Volume Forty-One 1999
Essays in History
Published by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia.

Fracas in Congress: The Battle of Honor between Matthew Lyon and Roger Griswold

Brian T. Neff
Yale University

On the morning of February 15, 1798, pandemonium broke out on the floor of the United States House of Representatives. Without warning, Federalist Representative Roger Griswold of Connecticut strode across the chambers to where his colleague Matthew Lyon was sitting preoccupied with some correspondence. Cursing him as a "scoundrel," Griswold pounded the Vermont Republican's head and shoulders with a thick, hickory walking stick. Federalist Representative George Thacher of Massachusetts witnessed and later recalled the attack:

I was suddenly, and unsuspectedly interrupted by the sound of a violent blow I raised my head, & directly before me stood Mr. Griswald [sic] laying on blows with all his mightupon Mr. Lyon, who seemed to be in the act of rising out of his seat Lyon made an attempt to catch his cane, but failed--he pressed towards Griswald & endeavoured to close with him, but Griswald fell back and continued his blows on the head, shoulder, & arms of Lyon[who] protecting his head & face as well as he could then turned & made for the fire place& took up the [fire] tongs. Griswalddrop[p]ed his stick & seized the tongs with one hand, & the collar of Lyon by the other, in which pos[i]tion they struggled for an instant when Griswald trip[p]ed Lyon & threw him on the floor & gave him one or two blows in the face(1)

Moments after the two grappling combatants were separated, Lyon retreated to the House water table; when Griswold re-approached him, Lyon lunged forward with the fire tongs and initiated a second brawl.(2) As Jonathan Mason commented, the central legislative body of the United States of America had been reduced to "an assembly of Gladiators."(3)

Griswold's attack was not a random act of violence--to some it did not even come as much of a surprise.(4) On January 30, Lyon had brazenly insulted the Connecticut Federalist Representative and an offended Roger Griswold had retaliated by publicly calling Lyon a coward. To this character attack Lyon had responded by spitting directly in Griswold's face; when Congress subsequently failed to marshal a two-thirds majority to expel Lyon for indecorum, Griswold thought it necessary to avenge his damaged honor by publicly caning Lyon in the House chambers. This hickory stick attack was the climax of over two weeks of fierce congressional turmoil.(5)

In contemporary politics, the Matthew Lyon-Roger Griswold confrontations might simply appear as battles of individual beliefs or conflicting personalities. After all, Lyon was a Republican and Griswold, a Federalist; Lyon was an Irish immigrant of humble origins, while Griswold belonged to the upper echelon of the Connecticut elite. The congressional fracas of 1798, however, is peculiar to the political culture of early national America, a culture in which politicians were hypersensitive to their public reputations as gentlemen, in which personal honor and politics were intimately related. Lyon and Griswold fought in a competition of reciprocal character attacks, each man intending to

reclaim his damaged honor by degrading the other. In defending or castigating the "Spitting Lyon," Congressmen fought almost entirely along party lines, calling on the political honor code to label one combatant the victim and gentleman, the other the culprit and coward. This unseemly congressional scandal thus manifested and exacerbated the ideological rift between the Federalists and the Republicans and was a national awakening to the virulence of America's increasingly partisan political process. Many Americans responded to the episode with fear that their carefully constructed republican government and its Constitution would collapse underneath all the partisan turmoil; they blamed both Lyon and Griswold for dishonoring the nation, for undermining the integrity and "virtue" of the United States in front of a watching world. Moreover, that both Federalists and Republicans invoked the honor code the understood framework of acceptable, gentlemanly behavior suggests that the rules of honor were malleable, open to interpretation, and at a politician's disposal to use in political discourse. As the Lyon-Griswold affair reveals, honor played an important role in the development of political parties in late eighteenth-century America. More generally, to understand early national American political culture fully, we must examine the personal side of this era's politics.(6)

"*Will you fight me with your wooden sword?*"(7)

To read the Lyon-Griswold affair within in its proper historical context, it is first necessary to examine exactly what happened on the morning of January 30, 1798. The House of Representatives had just conducted a vote on the impeachment of Senator William Blount. The House recessed while tellers tallied the ballots and Congressmen milled about the chambers conversing informally with one another. Standing "without the bar of the House,"(8) debating the merits of the recently proposed foreign intercourse bill with numerous colleagues, Matthew Lyon began to rant about the "malign influence of Connecticut politicians."(9) He boldly accused the Connecticut Federalists of hypocrisy and corruption, asserting that they "acted in opposition to the interests and opinions of nine-tenths of their constituents." He charged them with "pursuing their own private views," greedily seeking offices for the sole sake of power and title, and eradicating political opposition through an unjust monopoly of the press. Sarcastically, he accused the Federalists of brainwashing their constituents with opiates, claiming finally that "if he should go into Connecticut, and manage a press there six months,he could effect a revolution, and turn out the present Representatives." As later testimony reveals, Lyon spoke loudly, "as if he intended to be heardby all those who were near him."(10)

