The Ideology of Anti-War Federalism in Connecticut, 1812-1815," *Connecticut History* 52, no. 1 (2013): 18.

[391] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 337-8.

[392] Chatfield, 18.

> arduous task—it is a duty, to interpose their protective shield between the rights and liberties of the people, and the assumed powers of the General Government.[393]

As an ardent nationalist, Wolcott found abhorrent this states' rights argument and expressed dismay and shock that it received such widespread support in his home state. In Wolcott's mind, New England Federalists had revealed themselves to care far more about party and self-interest than a commitment to principles, or—more importantly—whether or not the country remained united. Wolcott counseled his brother Frederick to "Pray discourage all the crazy conversations about disunion & revolt. …No scheme can be more impracticable, foolish, & wicked in my opinion."[394] Wolcott saw dangerous the rumors of secession, which in his mind only played into the hands of the Federalist opposition. It is notable that this belief stands in stark contrast to his father, who argued that if Jefferson were elected to the presidency in 1796, that a permanent separation of North and South, however "unhappy for us," would be less so than under the government of a French agent."[395]

Wolcott believed that all true Americans, Republicans or otherwise, would have no choice but to unite against this threat. He prayed that what he was hearing was just idle chatter, and nothing more. Wolcott's disillusionment with his fellow Federalists would only grow exponentially in future years as the potential for war with Great Britain increased.

With the condemnation of the Embargo Act reaching a fever pitch during the summer of 1808, it is no surprise that Wolcott thought the Federalists stood an excellent chance to retake the

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[393] *Connecticut Courant,* March 1, 1809.

[394] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, December 4, 1808, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19); Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 349.

[395] The quote is in Kevin M. Gannon, "Escaping 'Mr. Jefferson's Plan of Destruction': New England Federalists and the Idea of a Northern Confederacy, 1803-1804," *Journal of the Early Republic* 21, no. 3 (2001): 414, https://doi.org/10.2307/3125268.

presidency. Encamped in New York City, Wolcott saw enough criticism of the outgoing Jefferson administration for him to declare that the state was about to return to Federalist control.[396] By October, Wolcott's confidence had increased, writing to his brother that "The chance of ejecting the present administration is growing better."[397] Upon hearing the news that Frederick had been chosen as one of Connecticut's electors, Wolcott further counseled his brother to support the Federalist ticket, adding that Connecticut should "watch critically & decide wisely." If collectively the American people made the wrong choice, Wolcott feared they would "lose our Government & ruin our Country."[398]

By the end of December Wolcott's prediction for a Federalist victory had proven incorrect. While the election was closer than in 1804, James Madison won handily in the Electoral College, 122-47, over Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. At this time, Wolcott penned one of his most extraordinary letters in all of the many he composed for his brother Frederick during their lives. Marked "Private" at the top of the page to indicate what followed was for his brother's eyes only, Wolcott promised to provide "a brief statement of [his] opinions" concerning the election and its aftermath. Far from brief, Wolcott's letter is a substantive exposition responding to all of the many calls being made by Federalists—now that the election did not secure their preferred outcome—to pursue secession. He began by emphasizing the most essential principle when it came to any discussion and conflict over the current state of the nation's government. In spite of any rational disagreement with Republican policy, any project [undertaken by the Federalists] which cannot be executed without producing a Civil War, must

[396] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, May 6, 1808, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

[397] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, October 7, 1808, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

[398] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, November 14, 1808, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

be a bad one." Nothing could be "gain[ed]" by such an outcome, nor would anyone they cared for benefit personally from it.[399] This argument by Wolcott helps explain why he never gave serious consideration to supporting Aaron Burr in 1804—a man known for his secessionist leanings—when Burr sought Federalist Party support that year for his upstart presidential campaign.[400]

Perhaps intentionally choosing to echo some of the same arguments President-Elect James Madison made more than twenty years prior in Federalist No. 10, Wolcott worried that the failure to remain united as a country would be "the signal for Factions to arise, directed by a Foreign Influence." He feared that "the consequence will be, the subjugation of our Country, or the establishment of a despotism."

Moreover, it was "utterly impracticable" for any state to "renounce its name & authority" in favor of leaving the Union, and even if such a proposal had enough popular support in New England, what then? New York, as an increasingly powerful state in its own right, would never consent to a scheme to leave the Union, which in turn would leave New England—in opposition to the United States—as "comparatively a weak state." How ever alarming the damage of the Embargo Act to "The Interest of the Commercial States," disunion could not be the response. After all, New England was not the only region of the country suffering. At present "The Commerce of the [entire] World was suspended." As such, necessary reform would occur in time—regardless of whether or not the Federalists regained control of the federal government. Until "a more quiet & auspicious period" in the country could be reached, all good Americans must do their part "to preserve the forms of [its] institutions."

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[399] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, December 26, 1808, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

[400] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 345-6.

For Wolcott, this meant far more than just staying quiet. In order "to prevent the people from ruining themselves by some act of Rashness," Wolcott believed it necessary for "wise men to moderate & guide their Passions." He concluded: "I am utterly opposed to all violent projects… & will resist them by whoever recommended."[401]

Despite the clarity and firmness of message expressed in his letter to his brother Frederick, Wolcott undoubtedly had mixed feelings because of the individuals at the center of radical sect of Federalist opposition in New England. The men pushing such drastic measures, including secession, were many of Wolcott's former and current friends. Timothy Pickering, Wolcott's colleague in the executive cabinet during the 1790s, was chief among them. As early as 1804 Pickering had been busy with his pen, sending missives all across New England and New York regarding the need to form a "Northern confederacy" in order to resist the spread of egalitarianism under Jeffersonian Republicanism.[402] Fisher Ames, another frequent Wolcott correspondent, wrote at the time that he now held serious reservations about whether or not it was prudent for a group of people to "subordinate" oneself after losing election, as it had been assumed was always necessary.[403] As war with Great Britain could be seen on the horizon (perhaps the greatest threat to the young nation since its founding), Ames and so many other Federalists now argued that a permanent division within the country, along party lines, was preferrable if it meant their natural rights (i.e., their societal and political preferences) would be secured.[404]

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[401] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, December 26, 1808, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

[402] Timothy Pickering to George Cabot, January 29, 1804, Pickering Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, reel 14.

[403] Fisher Ames, "'The Republican VII," Aug. 16, 1804, in W. B. Allen, ed., The Works of Fisher Ames, as published by Seth Ames (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1983).

[404] Gannon, 413-5.

In their mind, they were only acting in the spirit of the revolutionary leaders of ’76, who has reached the same conclusion regarding the relationship between support for one’s country and the protection of individual rights.[405] However unfortunate it might be to consider breaking up the country, these Federalist firebrands believed it may be necessary. For Wolcott, this line of thinking could not be more dangerous, and he has been shown, he was ready—more than he had been at a moment until now—to publicly declare it as such, if it meant he could make a difference in holding the fragile union together.

Breaking Point: The War of 1812 and the Hartford Convention

Over the next few years, the break between Wolcott and the majority of New England Federalists became all the more apparent. Nonetheless, as tension with Great Britain increased during the first years of the Madison administration, Wolcott surprised many of his former Federalist colleagues by expressing support for “Mr. Madison’s War.”[406] Siding with President Madison in the early years of his administration, Wolcott held the British accountable for their repeated “insults and injuries” to the United States by impressing its citizens and seizing its ships.[407] In a call back to the XYZ Affair, where the French government embarrassed American diplomats during the Quasi War of the 1790s, Wolcott further condemned the British for negotiating in poor faith during the present crisis, claiming the British ambassador’s only goal was “to insult and humiliate The Country.”[408] For these reasons, Wolcott eventually came to

[405] Gannon, 415.

[406] The disparaging name given to the war by Federalists.

[407] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, December 1, 1809, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

[408] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, December 7, 1809, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

believe that war with Great Britain was ultimately necessary in order to defend America's interests and its honor.

As the crisis deepened, Wolcott's support for the Madison administration—coupled with his criticisms of the most radical of New England Federalists—never wavered. In the spring of 1811, he counseled his brother Frederick to "resist in the most public and decided manner" the public debate occurring in New Haven, Connecticut at the time that was calling into question the legitimacy of the Madison administration's actions. Wolcott wrote that these "Gentlemen," while worthy of "respect… have totally mistaken the Interests of the Country & their duty. … I will not march with them in the Road to Ruin." One can observe the change in Wolcott's rhetoric, as he considered the growing crisis graver and more serious than ever. He concluded his letter to his brother with the following: "Depend on it, that you and I cannot live long enough to repent the consequences of a mistake on this subject."[409] The message was clear. Nonaction on the part of the Wolcotts and all good Americans was tantamount to complicity with the regard to the potential destruction of the Union.

With regard to the ongoing disputes between Britain and the United States, it was "certainly" the latter which had "the right of the question & [therefore] ought to be supported." In a direct reference to his fellow New England Federalists, who had long since proven to have lost their way when it came to political awareness, Wolcott contended that "no body of men who abet the claims of the British Government will be able to maintain their influence with the people." With regard to New England Federalists who Wolcott believed had taken their criticism too far, he would eventually be proven right. Before long, Wolcott would also be able to reap the benefits of his careful attunement to the pulse and feelings of the American people.

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[409] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, May 11, 1811, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

Soon after Congress formally declared war on Great Britain in June 1812, Wolcott wrote to his brother that the "crisis" that he "long considered inevitable" had finally arrived.[410] He immediately defended President Madison's decision to take the country war, arguing that it was necessary in order to defend New England's mercantile and manufacturing interests from the British, who were intent in dominating the global market in both financial sectors.[411] Far from brooding silently, when given the opportunity Wolcott often spoke publicly regarding the need to support the federal government's prosecution of the war against the British.[412]

According to the Wolcott, the greatest "danger" came "not from the force of the Enemy, but from" the country's "own divisions."[413] Wolcott continued by insinuating that those who did not support the Madison administration during this crisis weakened America. He was particularly incensed by the state governments in New England, whose leaders—when it came to supporting the war effort—refused to do little more than call up their own militias in self-defense.[414] If the longstanding political divisions—those that had threatened the country since its founding—were allowed to widen to the point of "a Civil War," then "liberty, property, & perhaps national independence" would be destroy[ed]."[415] It can be observed that Wolcott's arguments are once again consistent with those he advocated for during America's international crisis at the height of the Quasi War with France. As during this earlier conflict, Wolcott saw war as ultimately necessary if there was no other way for the United States to maintain its reputation and honor.

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[410] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, July 1, 1812, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

[411] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 356.

[412] Purcell, 334.

[413] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, July 1, 1812, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

[414] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 356.

[415] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, July 1, 1812, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

Moreover, Wolcott's position, that during this present conflict with Great Britain America's greatest dangers came from within, is consistent with the concern he expressed over pro-French sentiment that existed in America during the 1790s. The fear permeating through Wolcott's mind regarding the danger for revolution and disorder that might spring forth from the population at large is the same fear he now held; the only difference now was that those inciting disorder were not Republicans, but rather Federalists. It should be noted that in contrast to his Federalist counterparts, who seemed primarily interested in securing governmental power over all else, Wolcott's views on this matter are an illustrative example of his commitment to principles and national unity over party.

