

Fortescue Cuming: Federalists and Democratic-Republicans (1807)

Fortescue Cuming (1763-1823), an immigrant from Northern Ireland and an Easterner touring the backcountry in the early 1800s on the lookout for investment opportunities, described his reaction to the intensity of the politics he heard discussed in what was then considered “the West”—western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky.

Politicks, throughout the whole of this country [western Pennsylvania], seems to be the most irritable subject which can be discussed. There are two ruling or prevailing parties; one, which styles itself Federal, founded originally on the federal league or constitution which binds the states to each other; in contradistinction to a party which attempted to prevent the concurrence of the states to the present constitution, and after it was agreed to, made some fruitless attempts to disorganize it, and was called Antifederal. The opposite party is one which has since sprung up and styles itself the Democratick Republican. Since the federal constitution has been established, the first party exists no longer except in name. That which assumes it, stickles for the offices of government being executed with a high hand, and is therefore accused of aristocratick and even of monarchick sentiments by its opponents, who in their turn are termed factious, and disorganizers, by the federalists. They nickname each other Aristocrats and Democrats, and it is astonishing to what a height their mutual animosity is carried. They are not content with declaiming against each other in congress, or in the state legislatures, but they introduce the subject even at the bars of the judicial courts, and in the pulpits of the places of religious worship. In some places, the males who might otherwise be on terms of friendship with each other, are, merely on account of their diversity of sentiment on politicks, avowed and illiberal enemies; and the females carry the spirit of party into their coteries, so far as to exclude every female whose husband is of a different political opinion, however amiable, and ornamental to society she may be. The most illiberal opinions are adopted by each party, and it is sufficient with a federalist that another man is a republican, to pronounce him capable of every crime; while the republican takes care not to allow the federalist the smallest of the attributes of virtue.— Their general difference of opinion, at last becomes particular, and a mistaken point of honour frequently hurries the one or the other maniac into a premature grave.— The political wheel is kept in constant motion by those two parties, who monopolize it to themselves, to the exclusion of the moderate, well disposed, and best informed part of the community; who quietly pursue their several avocations, lamenting at, yet amused by the bickerings, disputes and quarrels of the turbulent and ambitious leaders of the parties, and their ignorant, prejudiced and obstinate tools— satisfied with the unexampled prosperity they enjoy as a people and a nation—and equally watchful perhaps to guard against tyranny or licentiousness, with the violent and avowed opponents of both.

Review Questions

1. What does Cuming think of the development of political factions in the new nation?
2. How does Cuming characterize each party?