

INTRODUCTION



The Society of the Cincinnati and the Confederation Period

What is to be done with the Cincinnati: is that order of Chivalry, that Inroad upon our first Principle, Equality, to be connived at? It is the deepest Piece of Cunning yet attempted.

John Adams¹

WHEN IN THE SPRING of 1783 Henry Knox, Frederick William Steuben, and other officers of the Continental Army organized the Society of the Cincinnati—the first veterans’ organization in US history—they did not anticipate the storm of outrage it would produce. Knox and his comrades in arms, who soon received the blessing and support of George Washington, wanted to preserve the memory of their common struggle in the Revolutionary War and to pursue their interest in outstanding pay and pensions. To honor fallen comrades and to perpetuate their association, the founders of the Cincinnati decided to make membership hereditary. Much to the officers’ surprise, this rule of heredity provoked public outrage. Within months, the Society stood at the center of one of the most heated controversies in postrevolutionary America.

Critics of the Society—among them men as prominent as John Adams, Samuel Adams, and Elbridge Gerry—accused the Cincinnati of an aristocratic conspiracy against the nascent American republic. According to these allegations, the Society planned to establish itself as a hereditary nobility, thus creating a homemade tyranny that would soon extinguish the flame of liberty. With the end of their common struggle for freedom almost in sight and after seven years of fighting England to create a new nation, one part of the Founding Fathers effectively accused another of betraying the ideals of the American Revolution. The resulting controversy and heated political discourse threatened to disrupt the American polity at a time when it was at its most vulnerable: the Confederation

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Period, or what John Fiske called the Critical Period. It also helped to carve out the foundation of political culture in the United States of America.²

Given the momentousness of the controversy surrounding the Society of the Cincinnati, the topic has not been a prominent one in the scholarly study of the 1780s. The first historian to comment on the role of the Society in the early American republic was herself a critic of the Cincinnati. Mercy Otis Warren's 1805 *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* portrayed the Cincinnati as one of the driving forces of reaction in the United States. Extensively quoting the anti-Cincinnati sources of the 1780s, Warren identified the Society as part of a greater Federalist conspiracy for "erecting a government for the United States, in which should be introduced ranks, privileged orders, and arbitrary powers."³

After Warren, a number of historians simply followed her assessment, to the point of claiming that the Cincinnati were "the closest thing to an Old World aristocracy that this country has ever produced."⁴ Other authors showed the Society in a slightly different light but still as a problematic force in the early republic. Charles Beard, for example, in 1913 linked the Cincinnati to the "creditor class" he saw as the driving force behind the Constitution. In the early 1950s, Sidney Kaplan identified them as a well-organized and crafty political pressure group that was intrinsically tied to land speculation in the Ohio valley. One of the very few authors to describe the controversy about the Society in detail during that same period, Wallace E. Davies, remained unsure about the Cincinnati's intentions.⁵

For the most part, however, historians have assumed the innocence of the Cincinnati, and given the matter little attention. Fiske rejected any notion that the Society might have been a threat to republicanism in America, as more recently did Richard B. Morris in the *New American Nation* series. Merrill Jensen, Catherine Drinker Bowen, Jackson Turner Main, Robert A. Rutland, Gordon Wood, and Forrest McDonald all mentioned the Cincinnati, usually in conjunction with the debate surrounding the ratification of the Constitution. They too dismissed the accusations against the Society as unfounded, and none gave the Society more than minimal coverage. Wood and McDonald, the only scholars offering an explanation for the outbreak of the controversy, linked it to the ideological debates about equality and power in postrevolutionary America.⁶

As for institutional histories, they were written by authors closely associated with the Society of the Cincinnati itself. Despite many problems, the Society successfully perpetuated itself, and the descendants of the founders proved to be highly interested in the history of their hereditary organization. A relatively large number of short regional and general accounts were written as a result, many of which were primarily concerned with questions of membership and genealogy.⁷

Nonetheless, two twentieth-century members of the Cincinnati provided important contributions. In the 1930s, Edgar Erskine Hume waged a one-man crusade to once and for all establish the Society's innocence, discussing many aspects of Cincinnati history. The other Cincinnatus to make a major contribution was Minor Myers, whose 1983 treatise *Liberty Without Anarchy* remains the principal, most comprehensive account of the Society's history. Interestingly, Myers did not dismiss the accusations against the Society out of hand and even acknowledged that while the Cincinnati were for the most part harmless, in the critical years of 1786–87 a few members might have welcomed a monarchy in America. Most importantly, Myers not only described the organizational history of the Society, but also gave a concise account of the many charges leveled against the Cincinnati.⁸

Even with Myers's work, however, much about the controversy remains unclear. The question of guilt or innocence of the Cincinnati is not the most important issue; in hindsight the harmlessness of the Society is obvious. More pressing is the question why the controversy surrounding the Cincinnati erupted at all and what the consequences were. Given the often frantic character of the accusations, did the critics of the Society act out of genuine concern, personal interest, or even out of political paranoia?