As the war between the United States and Britain increased in scale Wolcott continued to labor over his business affairs in New York. In 1810, Wolcott was appointed a member of the board of directors for the New York City branch of the US National Bank. Unfortunately for Wolcott, the charter was not renewed, making his position rather short-lived. Another opportunity soon presented itself, however, when Wolcott was tasked to be president of the Bank of America, which the New York State legislature approved in 1812. The Bank's founding was mired in party politics, with many New York elite intending for it be an exclusively Federalist operation, and one that would make the city the new financial hub of the entire country. While the Bank largely succeeded under his steady direction, Wolcott—now in his mid-fifties—quickly grew weary of the strain that such responsibility required of him. After two years in the role as bank president, Wolcott began to consider other options, but before he could act, he was suddenly removed from the presidency by the Federalist-controlled board of directors. Wolcott could only cry conspiracy, but in the end, he should have not been shocked at his removal; his

outspoken stances in favor of the war had furthered the already present alienation between him and his former political allies.[416]

Meanwhile, Federalist leaders in New England had reached a breaking point by the autumn of 1814. Talk of a potential Northern secession from the Union spread throughout the country, alarming Wolcott. Once news broke that Massachusetts Federalists were planning a convention of representatives from all the New England states to meet in Hartford that December, Wolcott wrote hastily to his brother Frederick that if Massachusetts spearheaded a movement to dissolve the Union, it would "produce a Civil War & ruin the Country."[417]

As has been shown, it was not the first time Wolcott had despaired over the possibility of civil war due to the growing animosity between the Federalist minority in New England and the Jeffersonian Republicans who continued to tighten their hold on federal power. Since at least 1808, even before James Madison's victory in that year's presidential election, Wolcott had been counseling those closest to him to educate the public about the dangers of secessionist rumblings coming from the New England Federalists.[418]

He now wondered how rational men could contemplate such a radical action, thought Wolcott, when Article 1, Section 10 of the Constitution expressly says that "no state can enter into any Treaty, alliance or Confederation nor without the consent of Congress into any agreement or Compact with another state or with a Foreign Power." The path New England Federalists were now considering constituted an open betrayal of the Madison administration and of the Constitution—one that would "render it impossible to maintain free Government in any

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[416] For a more substantial account of Wolcott's banking career in New York City, see: Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 352-6, 366.

[417] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, October 16, 1814, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

[418] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, December 4, 1808, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

form."[419] The Federalists' flirtation with secession, in Wolcott's mind, was also analogous to the actions and behavior of the Republican leadership during the latter half of the 1790s, when they were fiercely critical of the Washington and Adams administrations, to the point of tearing the Union asunder. Wolcott wondered: how could the Federalists not see the blatant contradiction in their own behavior? With a few exceptions, most of Wolcott's longstanding Federalist peers were oblivious to this hypocrisy.[420]

The Hartford Convention, as it would come to be known, represented the highwater mark of Federalist opposition to the War of 1812 and to the Jeffersonian Era of government that its most ardent members believed had gone unchecked since the start of the nineteenth century. For three weeks from December 1814 to January 1815, a group of more than two dozen Federalist leaders from New England met in Hartford, Connecticut to engage in discussion regarding their opposition to the war, which at that moment seemed to have little end in sight. Notably, the most radical Federalists, including Timothy Pickering, were excluded from the Convention so as to not delegitimize its work with talk of secession. Taken out of context, one might argue that the convention's eventual proposals—for example, limiting presidents to one term or requiring a two-thirds majority in Congress in order to declare war—were moderate and reasonable. All possibility of rational understanding of the Federalists' concerns, however, was shattered by the breaking news that the war had ended with the Battle of New Orleans and with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent.[421] In this aftermath, Federalist Party criticisms of the government, coupled with

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[419] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, October 16, 1814, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

[420] Two notable exceptions are David Humphreys and Rufus King. See: Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 363-4.

[421] Shaw Livermore, *The Twilight of Federalism: the Disintegration of the Federalist Party, 1815-1830* (New York: Gordian Press, 1972), 29-30.

their proposals for reform, appeared petty and unpatriotic. Ultimately, the overwhelming embarrassment suffered by the party due to the ill-timed Hartford Convention was something that it would never be able to overcome.

Wolcott, for his own part, expressed contentment that the Treaty of Ghent did not contain any provisions that might constrain American shipping or international business. With the war at an end, Wolcott saw a bright future for America, one in which the country would become more greatly unified behind a strong central government. This expression of hope from Wolcott was a stark contrast from the constant pessimism he had exuded since the Election of 1800.[422]

While many of his peers at the time stated otherwise, the Wolcott of 1815 was largely the same man politically as he was twenty years prior. It was his views toward the Federalist Party that had changed dramatically. While outwardly he may have been seen to retain at least lukewarm feelings toward the only political party that he had ever truly identified with, but his private correspondence told a different story. To Matthew Carey, one of the strongest voices espousing the need for a Hamiltonian economy, Wolcott poured out his true feelings. He conveyed a level of bitterness that for him was totally uncharacteristic:

> I have for nearly ten years, witnessed with grief, indignation, and despondency, the successful perversion of the principles of the Federal[ist] Party, to purposes diametrically opposed to those of its Founders. … I perceive the contrast between what Federalism was and now is, as distinctly as you do. … The distinct avowal of these determinations has subjected me to inconveniences, which I could not have anticipated. Combinations have been formed to destroy my Character, Credit, and Property. I presume they have not been attended, with all the success, which was expected by their Contrivers; but they have deprived me of much of that Society and Comfort, which I feel a consciousness of having merited from my Country. … I make these observations [so] that you may know my sentiments & situation: I am certain that a great number of respectable Men think as I do; but I am surprised to find so little independence, in the avowal of them.[423]

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[422] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 368.

[423] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Matthew Carey, December 16, 1814, Gardiner Collection, Pennsylvania Historical Society, quoted in Livermore, 41.

In this letter Wolcott intimates that the political relationships he once held dear had now been permanently shattered as a result of his open refusal to follow the Federalist Party towards—in his mind—a continued devolution. Moreover, he had long ago decided that he would live with the consequences—no matter how injurious to him personally or professionally. Truth and commitment to principles mattered most to him.

In sum, at this time Wolcott still adhered to the same ideological principles in spite of the disillusionment he felt towards the Federalist Party. Wolcott remained a nationalist first and foremost, and now more than ever he increasingly saw the Republicans (especially with leading Federalists now espousing states' rights arguments) as the best vehicle to bring the country together. Wolcott continued to support mercantilist economic policy, including the fostering of industry, manufacturing, and international trade. The United States in the post-war era, thought Wolcott, was ready to excel and flourish in all of these areas. In sum, up to this point Wolcott's purported political evolution was really just a façade. His political opponents may have labeled him a traitor to the Federalist Party, but the historical evidence indicates that since his entrance onto the national political scene in 1789, Wolcott had largely remained consistent in his views and principles.[424]

A Return Home

As the war came to an end, and nationalistic fervor swept through the country in the aftermath of the January 1815 Battle of New Orleans (which Wolcott himself celebrated), Wolcott finally acted on his strong desire to return home to Connecticut.[425] This sentiment

[424] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 368.

[425] Wolcott proclaimed, "The victory should be ascribed to the interposition of Heaven in favor of our Country." Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Rufus King, February 10, 1815, *WJP* (box 12, folder 8).

stemmed largely from the decision to wrap up his business interests in New York, which he began to do in the summer of 1814. After paying off all remaining debts that were the product of his many business dealings, Wolcott notes that "Though I am not what the world calls rich… this gives me no anxiety, as I hope to preserve a competency, with the character of an honest man."[426] Wolcott's musings with regard to his own financial affairs and his legacy were yet another reminder that he was never motivated by wealth for wealth's sake; rather he desired that he leave the world thought of by his peers as an honorable gentlemen, willing to say and do what was necessary in order for the betterment of his country—even in the face of a fervent opposition. Wolcott had abided by these principles during the recent crisis with Great Britain, with the outcry against his business partnerships with Hamilton and other Federalists in New York City, and with his ousting as the first President of Bank of America. It should come as no surprise that Wolcott would look to these principles yet again during the final chapter of his public career.

The United States had undergone dramatic changes since he had last served in the federal government more than a decade prior. And while Wolcott may have wished for a government appointment that would have given him a second career in federal service, he knew that as long as the Republicans, the party of Jefferson, controlled the legislative and executive branches that would be next to impossible. Instead, prompted by the urging of his Connecticut friends, Wolcott began to set his sights on the governorship of his home state, which—as he keenly observed—was undergoing a political transformation all its own.

[426] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, July 13, 1814, *WFC* (box 3, folder 19).

Chapter 6: A Final Call to Serve (1815-1833)

> *"…[T]he rise, progress, and actual condition of this State, in connection with the American Republics, affords just cause for patriotic exultation. …I desire to thank God, that my existence in this life has been allotted, during a period, distinguished by remarkable events; that I have constantly witnessed his protecting care of our beloved country; that I have seen the tree of liberty, the emblem of our Independence and Union, while it was a recumbent plant, fostered by vigilance, defended by toil, and not unfrequently waters with tears; and that by his favor, I now behold it in the vigor of youthful maturity, standing protected from violation, by the sound heads, glowing hearts, and strong arms of a new generation, elevating its majestic trunk towards Heaven; striking its strong roots in every direction through our social; and expanding its luxuriant branches, over a powerful, united and prosperous Nation."*[427]

Wolcott's Return to Connecticut

When Oliver Wolcott returned home to Litchfield shortly after the War of 1812 came to an official end, he could not help but marvel at the political changes that had occurred in Connecticut since he had last lived there. To be sure, Federalism remained a dominant force—unlike in the vast majority of other states.[428] With that said, the party's longstanding hold on Connecticut's government was staring to slip. In large part due to the efforts spearheaded by his cousin, Alexander Wolcott, the Republican Party had become a substantial and powerful minority voice throughout the state. From the state elections in 1804, through the first months of

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[427] "Governor Oliver Wolcott: Speech at May 1817 Session," in *The Public Records of the State of Connecticut, with the Journal of the Council of Safety and an Appendix*, edited by Forrest Morgan, Leonard Woods Labaree, and Charles J. (Charles Jeremy) Hoadly (Hartford: Press of the Case, Lockwood & Brainard Co., 1894), vol. 18, 234.

[428] The state of Massachusetts was the other, most notable exception. See: James M. Banner Jr., *To The Hartford Convention: The Federalists and the Origins of Party Politics in Massachusetts, 1789-1815* (New York: Alfed A. Knopf, 1970), vii-xii.

1815, the Republicans consistently polled at about one-third the strength of the Federalists. This corresponded to the party's representation in the state legislature as well. While the Republicans had struggled to grow any larger in size during this time, the Federalist leadership was unable to suppress their influence entirely.[429] Now, on all citizens' minds was the aforementioned embarrassment suffered by New England Federalists as a result of the ill-timed Hartford Convention. Connecticut Federalists were more vulnerable than ever before, and for those ambitious men who sought changes to the state's political leadership, now was the time to take advantage. Unbeknownst to Wolcott, his arrival in Connecticut aligned perfectly with a new strategy about to be employed by Republicans to ensure they gained control of the state's government.

