

Chapter 55. The Spector Of Secession Arises At The Hartford Convention (1814-1815)



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- New England Protests The Souths “Unfair Voting Advantages”

Macro-Themes

Politics

- North Vs. South
- 3/5th Voting Clause For Slaves
- Constitutional Amendments
- Majorities For War, Trade, States
- Term Limits For President
- Challenging Southern Political Power

Time: December 15, 1814 – January 5, 1815

New England Protests The South’s “Unfair Voting Advantage”

As Jackson is preparing to fight for New Orleans, another battle is taking shape, this a political one, pitting the Northeast states against the South.

From the opening debate in congress onward, the old-time Federalists of New England have stood in firm opposition to “Madison’s War” -- a war which has cost their region dearly in terms of lost manufacturing and shipping revenues, and left them feeling vulnerable at any moment to a Royal Navy invasion.

The sack of Washington and the threat to Baltimore over the summer of 1814 heighten their fear and anger.

A powerful trio of Massachusetts’s men are particularly outspoken critics of Madison’s conduct of the war and its effect on the economy. They include Timothy Pickering, former Secretary of State in Washington’s cabinet., the Boston lawyer, John Lowell, Jr., and Josiah Quincy, later president of Harvard University.

Others join them in the call for New England to band together and challenge federal operations and policies.

These ideas are aired at the “Hartford Convention,” which is gavelled to order in the Connecticut capital on December 15, 1814.

The convention is chaired by George Cabot, a well-known seaman, merchant, and ex-Senator from Massachusetts.

A total of twenty-six delegates attend, representing five states – Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont and Massachusetts. The meetings are held in private over a three week period and result in a report to be delivered to Congress.

At first glance this final document will appear fairly moderate. It suggests that five Amendments be added to the U.S. Constitution:

1. Prohibit trade embargoes lasting over 60 days;
2. Require a 2/3rd vote majority to declare war, impair foreign trade, admit new states.
3. Limit future presidents to one term.
4. Insure that future presidents are from different states than the incumbent.
5. End the unfair voting advantage the South has in the House owing to the 3/5th slave count.

It is the fifth amendment that quickly stirs regional tensions.

It does so by re-opening an old wound -- the controversy at the 1787 Constitutional Convention whereby the South was “allowed to count their slaves as semi-citizens” (i.e. the 3/5ths Enumeration Clause).

The North never quite lets go of this concession, and, at Hartford, it resurfaces as the source of an “unfair voting advantage” enabling the South to wield more than its fair share of power in Washington.

The result being two more Virginia presidents in a row – Jefferson and Madison – who have imposed trade embargos and brought on a war that has been ruinous to New England’s well-being.

In the face of these “unconstitutional infringements” on the region’s wishes, the only recourse left would seem to be breaking with the union or refusing to obey self-destructive laws.

Ironically this latter option is exactly what John Calhoun and the South will echo down the road, first over the tariff and then over slavery. The “right” of the states to nullify federal statutes detrimental to their well-being.

However, by the time the Hartford Convention report reaches Washington, the outlook for New England’s shipping economy is looking up. The war with Britain is over, and what’s left of the French army is straggling back from Moscow. Prospects are suddenly hopeful for a natural return to free and secure trade on the high seas.

Still the proposed amendments from Hartford will have a residual political effect when the Democratic-Republicans cite them as evidence of Federalist antipathy toward the South, and possible disloyalty toward the Union.