The controversy about the Cincinnati took place during the Confederation Period, a time of great change in which Americans had to come to terms with the consequences of independence and determine the shape of republican government. These great debates about the Constitution took place during a time when the very success of the Revolution seemed at stake. Thus, the discourse on the Society of the Cincinnati was intricately intertwined with a public debate of questions of revolutionary ideology, constitutional change, social order, and political leadership that makes the Confederation Period a truly formative era of American history. The heated accusations against the Cincinnati were part and parcel of the postrevolutionary struggle to determine the meaning of America.

Notes

1. John Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 25 April 1785, Elbridge Gerry Papers, DLC.
2. John Fiske, *The Critical Period of American History 1783–1789* (New York: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1898).
3. Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution Interspersed with Biographical, Political and Moral Observations*. 3 vols. (1805; reprint, Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988), 612–17.

4. Eckert Goodman, "The Hereditary Knights of America," *Country Life* (March 1940): 52. See also W.E. Woodward, *George Washington, the Image and the Man* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), 28; Millard W. Hansen, "The Society of the Cincinnati," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 44 (April 1945): 186.
5. Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the American Constitution* (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 39. Sidney Kaplan, "Veteran Officers and Politics in Massachusetts, 1783–1787," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series 9 (1952): 57. Wallace Evans Davies, "The Society of the Cincinnati in New England 1783–1800," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series 5 (1948): 25.
6. Fiske, *The Critical Period of American History 1783–1789*, 116; Richard B. Morris, *The Forging of the Union, 1781–1789* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 52; Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia: The Story of the Constitutional Convention* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1966), 20; Jackson Turner Main, *The Antifederalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781–1788* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 64; Jackson Turner Main, *Political Parties before the Constitution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 77; Robert Allen Rutland, *The Ordeal of the Constitution; the Antifederalists and the Ratification Struggle of 1787–1788* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 47–48; Harry M. Ward, *The American Revolution: Nationhood Achieved, 1763–1788* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 310; Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1992), 241; Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 399; Forrest McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985), 78–79.
7. See, for example, Henry H. Bellas, *A History of the Delaware State Society of the Cincinnati from Its Organization to the Present Time* (Wilmington: Historical Society of Delaware, 1895); John Cropper, *The Society of the Cincinnati in Virginia* (Washington, D.C.: Southern History Association, 1900); Curtis Carroll Davis, *Revolution's Godchild: The Birth, Death, and Regeneration of the Society of the Cincinnati in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976); Charles Lukens Davis, *The Society of the Cincinnati in the Southern States* (Washington, D.C.: Southern History Association, 1898); Francis S. Drake, *Memorials of the Society of the Cincinnati of Massachusetts* (Boston: Society of the Cincinnati of Massachusetts, 1873); Winslow Warren, *The Society of the Cincinnati* (Boston: Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati, 1929); William S. Thomas, *The Society of the Cincinnati 1783–1935* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1935).
8. Edgar Erskine Hume, *Early Opposition to the Cincinnati* (Providence: Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation, 1936); Edgar Erskine Hume, *Lafayette and the Society of the Cincinnati* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1934); Edgar Erskine Hume, "Steuben and the Society of the Cincinnati," *The American-German Review* 1, no. 3 (1935); Edgar Erskine Hume, "The Role of the Society of the Cincinnati in the Birth of the Constitution of the United States," *Pennsylvania History* 5 (1938); Edgar Erskine Hume, *George Washington and the Society of the Cincinnati* (Washington, D.C.: United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission, 1933). Edgar Erskine Hume, ed., *General Washington's Correspondence Concerning the Society of the Cincinnati* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1941); Minor Myers, *Liberty without Anarchy: A History of the Society of the Cincinnati* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983). Two other unpublished yet significant general histories of the Society of the Cincinnati are Bryan Scott Johnson, "The Society of the Cincinnati: A Contemporary Organization with Revolutionary Origins" (M.A. thesis, Clemson University, 1992) and Richard F. Saunders, "The Origin and Early History of the Society of the Cincinnati" (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 1969).