When Wolcott arrived home to Litchfield, he had also changed dramatically, both inwardly and outwardly. When he had decided to move his family to New York more than a decade prior at the conclusion of his service to the federal government, Wolcott could still be considered a young man (especially politically-speaking) at only the age of forty-two. Now, approaching sixty years of age, his physical decline had been notable. Never a slender man, Wolcott now carried more weight on his hips than ever before, and painful gout constantly troubled him. In addition to the physical ailments that came with older age, Wolcott's return to Connecticut came on the heels of a number of personal tragedies. As previously noted, his wife Betsy had died of consumption nearly a decade before, having not even reached the age of forty. Three of Wolcott's children had also died in infancy, and he also recently lost his sisters Mary Ann and Laura due to illness.[430] As Wolcott became more experienced in coping with the deaths

[429] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 381; Purcell, 273-4, 287-297.

[430] "The Ledger: Oliver Wolcott Jr.," Litchfield Historical Society, accessed February 20, 2024, https://ledger.litchfieldhistoricalsociety.org/ledger/students/2844.

of those closest to him, Wolcott remained committed to carrying on with the duties of life as best he could. Nothing less would suffice when it came to his own legacy, especially when judged through God's eyes. When Wolcott learned of his sister-in-law's passing, he offered wisdom and counsel to his grieving brother Fredrick, crafting a message that he undoubtedly applied to his own life:

> Your probation, my dear Brother, is not yet finished, and I hope you will not forget that your exaltation is also to depend on your conduct. To yield to despondency, would be to desert the station in which the Providence of God has placed you. You have new motives to preserve your life and the vigor of your mind, that you may the more efficiently perform the additional duties for which you are responsible to your Children, your Friends, and your Country. Unless we discharge these duties, we are not permitted to hope for the approbation of Heaven.[431]

It is reasonable to assume that with each successive personal tragedy Wolcott became more concerned about the country's future, and the ultimate legacy that he too would leave when he inevitably passed on to the next life. To be sure, now more than a quarter century after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, he represented an increasingly rare, living link to that first generation of American leaders who sacrificed to establish the foundation of the country during the 1790s. And while he still retained many of the political and ideological principles that had made him one of the most committed Federalists during the 1790s, his zeal for conservativism had considerably waned. As will be shown, Wolcott in his older years was in many ways progressive, especially given his background, and in the context of the times.[432]

The reality that Wolcott believed he was entering the concluding chapter of his life was a key motivator for his decision to leave New York. While a large part of him enjoyed life in the

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[431] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Frederick Wolcott, April 9, 1812, Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott,* 340.

[432] Jarvis Means Morse, *A Neglected Period of Connecticut's History, 1818-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), 26-7.

city—especially the opportunity it provided him to observe and participate in the latest innovations regarding manufacturing, trade, and shipping—Wolcott had increasingly become worn out by the stress and anxiety of the daily grind that maintaining a prosperous business in New York required. These had also become more prevalent in recent years due to his outspoken support for the Madison Administration and the War of 1812, which alienated a sizable portion of his stridently Federalist-leaning business contacts.

Nevertheless, Wolcott had done well for himself financially during the past decade, which now made a change of scenery all the more possible. For Wolcott, a return to Litchfield promised a quieter life where his remaining days could be spent as a simpler farmer.[433] It should be noted that this calling that Wolcott felt was not unsimilar to the one that John Adams, experienced when he left the federal government in 1800 upon losing that year's presidential election. Unlike Adams, however, Wolcott's journey to retirement would be quickly interrupted by one last, critical stop on the public stage.

Tapped as a Gubernatorial Candidate

Even for a man especially well-attuned to the political winds of his given environment, Wolcott must have been surprised when he learned in early 1816 that he had been chosen as a candidate for governor by the newly formed Tolerationist Party. The Tolerationists, Wolcott soon learned, were an amalgamation of various political groups, brought together by a united vision that stressed the need for reform in Connecticut. Of perhaps greatest concern was the significant increase in Connecticut residents leaving the state and moving west, in order to find greater financial opportunities. This rapid loss of the state's most productive citizens, if no

[433] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 378.

changes could be found to mitigate this westward migration, was certain to cripple Connecticut's economy.[434] Taking full advantage of the state's highly precipitous situation, the creation of the Tolerationist Party was spearheaded by Connecticut Republicans, who realized—after more than a decade of trying—that they could not overthrow the majority Federalists alone. Ultimately, they chose to unite with other disillusioned groups in the state, many of them religious; outside of the majority Congregationalist citizenry these included Episcopalians, Baptists, and Methodists.[435]

For the leading Tolerationists who chose him, the selection of Wolcott as their gubernatorial candidate was intended as the final, critical move to secure control of the state's governmental apparatus. Without Wolcott at the head of their party, the Tolerationists' chances of doing so, at least in this specific moment, would have been severely mitigated. The party's choice of Wolcott as their gubernatorial candidate made strategic sense for a number of significant reasons. Though he had been raised a Congregationalist, Wolcott's allegiance to the Church was ambivalent at best, which indicated that he would be supportive of the denomination's disestablishment in the state—a major pillar of the party's platform, and of Republicans especially. Uniquely, owing to his residency in New York, Wolcott could also be pitched as an outsider who had not been present during the fractious political environment of the last decade. Simultaneously, the Wolcott name still carried substantial weight; no one could claim that in spite of his absence from the state over the past fifteen years that Connecticut was not Oliver Wolcott Jr.'s true home. Finally, the claim made by some citizens that Wolcott remained an ardent Federalist was marginalized by his ardent support for the War of 1812—a

[434] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 378-9.

[435] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 386; Alan W. Brownsword, "The Constitution of 1818 and Political Afterthoughts, 1800-1840," *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* 30 (1965): 5.

position that had alienated the majority of his former Federalist colleagues and friends. In fact, many leading Republicans in the state applauded Wolcott for public support of the Madison administration. The state's newspaper editors noticed as well; where once Wolcott could expect to find criticism from leading Republican papers, now he found commendation. It can be concluded that the Tolerationist Party—far from dangerous and unhinged as their critics charged—demonstrated their political savviness by selecting the moderate Wolcott as their gubernational pick.[436]

Wolcott's ambivalence towards the nomination reflected his continued allegiance to traditional views towards public service. As he exclaimed to his son-in-law, George Gibbs, regardless of his own views—he claimed to be uninterested in the office—if called upon by his fellow citizens Wolcott believed it was his duty to serve. Even so, he refused to publicly campaign, nor would he otherwise proclaim his interest in the office.[437] This mindset was keeping with the spirit of America's earliest leaders, including Adams, Jefferson, and Washington, who maintained the same allegiance to the appearance of indifference and modesty when it came to seeking higher office. As the 1816 state elections approached, Wolcott wrote to Rufus King that he did not want his peers to think him "churlish" and ungrateful for the nomination; moreover he contended that if elected as governor he did not think "the interests of religion, morals, and good order [in the state] would be endangered."[438] In the end, Wolcott agreed to be the party's nominee not only for these reasons, but because he found the three core

[436] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 390-1; Purcell, 334, 337; Alan W. Brownsword, "The Constitution of 1818," 5; *American Mercury*, August 23, 1814, March 26, 1816. The Tolerationists, in their desire to reshape the church-state relationship in Connecticut, stressed through their campaign messaging that they were open and accepting of all religious denominations.

[437] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Colonel George Gibbs, April 7, 1817, *WJP* (box 29, folder 10).

[438] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Rufus King, September 2, 1816, *WJP* (box 12, folder 9).

goals of the party's platform—a new constitution to replace Connecticut's original colonial charter, the official disestablishment of Congregationalism as the official state church, and increased suffrage for Connecticut residents—as especially noble.[439]

Unfortunately for Wolcott and the Tolerationists, the fall 1816 elections did not produce the desired results where the gubernatorial race was concerned. While incumbent Governor John Cotton Smith narrowly defeated Wolcott, any objective political analyst could at best consider this a pyrrhic victory for the Federalist Party.[440] Their decision to run a highly "negative" campaign, which included scurrilous attacks on their Republican counterparts (most notably, that their leading members were all "irreligious"), ultimately had significant drawbacks, as the other races that election season indicated.[441] For his own part, Wolcott faced the most severe attacks—both in this election cycle and the next. Judge Tapping Reeve, the great Federalist legal mind who had trained Wolcott in the law nearly forty years prior, denigrated his former student as "the greatest scoundrel in the whole host of Tolerationists."[442] Many of the leading Federalist newspapers in Connecticut further accused Wolcott of political "apostasy" for abandoning the Federalist Party, and for his incessant "scheming" in order to fulfill his "ambition" of acquiring the governorship.[443]

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[439] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 389, 392.

[440] Purcell, 339. The vote total for the election was as follows: Smith – 11,386; Wolcott – 10,170. Wolcott lost by less than five percentage points.

[441] Ibid., 338.

[442] Quoted in Alan W. Brownsword, "Connecticut Political Patterns, 1817-1828," (Ph.D. diss., The University of Wisconsin, 1962), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, 48.

[443] Ibid. The papers in question include the *Connecticut Journal*, the *Connecticut Mirror*, and the *American Mercury*.

In the end, despite Wolcott's defeat the Tolerationists made substantial gains in the legislature (winning seven more seats than the Republican Party ever had as a minority), and nearly every county in the state expressed record levels of support for this new coalition reform party.[444]

A Changing of the Guard: Wolcott's Election as Governor

Riding this wave of momentum, during the following gubernatorial election cycle the outcome would prove far different. In this contest Wolcott and the Tolerationists reversed the previous election's outcome, winning this time by just 600 votes. Nearly all observers of this critical moment in Connecticut's history, and that of the future of Federalist Party in the state itself, realized its significance. Wolcott's election, according to the *Boston Patriot*, had ushered in "the destruction of the sheet anchor of Federalism's last hope."[445] Tolerationists in Connecticut, along with even some disaffected Federalists, proclaimed the newly elected Wolcott as "Governor of the State, not of a Party"—a sign of the unifying impact his ascendence was expect to have on the state and its people.[446] More than five thousand additional people voted in this election cycle than the previous, indicating again that the state's citizens realized this moment in Connecticut's history was significant turning point. In addition to the governorship, the Tolerationists also secured a majority in the House of Representatives for the first time, a critical victory arguably more important than taking control of the executive branch.[447] Wolcott, gratified with the honor bestowed upon him, speculated that nearly ninety percent of Litchfield

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[444] Purcell, 340.

[445] Quoted in the *American Mercury*, April 25, 1817.

[446] Purcell, 351.

[447] *CT-PR*, vol. 18, xxxi.

voters had voted for him, "though many of them dare not confess it." To explain why he emerged victorious in this cycle but had failed in the previous, Wolcott remarked of his fellow Connecticut citizens: when "a strange animal as they consider me comes along, they first attempt to knock him on the head. If they find him too strong, they will make peace on pretty fair terms & like him the better for having resisted them."[448] Throughout his life Wolcott nearly always expressed an unwillingness to laud his own conduct, but this pivotal moment in his public career surely counted as a necessary exception.

One cannot help but observe the parallels between this turn of events in Connecticut's political history to that of the country itself just twenty years prior. In the 1796 Presidential Election, John Adams had emerged victorious over Thomas Jefferson by just three votes. In many ways this narrow victory foreshadowed what was to come. Four years later it was Jefferson who defeated Adams in what became known as the Revolution of 1800—a turning point in American history that ushered in more than two decades of supremacy in the federal government for Jeffersonian Republicanism. During this time, it had been Wolcott on the losing side. As a committed High Federalist, he had railed against the dangers of revolutionary thought coming from Jefferson and his disciples and had advocated plainly the necessity of preserving and defending America's present social and political order—as best represented by the leadership of Federalist Party. As has been shown, these arguments fell flat nationally during the late 1790s, and they did so again when Connecticut Federalists championed them again in the 1816 and 1817 state elections. This time, however, Wolcott's name would not be lending credibility to these arguments, which he clearly believed now were futile and exaggerated.[449]

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[448] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Colonel George Gibbs, April 7, 1817, *WJP* (box 29, folder 10); Brownsword, "Connecticut Political Patterns," 75-6.

[449] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 393-4.

Despite the party label, coupled with the hatred exhibited towards him by Connecticut Federalists, Wolcott had not become a true Republican or Jeffersonian. In his mind he was still a Federalist, albeit perhaps a more "moderate" one than he had been in the past.[450] In an apparent acknowledgement that there were worse choices for governor than Wolcott, the pro-Federalist *Connecticut Courant* conceded that Wolcott's election represented an appropriate call to cast aside "the spirit of party," which had so recently damaged and depressed the self-esteem of the state's citizens.[451] Highly motivated by this sudden wave of near-universal confidence in his governorship, and that of Connecticut's future, Wolcott now stood ready to guide the state forward into a new and prosperous era.

Wolcott's moment came early on a brisk spring day in May 1817, where he delivered his public comments as governor. One historian has aptly referred to Wolcott, during his ten years as governor of Connecticut, as a "conservative reformer."[452] Though oxymoronic, the label accurately captures Wolcott's political ideology during this final stage of his public career. One can argue that the ultimate legacy of his time as governor was initially crafted during this first inaugural address. In his opening message to Connecticut's citizens, Wolcott presented a thoughtful opening statement that demonstrated his ideas to rectify many of the state's ongoing social, cultural, and economic issues. He began his speech humbly, acknowledging his relative inexperience in taking on the role of governor, as well as conceding his "services" to the United States had been conducted successfully only through "the guidance of illustrious men, who were

[450] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 393-4.

[451] *Connecticut Courant,* June 14, 1817.

[452] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 376.

among the founders of our Nation."[453] The deference he showed to America's founding generation was typical of Wolcott; throughout his latter life he would express that his own role in the nation's early history should be assessed in especially modest terms.

To address the state's problems Wolcott sought to offer a moderate vision for the state's future, one that would please the two major factions that had united to secure his election: Jeffersonian Republicans, and the more liberal-leaning Federalists who had become disillusions with the radicals in the party in the aftermath of the Hartford Convention. At this point in time, Wolcott's political views most closely aligned with the group of politicians who would become known as the National Republicans, whose prominence and influence in the country would grow exponentially during the successful two terms of President James Monroe. A quarter century after he played a key role in its implementation during the first years of the Washington Administration, Wolcott remained staunchly committed to Hamiltonian economics, and its call for government intervention to stimulate market growth. At the same time Wolcott sought to acknowledge traditional Jeffersonian principles—namely that government should remain limited in its size and influence.[454]

Much of Wolcott's opening speech focused on the plight of Connecticut's lower and middle class, whose members had been leaving the state in droves for greater financial opportunities elsewhere. In particular Wolcott criticized the overcomplicated tax system in the state, which were often "arbitrary and unequal," and ultimately punishing to the average Connecticut farmer.[455] If the state's tax system could become more balanced, the burden on the

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[453] Oliver Wolcott Jr., "Speech at May 1817 Session," *CT-PR*, vol. 18, 226.

[454] *CT-PR*, vol. 18, xxxi-xxxii.

[455] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 396.

lower and middle class would be reduced and thus the desire to emigrate would be dramatically lessened. Moreover, due to the economic turmoil faced by the state in the aftermath of the War of 1812, Wolcott called for a greater investment in industry and manufacturing, as well as the modernization of the state's agricultural sector in order to increase efficiency. This was especially needed in order to ensure Connecticut could prosper independently and without the aid and assistance of neighboring states.[456] It seems likely that Wolcott's desire to boost industrial growth in Connecticut originated at least in part from his many years living in New York City, where he saw firsthand how innovation and entrepreneurial spirit could bring financial benefits to all members of a community. While full implementation would take a few years, by 1821 many of Wolcott's suggested reforms became law. Property taxes were streamlined in order to benefit the state's yeoman class, and other regulations were lessened so as to benefit labor in all sectors. Emigration as well slowed to a more manageable rate.[457]

Wolcott also advocated for other areas of reform in his speech. Echoing the message of Hamilton in his famous Federalist No. 78, Wolcott also spoke of his desire to reform the state's judicial system that in his mind promoted a dangerous lack of independence. Instead of only one-year terms, judges should continue to serve "during good behavior" – language which aligned with Article III of the US Constitution.[458] It appears likely that Wolcott, always a keen observer of major events on the national political scene, was influenced by the recent history of the Supreme Court under John Marshall, which had done much in the last fifteen years with its

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[456] *CT-PR*, vol. 18, xxxii-xxxiii; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 398.

[457] Purcell, 415-6.

[458] Oliver Wolcott Jr., "Speech at May 1817 Session," *CT-PR*, vol. 18, 229-230; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 398; Alexander Hamilton, Federalist Papers: No. 78, The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, accessed November 18, 2024, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed78.asp.

independence to establish a strong national government in the face of persistent opposition from Republicans in Congress, and in the Executive Branch. While Wolcott would fail to secure certain reforms specific to lifetime appointments, the independence of the state's courts became guaranteed the following year with a constitutional measure that prevented members of legislature from serving concurrently as a judge.[459]

Of perhaps greatest importance—especially to Wolcott—came with his commentary on the state of agricultural and manufacturing in Connecticut. Consistent with his longstanding views on the government's responsibility for the economy's well-being, Wolcott called for significant investments in both financial sectors, coupled with tax reform to limit the burden imposed on those industries. Wolcott's motivation for these ideas stemmed from his desire to create and maintain a stable and orderly society. Conversely, thought Wolcott, without government's precise management of the economy, calamity and suffering was sure to ensue.[460] These views reflected the same philosophy advocated by Alexander Hamilton and Wolcott more than a quarter-century prior during the foundation of the Treasury Department.

All who reported on Wolcott's opening speech as governor considered it a tremendous success; this harmonious reception foreshadowed a seminal event in Connecticut's history about to take place.[461]

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[459] Purcell, 405-6.

[460] Oliver Wolcott Jr., "Speech at May 1817 Session," *CT-PR*, vol. 18, 227-228; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 398-9.

[461] Purcell, 351-2.

A New Constitution

With the Tolerationist Party possessing more power in Connecticut than ever before, it is no surprise that their longstanding desire for a new state constitution was finally realized. Anticipating the seminal event about to take place, Wolcott began his May 1818 speech to the General Assembly by illuminating his views on the matter. He believed that no citizen of Connecticut, in their calls for constitutional reform, wanted to "impair [the state's] institutions, or to abridge any of the rights and privileges of the people." In fact, Wolcott contended that "The State of Connecticut, as at present constituted" was "the most venerable and precious monument of republican government existing among men." A new constitution, as Wolcott saw it, would "more precisely define" the present role of "the legislative, executive, and judicial authorities" of the state government, and expressly note "the rights of the people [already] declared and acknowledged."[462] With regard to his governorship, Wolcott's views on the need for a new constitution, it can be said, reinforced his desire to play the role of unifier and moderator. His words and actions demonstrate his tactful ability to lend credibility to two disparate groups within the state--those who wished to preserve and protect Connecticut's Standing Order, and those who desired reform.

Just two months after Wolcott's address, and a little more than one year after Wolcott's election as governor, a convention took place to develop a new governing document to replace the state's original colonial charter. With Tolerationists firmly in control of the proceedings, Wolcott was selected to preside over the convention as president. Wolcott counted himself as a steadfast supporter of a new constitution, but he nonetheless wished to preserve the present order in Connecticut that he so deeply valued. Federalists, there numbers in the General Assembly now

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[462] "Governor Oliver Wolcott: Opening Speech at the May 1818 Session," *CT-PR,* vol. 19, 107.

smaller than they had ever been, no longer had the influence to object to the convention outright, and simply tried in vain to protect the old system of government under the original colonial charter as much as possible. Notably, seven of the delegates present at the convention had also ratified the United States Constitution thirty years prior. In the end, the government document that emerged from the convention reflected closely the spirit and ideas of its more famous predecessor.[463]

As such, perhaps the most notable consequence of the new Connecticut constitution was the inclusion of a declaration of rights. As in the Federal Bill of Rights, Connecticut's included strong protections for freedom of expression, the right to a jury of one's peers and to that of a speedy and impartial trial, as well as the denial of government to perform unreasonable and unauthorized searches and seizures.[464] While it can be argued that many of these rights were in fact guaranteed in Connecticut under the old colonial charter, by the early nineteenth century the vast majority of citizens across all states began to feel that only when their rights were expressly written could they be protected.[465] Wolcott favored the inclusion of a written declaration of rights, but it can be argued that he was simply looking to establish without question the natural rights that the state had always guaranteed more or less since its founding.

The most notable inclusion in the Connecticut constitution's declaration of rights, it can be argued, concerned the right of all people to freely practice their own religion. It is evident from Wolcott's initial address to the delegates that he counted himself a firm advocate of this provision, although he worried about those citizens who might abstain entirely from their duties

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[463] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 402-3.

[464] Ibid., 403-4.

[465] Christopher Collier, "The Connecticut Declaration of Rights before the Constitution of 1818: A Victim of Revolutionary Redefinition," *Connecticut Law Review* 15, no. 1 (1982): 98.

before God. Wolcott wished for every Connecticut to be required to publicly maintain a church, and that all residents would be taxed to support it regardless of their religious affiliation. These ideas did not find their way into the constitution; notably, a clause was inserted that gave individuals the right to remove oneself from a particular church upon written notice. Doing so would make them exempt from taxation that went to the church in question.[466] While on the surface an idea that seemed to strongly favor those advocating for permanent separation of church and state, the written exemption clause in effect forced individuals to publicly declare their dissociation from a given church. That this could not be done in secret was a nod to the minority Federalist influence on the convention, who hoped to prevent religious dissenters from having an easy time of suspending their religious support.[467]

In the end, much of these reforms concerning religion can be credited to Wolcott's steady and moderating hand over the convention's proceedings, but also to the growing view among Christian minority groups (Episcopalians, especially), who had grown frustrated with the favoritism the state expressed towards Congregationalism. With the ratification of the new constitution, disestablishment of religion in Connecticut was guaranteed.[468] Federalists protested the new religious clauses in vain, claiming that Congregationalists especially would now be forced to lend financial support to other denominations.[469] This was at best a weak and misleading argument. As one historian put it, Congregationalists were merely upset that they

[466] Purcell, 400-1; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 404.

[467] Paula G. Shakelton, "Remembering What Cannot Be Forgotten: Using History as a Source of Law in Interpreting the Religion Clauses of the Connecticut Constitution," *Emory Law Journal* 52, no. 2 (2003): 1035-6.

[468] Brownsword, "The Constitution of 1818," 3.

[469] Brownsword, "Connecticut Political Patterns," 40.

"could no longer get together to march in procession, drink rum, and decide who was to be governor of Connecticut."[470]

A substantial lowering of the suffrage requirement marked another landmark reform that came out of the convention. By more or less eliminating land ownership and income requirements, the new constitution essentially guaranteed universal suffrage to all white men. On voting day, all men were also declared to be exempt from civil arrest, so that no barriers against the fulfillment of this sacred right could be initiated. Ultimately, Wolcott's reasoning for championing suffrage reform likely had a more pragmatic element than what was visible on the surface. Writing to Rufus King years after the convention, Wolcott admitted that for at least one hundred years little to no enforcement of the state's strict voting laws had taken place. Rather, the primary impetus for supporting suffrage reform was to enable voting "to be done directly and without trouble, which before was habitually done indirectly, with some trouble, but with no considerable risk, or any disgrace."[471] As evidence that enforcement of voting restrictions—and in particular the requirement to own property—was not being enforced, a record number of Connecticut residents had voted in the 1817 elections. Conversely, after the property requirement was dropped, only a marginal increase was shown in the voting numbers for subsequent elections.[472] In other words, the material effect of suffrage reform in Connecticut as a result of the constitutional convent appears to be limited. Nonetheless, Wolcott deserves credit for promoting greater democratization within Connecticut's election system, and for providing the final straw in ridding the state of an archaic law.

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[470] Morse, 3.

[471] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Rufus King, October 4, 1821, *WJP* (box 26, folder 9).

[472] Brownsword, "Connecticut Political Patterns," 27.

Wolcott's support for these measures also aligned with the Assembly's striking down of Connecticut's archaic "Stand-Up Law" the previous autumn.[473] This controversial law had required voting men to stand in order to declare their official support for particular candidates, which in turn put considerable pressure on dissenting voices in the General Assembly to remain quiet. Naturally, this has long favored the once-dominant Federalist Party. From now on, secret balloting would forever be enshrined in Connecticut.[474] Presiding over the convention, the fact that Wolcott chose to support this change demonstrates how far he drifted away from his Federalist roots.

Finally, in keeping with the structure of government established in the United States Constitution, the new Connecticut governing document officially stipulated that there would be three branches of government in the state: legislative, executive, and judiciary. These branches would possess separate powers and operate independent of one another, which—as previously shown—Wolcott in particular championed with regard to the states' judges and their ability to check the power of the General Assembly, when necessary. Where the judicial branch was concerned, judges could no longer be removed by the legislature unless they were successfully impeached.[475] Collectively, these changes on the surface do not appear revolutionary, given the presence of these clauses in other state constitutions throughout the nation. Importantly, though, as one historian has noted, "Connecticut had (finally) joined other states along the path of an American form of Constitutionalism."[476]

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[473] Michael Besso, "A Study in Constitutional Development: The Effect of Political and Social Institutions on the Campaign for a Written Constitution in Connecticut," *Studies in American Political Development* 17, no. 2 (2003): 146n, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X03000099.

[474] Purcell, 194; Brownsword, "Connecticut Political Patterns," 27-8.

[475] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 406.

[476] Besso, 146.

Overall, while Wolcott's official role at the convention was largely that of a moderator, his dignified presence and calls for a balance between reform and moderation had a significant impact on the proceedings. As evidence that his role was far from ceremonial, the assembled delegated held a vote at the close of the convention, thanking Wolcott for his performance as president.[477] It can only be concluded that while Wolcott was one of many influential men that influenced the ratification of Connecticut's new constitution in 1818, his presence added weight and gravity to the proceedings, and otherwise ensured that substantive reforms were enacted, all the while preserving certain core features of the state's "Standing Order."

Months after the constitution's ratification, Wolcott assessed that the new governing document amounted to merely a "few changes," but most importantly the reforms enacted derived specifically from "the will of the people." Wolcott concluded that he could not "but consider the [new] Constitution [to be] a great security to the community," but that its status as such depended upon the active participation of the state's citizens in the institutions of government. He cautioned against "extreme negligence, or culpable apathy," which would threaten the "political liberty" of the people.[478] In many ways, Wolcott's message to the Assembly and to the people of Connecticut mirrors the standard to which he had always set for himself when it came to duty and public service. Those with the means and capability to do so had an inherent responsibility to their community, to foster a safe and prosperous environment for all citizens. With the debates surrounding the need for a new constitution now in the past, Wolcott looked ahead to what he hoped would be a bright future for Connecticut.

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[477] Purcell, 408.

[478] "Governor Oliver Wolcott: Opening Speech at the May 1819 Session," *CT-PR,* vol. 20, 141-2.

Wolcott Ushers in a New Era in Connecticut's History

With a new constitution, the state of Connecticut had now entered into a new era arguably for the first time in its two-hundred-year history. Wolcott, continuing to strike a moderate balance between all political groups, led the way from the governor's chair. Despite the aforementioned changes ushered in by the new constitution, Wolcott continued to call for continued reform. This in of itself came as a surprise, not only because of Wolcott's long history of supporting conservativism, but because someone of his advanced age was not often associated with advocating for liberal causes. Nonetheless, Wolcott's policy prescriptions generally found favor with Connecticut's citizens (although that did not always translate to legislative approval).[479] Between 1818 and 1825, Wolcott secured reelection as governor each year by substantial margins. As a sign of his universal popularity among all constituents, oftentimes he ran unopposed—or, when the Federalists were able to put forth a candidate—more than three-fourths of the vote went to Wolcott.[480]

Perhaps the issue Wolcott devoted the greatest attention to during this period was tax reform. Wolcott prepared a lengthy address on the subject for the May 1819 session of the General Assembly, in which he argued that Connecticut families subsisting off of agriculture paid a much higher "proportion" of their income in taxes than their counterparts working in industry and manufacturing. Wolcott spoke further about the "inconvenient" nature of living as a farmer, which often included "unfavorable seasons, inevitable accidents, and distress [that] frequently reduced his income." All of this "expose him to incur debts, which he can not

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[479] Morse, 26-7.

[480] "CT Governor," *Our Campaigns*, accessed November 10, 2024, https://www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID=217488. The website tools can be utilized to access each year's Connecticut gubernatorial election and results.

otherwise defray, than by reducing the stock of his farm." Citing his many years of experience and expertise with regard to public finance, Wolcott concluded by counseling the legislature that "It is accordingly an admitted fact, by writers on finance, and political economy" that "generally all taxes, which fall upon the necessities of life… are great discouragements to agricultural improvements."[481] In one of the notable exceptions from Wolcott's ten years in office, the state legislature acted on much of his recommendations regarding tax reform. The tax bill signed into law later that year reflected a general understanding that tax rates should be based on assessed values rather than flat rates, which Wolcott found archaic and unfair, especially to farmers.[482]

Subsequent views as expressed by Wolcott would often not find favorable footing. One of the more notable events from this era in Connecticut history concerns Wolcott's decision to use the governor's veto to prevent the pe that aimed to deny access to Connecticut waters to steamboats from other states. The legislation originated after Robert Fulton secured a monopoly in New York for his shipping company, and legislators in Connecticut were rightfully concerned that the state's shipping interests would be negatively impacted. In his veto message, Wolcott argued that since the original act by the state of New York was unconstitutional, Connecticut had no authority to follow through with its own legislation in response. Only the federal government could regulate interstate commerce, contended Wolcott, only two years before the landmark Supreme Court case *Gibbons v. Ogden* (1824) would argue the same. Additionally, he thought the bill was injurious to Connecticut's reputation as a result of its blatant and defiant stance towards the federal government. Unfortunately for Wolcott, these arguments were ignored. The

[481] "Governor Oliver Wolcott: Message on Taxation at the May 1819 Session," *CT-PR*, vol. 20, 152-3.

[482] *CT-PR*, vol. 20, xl-xli.

legislature quickly overturned Wolcott's veto, with little to no debate on the matter.[483] Wolcott, in a way, would have the last word on the matter when the Supreme Court rendered Connecticut's law null and void with its landmark 1824 decision *Gibbons v. Ogden*. In short, that the federal government had the exclusive right to regulate interstate commerce, as Wolcott had counseled the legislature regarding, was the correct position.[484]

A similar outcome occurred when Wolcott counseled the legislature on the need for educational reform, which itself was a feature of his general call for internal improvements throughout the state. Refusing to mince words, Wolcott criticized the Assembly for its passage of an 1820 appropriations law that had insufficiently funded Connecticut's schools. To remedy this mistake, Wolcott called for increases in taxes so that additional funds could be put towards hiring highly qualified teachers and securing modern classroom equipment. Moreover, he further contended that to truly address the issue "the patronage of the National government" was necessary, on account that Connecticut would forever struggle to retain its own best and bright individuals—especially with regard to colleges and universities, and when neighboring states presented such "opulent and enterprising" options to interested students.[485]

In the end, Wolcott correctly predicted that the Assembly would not be moved to action by his calls for reform, but he nonetheless hoped local communities would be inspired to pick up the slack where funding was concerned. Unfortunately, it would take another more than fifteen years before the state legislature properly addressed the many challenges—lack of textbooks,

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[483] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 411-2. As part of the new constitution, to overturn a governor's veto the General Assembly only needed to secure a simple majority.

[484] Morse, 70-1.

[485] "Governor Oliver Wolcott: Opening Speech at the May 1825 Session," *CT-PR,* vol. 23, 208.

excess truancy, a lack of teachers, etc.—facing Connecticut's educational institutions.[486] On this issue especially, Wolcott demonstrated tremendous foresight; unfortunately the limitations placed on the governor's chair, which became a prevailing them of his ten years in office, rendered him powerless to take unilateral action in the face of unmoving legislature.

Ultimately, the views Wolcott expressed on so many of the major issues of his day were consistent with his nationalistic tendencies. Wolcott always governed in manner that was best for Connecticut's citizens, but—in the case of the Fulton monopoly controversy—he was nonetheless skeptical of aggressive state action that challenged the authority of the federal government. Two other significant conclusions can be reached regarding Wolcott as governor. First, Connecticut's citizens were consistently demonstrating that they wanted power to almost universal reside in the legislature, at the expense of the governor. Any actions to the contrary by Wolcott, no matter how subtle (and in the case of the Fulton monopoly controversy, constitutional) would not be met enthusiastically.[487] Second, these issues were yet further examples of how Wolcott never shied away from expressing his views, even if they were unpopular politically—which he knew they were with regard to arguing against Connecticut's autonomy in relation to the federal government, or to chastising the legislature for its previous actions regarding funding for education.

Despite the limited power his office held, Wolcott admirably tried to influence the state legislature to support policies that would benefit both agricultural and industrial pursuits. A consistent theme in many of his speeches as governor concerned reporting on the state of manufacturing and commerce throughout New England. During the years after the ratification of

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[486] *Hartford Courant*, May 7, 1822; Morse, 54-6, 149-152.

[487] Morse, 59.

the new state constitution, he called for large-scale infrastructure projects, including the building of a canal in the northeast corner of the state. Wolcott also consistently praised Connecticut's best and brightest for making sound use of new agricultural techniques that were increasing production, and for the continued growth he saw with regard to industries as diverse as iron, cotton, and leather. All the while, Wolcott advised his constituents to comport themselves with "frugality and honesty" and to otherwise foster "the promotion of concord among the people."[488]

One of Wolcott's most tangible accomplishments as governor occurred during his last few years in office. The only prison in Connecticut, Newgate Prison, had been a black mark on the state's reputation for decades, owing to its hazardous and inhuman conditions. Built on top of an old copper mine, the upkeep of the prison was also exorbitantly expensive. Wolcott became a staunch advocate of prison reform, advocated for the building of a new modern facility in the town of Wethersfield. The General Assembly agreed to this plan in 1826, after initially arguing the proposal was more trouble than it was worth. From the opening of the new prison, it was clear that conditions for prisoners had been dramatically improved, and it also critically ceased to be a major liability on the state's budget.[489] Because of his actions, one historian has credited Wolcott—who first spoke about the inhumane conditions at Newgate Prison in 1817—with being a pioneer of the larger prison reform movement that would spread throughout the country later than century.[490]

During this period Wolcott also made strides as governor to advance the cause of abolitionism. Slavery as a practice was already on the decline in Connecticut, but nonetheless

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[488] "Governor Oliver Wolcott: Opening Speech at the May 1819 Session," *CT-PR,* vol. 20, 141-4; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 410-1.

[489] Morse, 185-6, Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 409.

[490] Purcell, 362; [490] "Governor Oliver Wolcott: Speech at the October 1817 Session," *CT-PR,* vol. 18, 271n.

Wolcott's voice served as a powerful influence to expedite its elimination from the state.[491] To be sure, Wolcott's anti-slavery views originated more from constitutional and economic considerations than they did moral ones. He possessed no qualms about proposals put forth by national politicians to prevent the expansion of slavery in new states and territories, as he contended that the federal government held supremacy over such matters. Moreover, Wolcott argued that the institution of slavery stunted economic growth and innovation, and otherwise hurt yeoman farmers.[492] In short it can be concluded that Wolcott's overarching position aligned consistently with his desire to promote an increasingly powerful national government—one that deemed the growth of industry and innovation as its most important objectives. Wolcott articulated these arguments in great depth at the opening of his May 1820 address before the General Assembly, a speech that took place just two months after the controversial Missouri Compromise became law. Wolcott concluded that he felt "compelled by a sense of duty" to deliver his remarks on "the admitted evils of Slavery," given the prominent platform he held as governor.[493]

In addition to this address, as governor, Wolcott took one other subtle but important action regarding the institution of slavery. As had become all too common during this present moment in American history, a black American child was kidnapped from Connecticut and taken to South Carolina. When Wolcott learned of the story, he instructed the General Assembly to raise funds to secure the boy's return to the state. Where Wolcott's motivations lie with this decision is difficult to ascertain, but one can presume he was equally cognizant of protecting the

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[491] As evidence of Connecticut's growing sentiment against slavery, James Lanman, a US Senator from the state, was burned in effigy after he voted to support the controversial 1820 Missouri Compromise. See: Morse, 192.

[492] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 413.

[493] "Governor Oliver Wolcott: Opening Speech at the May 1820 Session," *CT-PR*, vol. 20, 355-9.

state's reputation and honor, as much as he might have been concerned for the immorality of the act that had been perpetrated.[494]

Declining Influence and Removal from Power

As the Presidential Election of 1824 approached, Governor Wolcott was chosen as an official elector in Connecticut. He ultimately cast his vote for John Quincy Adams, an action which was highly logical given Wolcott's longstanding political views.[495] In particular, Wolcott had been pleased that the Republican Party at the federal level, led by President James Monroe, had become far more moderate than it had under the administrations of Madison and Jefferson. Wolcott certainly approved of the fact that Republicans had gradually come to embrace the brand of big government economics that had originated with Hamilton and Wolcott during their respective tenures in the Treasury Department during the 1790s. Where foreign policy is concerned, Wolcott had long supported the expansionist designs of the Monroe Administration, proclaiming in one notable speech that due to the acquisition of additional lands, including Florida, the [new] "possession of an ample domain," including access to rivers and new coastlines, the people of the United States now had vital opportunities and responsibilities ahead of them. Concurring with the sentiments of President Monroe, Wolcott exclaimed that the country's citizens were

> now entrusted the most important concerns which were ever committed to men. … [If] every man can here maintain, in peace & tranquility, the secure enjoyment of his rights, acquired under the faith of government, & the sanction of stable laws, then our Country will soon attain all that moral & intellectual dignity, of which human nature is susceptible; & our example will be imitated by other Nations.[496]

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[494] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 413-4.

[495] Morse, 57-9; Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 412.

[496] "Governor Oliver Wolcott: Opening Speech at the May 1821 Session," *CT-PR*, vol. 21, 115-6.

Wolcott, in true nationalistic fashion, saw a role for America beyond the prosperity of its own people residing within its borders. He desired Americans to act as global representatives of democracy and liberty, so that other countries—those not as knowledgeable or privileged—could follow America's lead.

Beyond their shared views on nationalism, there were other notable parallels between Wolcott and John Quincy Adams. Adams, (now serving as Monroe's Secretary of State) in his own right, had also been a disenchanted Federalist before he was essentially kicked out of the party after his support of Jefferson's controversial Embargo Act in 1807. Observing connections with his own life (as previously discussed, Wolcott himself had been reluctant to overly criticize the Embargo), Wolcott certainly appreciated Adams's commitment to his principles in the face of relentless political pressure. It was yet another reminder of how Wolcott viewed his own responsibilities as a public servant; party interests should never outweigh what one feels is best for his community and country. Wolcott especially found favor with nationalistic foreign policy vision put forth by Adams, as evidenced by the former's praise for the Monroe Doctrine.[497] In his opening address to the legislative session in May 1825, Wolcott hailed that "The unjust dominion claimed by the Eastern continent [Europe]" over "the Western Hemisphere" had "been signally repressed" since the famous speech made by President Monroe just eighteen months prior. Wolcott proclaimed it was the start of a new era, where "agriculture, commerce, arts and manufactur[ing] would not expand and prosper "on terms of equality, unrestrained by external arrogance."[498]

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[497] John Quincy Adams, not President James Monroe, is considered by most historians to be the principal author of the Monroe Doctrine.

[498] "Governor Oliver Wolcott: Opening Speech at the May 1825 Session," *CT-PR*, vol. 23, 196.

Regarding domestic issues, Wolcott similarly championed Adams's ardent supporter for Henry Clay's American System, which called for significant internal improvements—the building of roads and canals especially—throughout the country. Adams also advocated for a protectionist American economy with strong tariffs at its foundation. These objectives, highly nationalistic in their intent, represented the future for the United States that Wolcott had always desired.[499] For a man who had during much of the 1790s felt pessimistic and despondent about the ability of the nation to survive, John Quincy Adams's eventual election to the presidency provided a source of pride and contentment for the aging Wolcott.

Publicly, Wolcott advised his constituents to trust the political process in what promised to be an especially close presidential election. On the prospect of the House of Representatives needing to decide the winner should a candidate fail to secure a majority of electoral votes (which ultimately proved necessary), Wolcott struck an optimistic tone. He reminded his peers in his annual address to the state legislature that the federal Congress was comprised of the nation's brightest and most "virtuous" individuals; they would be able to safeguard the nation's future in the event of any perceived crisis.[500] For Wolcott, this was true even of individuals with whom he held notable disagreements with when it came to ideology and policy.[501] In the waning months of 1823 Wolcott had angered many members of the Tolerationist coalition by appointing representative Henry W. Edwards to fill the a vacancy in the Senate created by death of Elijiah Boardman.

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[499] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 412-3.

[500] "Governor Oliver Wolcott: Speech at May 1824 Session," *CT-PR,* vol. 22, 141-4; Morse, 70-1; *Hartford Courant,* May 11, 1824.

[501] Morse, 69-70.

Filling congressional vacancies was one of the few express powers that Governor Wolcott could actually wield. A general fear emerged that Edwards—a fervent Republican—would be able to unduly influence the presidential election by pushing members of the House of Representatives in Washington to support Andrew Jackson. This did not concern Wolcott, however; Edwards's laudatory background—a fellow graduate of the Litchfield Law School, subsequently a prospering lawyer, and most recently a two-term member of the House of Representatives—took precedence over any partisan considerations.[502] Wolcott also ignored threats from angry citizens who claimed the appointment of Edwards would lead to the governor's removal from office.[503] Wolcott's advocacy of Edwards represented a marked contrast from the Wolcott of decades earlier, who would have been outraged to learn an individual from the opposition party was securing an important government post. (As discussed in this project's fourth chapter, this had been Wolcott's very reaction when President John Adams in March 1797 had proposed Jefferson or Madison lead the new peace mission to France.) By his own words and actions as governor, Wolcott, now in his mid-60s, continued to demonstrate his gradual political evolution from a radical to a moderate.

In the spring of 1825, with the recent presidential contest finally settled with the election of John Quincy Adams, it came as no surprise that Wolcott pursued a similar economic vision to the one advocated for by Adams in his annual address before the Connecticut state legislature. Unfortunately for Wolcott, the General Assembly represented an insurmountable barrier that left him little room to enact his proposed policies. It was often a harsh reality for Wolcott that the state legislature controlled the bulk of the actual governing power in Connecticut, and thus—

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[502] Morse, 69-70.

[503] For one example, see J. Law to Oliver Wolcott Jr., September 25, 1823, *WJP* (box 26, folder 15). See also Brownsword, "Connecticut Political Patterns," 182-3.

absent his ability to persuade—there was little Wolcott could do when faced with opposition. The Republican-controlled General Assembly, who had previously found little to criticize with their governor, decided to suspend his ability to issue proclamation that called for additional government funding. Thus, the powers of the governorship became even more limited. It was an indication—for perhaps one of the first times during his tenure as governor—that Wolcott had made a political miscalculation; Adams's election to the Presidency did not portend a full-scale return to the Federalist economic politics of yesteryear. Rather, Republican leaders in the state legislature desired government expenditures to remain limited, in contrast to Wolcott's own ambitious economic goals.[504]

Unable to directly petition the legislature for additional government funds, Wolcott was left to offer praise for the Adams administration's embrace of Hamiltonian style economics, in the hopes that he might convince the members of the Assembly to adopt similar policies in Connecticut. In his final legislative address, Wolcott opened by speaking about how optimistic he felt about the country's future: "The great interests of our State and Nation, continue to be prosperous. Science, education, arts, manufactures, commerce, agriculture, and improvements of the most permanent & diffusive nature, are extending. All these are [the] natural products of the irresistible energies of free & intelligent minds." While he could retain a certain level of plausible deniability, Wolcott clearly intended to inject a not-so-subtle reference to the "energies" at present exuded by the Adams administration at the federal level. As a nationalist who had always believed that a powerful and active federal government was needed to bind the country together, it comes as no surprise that Wolcott admitted later in his speech that this was where his greatest interests lay. Wolcott conceded that he had "little" to speak about regarding

[504] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 412.

"merely local concern[s]," rather of "most important interest" was "connected with the proceedings of the National government."[505]

In keeping with his long-held views, one of the issues that Wolcott believed was of paramount concern for the entire country was that of international trade, and how that impacted the moral character of its people. Wolcott took comfort in the fact that substantive increases in international commerce were introducing to Americans all that was "virtuous and intelligent" from other countries. He couched this, though, with concerns that a "contamination" of "vice and degradation" was also at risk of spreading throughout the nation. Wolcott called it "indispensably necessary" for Connecticut to work together with all the states in the Union to support "virtue against vice." While he did not mention the issue directly by name, Wolcott undoubtedly was speaking about the issue of immigration. During the 1820s, the country as a whole was experiencing its first major wave of new immigrants, and Wolcott wanted to convey his concerns for how this would impact culture and levels of "unusual crime." He argued that public support for "moral & religious instruction… afford[ed] the best security against [the] cruelty & oppression" brought by those new individuals from unfamiliar cultures immigrating to the United States.[506]

Nine years into his tenure as governor, his views on this issue suggest that Wolcott remained a social conservative. More than thirty years prior, Wolcott had expressed similar concerns about immigrants during the height of the Quasi War with France. In the end, he was forever skeptical that America's cultural and social institutions could be upheld with an influx of people wholly foreign to the nation's customs. Notably, however, instead of believing non-

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[505] "Governor Oliver Wolcott: Opening Message to the May 1826 Session," *CT-PR*, vol. 23, 417.

[506] Ibid., 420.

Americans could never be asset to the country, Wolcott now argued that education was now the proper remedy.

During his final years as governor, concerns about the state of political parties in the state and throughout the nation continued to trouble Wolcott. It should be noted that while he had taken some measure of solace in the fact that he had assumed the governorship through the efforts of a diverse coalition of Connecticut citizens, Wolcott continued to despise the fractious and—in his mind—dangerous behavior expressed by the leaders of all political parties. Wolcott contended that political parties—and the men subservient to them—acted only in their own self-interest. Echoing the views expressed by the two former presidents he once served under, Washington and Adams, Wolcott continued to abhor the power wielded by political parties, believing that doing what was best for society trumped any allegiance to the parties that may have secured their own election.

Ultimately, Wolcott's views to this end were becoming a thing of the past. While his election as governor had been a critical steppingstone for Connecticut as it transitioned into a new era, nine years later many political leaders across the political spectrum began to think Connecticut needed new leadership. Even though Connecticut had undergone significant economic and cultural changes over the past couple of decades, the state continued to remain, at least in part, the "Land of Steady Habits." By 1825 leading Republicans in Connecticut were expressing a weariness with moving forward with Wolcott as their party leader. Two rival groups, one of them who had supported the presidential candidacy of William Crawford in 1824 (and presumably criticized Wolcott for his open support of John Quincy Adams) met in secret to try to garner support for alternative candidates.[507] While this initial plot failed, not coincidentally

[507] Brownsword, "Connecticut Political Patterns," 228.

the gubernatorial election the following year saw Wolcott's vote total drop to 57%, his lowest since his first election win in 1817. Even more alarming data can be seen in the raw vote total. Wolcott secured only one-third of the total number of the citizens' votes he had won five years prior, which had been his largest victory.[508] The evidence to keen observers, party bigwigs especially, demonstrated that enthusiasm for the aging Wolcott was quickly waning. Leading Republicans at the head of the Tolerationist Party decided not to nominate him for governor in the following year, citing unspecified sources that Wolcott intended to retire from public service. Abandoned by the party that needed him in order to oust the Federalists from power in 1817, pressure now mounted on Wolcott to step out of the gubernatorial race entirely.[509]

Mirroring in many ways Wolcott's own attempts to oust John Adams from the presidency during the summer of 1800, Republican leaders had put forth a scheme built on lies and deception to ensure Wolcott would not be reelected. The truth is that the rumors concerning Wolcott's intentions were outright false. In keeping with the longstanding tradition of public servants refusing to actively campaign for themselves, Wolcott had never publicly declared an interest in any office—only a willingness to serve if the people of Connecticut thought him worthy. In a particularly malicious letter Wolcott received the September before the 1826 Election—a local party leader told him he should retire (Wolcott could use old age and physical ailments as the excuse) and then call for a convention so that he could be immediately replaced. Wolcott was even told that by not stepping down he was challenging the legacy set forth by George Washington, who chose to retire after eight years.[510] Wolcott chose not to respond with a

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[508] "CT Governor – 1826," *Our Campaigns*, accessed November 10, 2024, https://www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID=216861.

[509] Brownsword, "Connecticut Political Patterns," 244-6.

[510] Ibid., 246.

letter of his own, but he did write in the margins of this letter for posterity: "I did nothing towards placing myself in the Station of Governor & ought to do nothing towards displacing myself."[511] Refusing to betray his long held principles, Wolcott would let his political future be decided by the people at large.

Despite being abandoned by the bigwigs in the Tolerationist Party, a swell of Connecticut residents nonetheless declared their support for Wolcott. Placed on the ballot as an independent candidate, and running against the Republican Gideon Tomlinson (who one historian has dubbed "an advance agent of Jackonism"[512]), Wolcott performed exceptionally well for a candidate who steadfastly refused—as he had his entire public career—to campaign on his own behalf. In this election cycle Wolcott even received an endorsement from the *Hartford Courant*, a newspaper that had been historically hostile to him. The endorsement was a recognition that even the most ardent Federalists had to concede that Wolcott had consistently proven himself to be an honest and independent man, who was one of the few public servants who could legitimately claim to represent all his constituents. In the end, though, Tomlinson's support from the Republican Party proved to be much too strong, and Wolcott suffered a narrow defeat of just 1,700 votes.[513]

Upon Wolcott's sudden and "quiet" departure from the public arena, one of Connecticut's greatest historians of the early nineteenth century wrote the following assessment of his ten years as governor:

> With the passing of Wolcott the state was deprived of a valuable public servant. First elected governor at a time when political strife was at its heigh, he had conducted himself with extraordinary tact. Winning the respect of opponents while at the same time keeping the confidence of friends, he had done more than any other individual to calm the bitter

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[511] John H. Jacocks to Oliver Wolcott Jr., September 17, 1825, *WJP* (box 27, folder 2).

[512] Morse, 88. A reference to soon-to-be President Andrew Jackson, and the national movement that would become known as Jacksonian Democracy.

[513] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 420.

> conflict succeeding the constitutional convention. With long political experience behind him, he continuously devoted to the service of his state the full powers of a vigorous mind and a spirit of enlightened patriotism. …The governor's opinions regarding politics and society proceeded from an unquestioned integrity of character, but… [at his end] his period of usefulness was believed to have passed.[514]

While Wolcott never expressed it openly, his ousting from the governor's chair must have stung. Throughout his time in office, he lamented not accomplishing more—hampered and constrained as he was by an overbearing legislature. In a decision that signaled Wolcott associated his career in public service with his home state of Connecticut, he chose to return to New York City for the final six years of his life. Once again without a government appointment, it made logical sense for Wolcott to spend his remaining years as a private citizen in the same place that had served him so well during his forced departure from public service in 1802. New York, after all, remained the center of industry, innovation, and economic development, and it must have comforted Wolcott to observe all of the city's happenings during the twilight of his life.[515]

These last years for Wolcott were spent in relative obscurity. He lived modestly and largely stayed out of the spotlight, choosing to spend time with his daughter Laura and son-in-law George Gibbs.[516] Wolcott started writing his autobiography but did not get far; he never advanced past his teenage years.[517] He also retained a close relationship with his brother Frederick, despite tensions that had arisen in recent years due to the financial pressures put on both of them by debts accrued through their shared business interests in the state. In one of their

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[514] Morse, 82-3.

[515] Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 411, 420-1.

[516] Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott*, 308.

[517] "Autobiographical narrative by Oliver Wolcott Jr.," *WJP* (box 29, folder 8).

final letters, Frederick thanked his older brother for the "great efforts" he had put forth to ensure he could find his own success in his life.[518] Suffering from ailments and illnesses all too common with old age, Wolcott died at the age of seventy-three on June 1, 1833. Wolcott had been the last surviving member of the Washington and Adams administrations.

[518] Frederick Wolcott to Oliver Wolcott Jr., September 27, 1831, *WJP* (box 38, folder 22). For a more detailed description on the financial struggles experienced by the Wolcott brothers in their later years, see Hamilton, "The Life of Oliver Wolcott Jr.," 415-419.

Epilogue

> *"When I review the incidents of my own life, I am compelled to acknowledge, with sincere and reverential gratitude, that many of the most important, in relation to my standing in society, my health, my fame, my family, and my children, have occurred without my contrivance, and have terminated contrary to my expectations and wishes. I have suffered severe afflictions; yet on the whole, my life has, so far, been happy and fortunate. I have been connected with great Men, who were Actors in events, of which they saw not the results, nor are they yet to be foreseen."*[519]

Oliver Wolcott Jr. lived an extraordinary life in extraordinary times, and yet unsurprisingly he has been overshadowed, as have so many other notable figures by the titanic men of early American history: Hamilton, Washington, Adams, Jefferson. (As the above letter from an elderly Wolcott indicates, his own views represented the mainstream consensus when it came to his own legacy and that of his more famous peers.) Nonetheless, up until now Wolcott's contributions to the Early National Period, at both the state and federal level, have been largely overlooked by scholars, or at least not been given a full and proper examination.

The immediate aftermath of Wolcott's death suggests otherwise. In the weeks and months that followed his passing, many of Wolcott's peers came forward to deliver praise for his life's many accomplishments. Joseph Hopkinson, a federal judge and for many years a close associate of Wolcott, offered perhaps the most fitting tribute to his deceased friend when he wrote:

> His [Wolcott's] devotion to the business and duties of his office was severe and unremitting. He possessed, in a high degree, a very rare qualification, the capacity for

[519] Oliver Wolcott Jr. to Doctor Rhinelander, October 4, 1829, Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott*, 304.

> continued hard work, and was in everything systemic and orderly. …His political opinions were the honest convictions of a man of undoubted integrity, of distinguished intelligence, and high attainments, and, above all, of a true and sincere lover of his Country.[520]

As this project has demonstrated, there is little evidence to dispute Hopkinson's assessment of Wolcott's character. Through his initial work in the nation's first national Treasury Department, and for a man who spearheaded the development of the modern American bureaucracy, his skills for organization and efficiency, coupled with his impeccable work ethic, made him ideally suited to the roles in government in which he thrived throughout his career. At a minimum, this project has achieved its first goal of offering the first full political evaluation of Wolcott's legacy. The historical evidence shows that Wolcott's actions on the national political scene during the tumultuous 1790s, along with a second career as governor of his home state during the twilight of his life, render him a highly consequential figure in the history of Connecticut and of the Unite States.

In order to fully grasp the fundamentals of Wolcott's character, and the actions he took throughout his career, a careful evaluation of his early life and upbringing was necessary. This investigation, largely untouched and unexamined by past scholars, comprised this project's first research question. It is clear that an assessment of his life before entering federal service prepared Wolcott to be an integral member of the Federalist Party under the Washington and Adams administrations. As has been shown, the lineage and history of his family heavily influenced Wolcott. His grandfather and father especially instilled within him a commitment to public service; this sacred duty to one's community and nation could not be disregarded, especially when one was a member of the privileged elite, as all members of the Wolcott family

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[520] Quoted in Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott*, 306-7.

were. Wolcott was encouraged to pursue work in government that was less than glamorous; he knew that his talents resided in largely bureaucratic work that would win him little fame. Nonetheless, this mindset and commitment to taking on arduous work would earn him immeasurable respect and admiration from those who collaborated closely with him, especially Wolcott's most important benefactor, Alexander Hamilton.

With Wolcott's formative years comprehensively examined, a reevaluation of Wolcott's years as part of the Federal Treasury during the height of Federalist Party control in the 1790s became necessary. While his contributions during this period have received some attention from past historians, Wolcott has generally been depicted in a negative and dismissive light. With few exceptions, at best Wolcott's legacy has been that of a minor figure whose impact on the national political scene during this time should be appropriately overshadowed by the greater men to which he was constantly in close proximity.

It is of course misleading to suggest that Wolcott deserves the same recognition as titans of early American History like Washington, Hamilton, Adams, and Jefferson. Nonetheless, it is equally as such to imply that only these few great men warrant attention from scholars. In short, the core Founding Fathers, as they are known, were not the only influential figures during the Early National Period. Similarly, a related point must be made regarding historical evaluations of Wolcott during his time in the federal administration during the 1790s, which depict him as a mediocre, inconsequential political actor—on par with his colleagues in the Cabinet such as Timothy Pickering, James McHenry, and others.

It has been previously demonstrated, through this authors' work in Chapters 3 and 4 of this project, how Wolcott deserved credit for leading the way in developing the federal bureaucracy that helps the immense-in-scale federal government function today. Moreover,

Wolcott made substantial contributions in assisting Hamilton with the day-to-day operations of the Treasury Department, ensuring his mentor's plans for establishing national public credit, and for otherwise ensuring that a powerful federal government could be realized and implemented.

When Hamilton retired as Treasury Secretary in January 1795, Wolcott proved himself a most adept replacement. In Hamilton's own words, with which President Washington concurred, Wolcott was the only other man—given the indispensable role he played in the department's origination—who could successfully perform the duties of this office. Wolcott served Washington ably for the remaining two years of the president's term, before staying on to serve in the cabinet of Washington's successor, John Adams. While their relationship was tumultuous at times owing to their political differences (especially concerning how best to deal with an impending conflict with France), Adams respected Wolcott for his honesty with regard to policy recommendations, and for the measured way he managed the nation's finances. When Adams lost his patience with his Cabinet, who he came to realize were constantly scheming against him, he chose to retain Wolcott (while dismissing the others—Pickering and McHenry) for the aforementioned reasons. Later, as evidence that no bad blood existed between the two men, Adams during the last days of his presidency nominated Wolcott to serve in the federal judiciary. Despite engaging in a behind-the-scenes correspondence with Hamilton in order to consider ways in which to undermine Adams's reelection in 1800, it can be concluded that Wolcott was motivated only by a commitment to his principles—i.e., what he believed was best for the country.

A quick assessment of Wolcott's political career after his time in the Cabinet, coupled with a comparison of the later lives of other cabinet members from the Washington and Adams administrations, reveals in no uncertain terms how markedly different historians should rate him

when compared to his contemporaries. By virtue of an impactful ten years as governor of Connecticut, no other former Cabinet member from the 1790s—with the exception of Jefferson, of course—had as much success and influence in service to his government and country.[521] One might make an argument for Pickering, given his brief stints in the Senate and House during the early part of the nineteenth century, but few of his contemporaries ever took him seriously as a public figure—as evidenced by the decision by leading Federalists to exclude him from participating in the Hartford Convention of 1814-5. Others, including Edmund Randolph, Henry Knox, and James McHenry, faded into relative obscurity. The same could even be said for Alexander Hamilton—who after his retirement from the Treasury in January 1795, struggled for the next decade to retain a semblance of the influence over national affairs he once held.

With regard to Hamilton, a final word on the research question regarding Wolcott's impact during the 1790s must be said with regard to the relationship he held with his mentor and benefactor. Too often past scholars have criticized Wolcott for merely functioning as Hamilton's lackey; characterizations of Wolcott's behavior have been that of a puppet responding to the directions of its puppet master. As this project has demonstrated, nothing could be further from the truth. While often of like minds, when it came to all matters political and personal, Hamilton relied on Wolcott for advice just as much the other way around. Moreover, at key moments—such as his plea for Hamilton to not release his infamous public letter condemning President Adams—Wolcott dissented from his benefactor. To the extent that Wolcott did in fact defer often to the wishes of Hamilton, one must wonder why this should be considered automatically

[521] It should be acknowledged that John Marshall, America's first (and perhaps greatest) Chief Justice, served briefly as Secretary of State during the final months of the Adams administration. Marshall should be considered an outlier, though, with this comparison, as his ultimate legacy is entirely owed to Adams's appointment to the Supreme Court. If this appointment had not been made, it is highly debate whether or not Marshall—especially as a resident of Virginia—would have ever found a high enough popularity amongst his fellow constituents to be elected to a prestigious state or national office.

as a significant character flaw. While this author would stop well short of viewing the respective careers of Wolcott and James Madison in the same light, few historians have found fault with the latter's reliance on and constant deference to Thomas Jefferson. In sum, it is natural and perfectly appropriate for the relationship between two like-minded political actors, such as Hamilton and Wolcott, to be defined by one's acquiescence and reverence for the other. That the younger, less experienced individual (in this case, Wolcott) exhibits this behavior is only logical.

Earlier in the author's research process a critical question emerged regarding a largely unexplored period of Wolcott's life: the fifteen years he spent as a private citizen between 1802 and 1817. This time period, in between Wolcott's departure from the federal government and his ascension to the Connecticut governorship, encompassed this project's third research question. Past historians have devoted little to no attention to this seemingly quiet period of Wolcott's life, perhaps for the obvious reason that as a private citizen he held no official influence over government affairs. With that said, as this project demonstrates, one cannot understand how and why Wolcott reemerged as governor of Connecticut in 1817 without examining the key moments of the previous fifteen years. Owing to the impressive reputation he built up over a decade of service in the federal government, Wolcott moved to New York City and quickly secured substantial investments from Federalist friends (including Alexander Hamilton) to develop a number of successful business ventures in shipping, international trade, and banking.

When Hamilton was tragically killed in 1804, Wolcott's attitude towards government and politics mellowed, and he his alignment with the fieriest of High Federalists began to subside. In subsequent years he would find common cause with a number of Republican ideas, including mild support for President Jefferson's controversial 1807 Embargo Act, and President Madison's decision to bring the country to war against Great Britain in the War of 1812. This support, while

consistent with his core principle of nationalism, set Wolcott at odds with many of his Federalist allies. All the while Wolcott was publicly labeled a traitor to the Federalist Party, but for this he cared not. What mattered most was holding true to his principles, and it was this that would not go unnoticed by public leaders in Connecticut, who wished to bring about significant social and political changes in the state.

In addressing the final years of Wolcott's public life, and as part of this project's fourth research question, the author finally examined Wolcott's ten years as governor of Connecticut from 1817 to 1827. This period of Wolcott's career in government has almost entirely been overlooked by modern historians. Despite failing to achieve all of his goals as chief executive of the state, Wolcott's impact on Connecticut was highly consequential. This was perhaps first noted by governor of Connecticut at the time of Wolcott's death, Henry W. Edwards—previously a US Senator who had received a controversial appointment from Wolcott ten years prior. Honoring Wolcott in a speech made in front of the state General Assembly just days after the news broke of Wolcott's passing, Edwards proclaimed that "In the foundation of what is most valuable and most esteemed in our [Connecticut's] present institutions, we trace the work of his hand."[522]

As has been shown, the historical evidence demonstrates that Edwards praise for Wolcott's contributions to Connecticut could not have been more appropriate. While his official powers as governor were rather limited, Wolcott displayed political savvy by using the prestige that came with his name and reputation in order to influence the legislature to enact substantial reforms. As previously discussed, these included the striking down of the state's controversial

[522] "Legislative address by Governor Henry W. Edwards, June 6, 1833," Samuel Wolcott, *Memorial of Henry Wolcott*, 309.

"Stand Up" laws, the protection of religious liberty (owing to the disestablishment of Congregationalism as the preferred denomination), greater voting rights access for the state's citizens, and stronger commitments to bolster Connecticut's economy through public investments in industry and manufacturing. Many of these reforms came about through the ratification of the state's new constitution in 1818, a process over which Wolcott sagely presided. Still operating under its original colonial charter when Wolcott assumed the governorship, by the time he retired from public life ten years later Connecticut had been successfully transformed—socially, culturally, and politically—as the nation entered a new modern era.

One of this project's most notable findings—which encompasses this project's final research question—is with regard to the question of Wolcott's political evolution during his lengthy public career, which spanned more than forty years. As has been shown, while Wolcott's party allegiances changed over time (most notably, abandoning the Federalists in the aftermath of the War of 1812), the core of his philosophical and political ideology remained consistent. From the 1787 Constitutional Convention onward, Wolcott remained an ardent nationalist. As such throughout his life he was a staunch advocate for a strong national government, which in his mind should be empowered by a protectionist economic system, in order to support American industry and manufacturing. Whether it be as a member of the Treasury Department, or governor of Connecticut, he steadfastly promoted these values and ideas.

In keeping with the views of many of America's early leaders, Wolcott abhorred political parties, and yet it must be conceded that during the 1790s especially, as a key member of the cabinets of Washington and Adams, he engaged actively in securing a Federalist agenda through the strength and influence that his party provided. To the extent that some of Wolcott's views changed later, during the first decades of the nineteenth century, they did so in alignment with

the larger political and social shifts that were occurring nationwide. Without these subtle but significant changes, highlighted by his embrace of the Madison administration during the War of 1812, Wolcott would never have been given the opportunity in the final stage of his career to serve as governor of Connecticut. This stands in stark contrast to other prominent Federalists—most notably Timothy Pickering, George Cabot, James Hillhouse, and others—who became too insular and concerned with party politics, often at the expense of the wishes and desires of the public at large. As evidenced by his inaugural address as governor, if anything Wolcott's public messaging had evolved in order to appeal more to the common man (in keeping with prevailing stylistic choices made by the nationally dominant Republican Party), which represents a more dramatic shift away from his elitist upbringings from one of the most prominent families in Connecticut, than it does a true change in values.[523] Wolcott's life-long attunement to the political winds of the people around him to a large degree helped him find consistent and tangible success.

More than anything, Wolcott's legacy should be that of a man who answered the bell when called to serve by his peers and fellow citizens. When faces with challenges or severe criticisms, he persevered in ways that most men in his station could or would not. For Wolcott, remaining committed to principles and doing what he believed was morally right took precedence over the uncertain whims of public opinion. What was morally right most often meant fostering an orderly society, pride in the country, and reverence for the national government. While he was in part motivated by receiving acclaim from his friends, family, and

[523] In David Hackett Fischer's *The Revolution of American Conservativism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York, Harper & Row, 1965), no coverage is given to Oliver Wolcott Jr. Fischer acknowledges the contributions of more than a dozen Connecticut Federalists (a large number of them Wolcott's contemporaries) who were active after the Election of 1800; the absence of Wolcott in Fischer's landmark study demonstrates how not long after he left the federal government, Wolcott's political ideology drifted notably away from its Federalist roots.

colleagues, this influenced Wolcott far less than the average individual. As he believed every good citizen should, Wolcott simply lived his life in order to best apply his talents and skills to the betterment of his country. Ultimately, Wolcott passed his own test with excellence. His contributions to late eighteenth century American political history, and early nineteenth century Connecticut history speak for themselves. For these reasons, the author hopes readers—academics, amateur historians, and lay people alike—will give to Wolcott and his remarkable political life the attention that this project has posited is needed.

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