Standing nearby, Roger Griswold grew irate listening to Lyon and from a distance asked him whether he would march into Connecticut "[wearing his] wooden sword"; this was a direct reference to Lyon's temporary but dishonorable discharge from the Continental Army.(11) Lyon either did not hear Griswold's comment or chose to ignore it; in any case, Griswold approached Lyon, placed his hand on his arm, and repeated the question. Insulted, embarrassed, and dishonored before his fellow Representatives, Lyon spat straight in Griswold's face. Without a word, Griswold wiped the spit with a cloth and exited the chambers. The Committee of Privileges instantly drew up a formal resolution calling for the expulsion of Matthew Lyon for "a violent attack and gross indecency." So the Annals of Congress records this infamous spitting affair.(12)

This abusive exchange was in part a battle between two ideologically opposed representatives over current political controversy.(13) Lyon and Griswold were of conflicting political orientations that had been at odds with one another over recent debates about American international relations. In 1798, the United States was embroiled in an undeclared "Quasi-War" with France that had been prompted by France's seizure of American ships in the West Indies. Richard Hofstadter claims that "The French Revolution and the war that followed joined and intensified all the differences that separated

Federalists from [Republicans]: differences over what the character of the new society should be, over economic policies, over the interpretation of the Constitution, over foreign policy, clashing sectional interests, and republican ideology."(14) The Republican party had been dubbed the "French party" by the Federalists, who claimed they "[advocated] a radical, French-inspired democracy hostile to property and order."(15) In January, Republican representative John Nicholas of Virginia had introduced an amendment in the House whose aim was to regulate the number and payment of foreign Ministers. Roger Griswold and the Federalists adamantly disagreed with the measure because they thought it was imperative for the United States to retain a strong diplomatic stance toward Europe and that Nicholas's bill aimed to "invade the constitutional powers of the Executive." The Federalists scoffed at the Republican argument that the President exercised too much power in what Republicans referred to as his "immense patronage" of foreign ministers.(16) Republican Matthew Lyon was particularly outspoken in support of the legislation; as one Philadelphia gentleman reported, "the Lyon of Vermont has lately become more furious and turbulent than ever."(17) Robert Lee Blackwell writes that Lyon "hated tyranny and all the trappings of royalty which, to him, were symbols of tyranny. Out of his dedication to man's quest for freedom under just laws, [Lyon] looked upon the new government of his adopted country as the ground of hope for deliverance from tyranny." Lyon had expressed such disgust with the "trappings of royalty" several months earlier when he had refused to march in a "regal-type procession" to the auditorium where President Adams was to give his compulsory respects to Congress.(18) Lyon was indeed a self-proclaimed demagogue to the Republicans. "Everyone knows there are two different opinions entertained in this country with respect to the management of the government," he reminded his House colleagues on February 8, 1798, "and everyone who knows me knows that I am very free in speaking my opinion on these subjects."(19) Only months after entering the House, Lyon had become perhaps the most vocal of an increasingly vocal minority.(20)

A Federalist letter published at this time in the Connecticut *Middlesex Gazette* encapsulates the turbulent party sentiment at the heart of the Lyon-Griswold fray. The author declared that Republicans were an "associated club of disorganizers" who "[bore] the plain impress of partiality, deceit, and distortion." Lyon, as one of the party's most prominent rabble rousers, was out to "bring the [national] government into contempt, to palsy its efforts, to degrade its dignity, and to undermine and destroy its constitution." While Lyon vehemently objected to what he thought were superfluous governmental offices, Federalists argued that "the various establishments of Government [were] the wheels on which it [moved]." To the author of this *Middlesex Gazette* letter, "the enquirymust bewhether establishments [were] made *unconstitutionally* and *unnecessarily*," and he sarcastically questioned whether Lyon "wouldhave *no* establishments--neither army, navy, or ministers," or if he "wouldbanish *all* expencesand every appointment that will occasion them."(21) The author also questioned how Republicans could possibly denigrate the Federalists as "*enemies to the people*" if they were "the champions of theconstitution [and] friends to the executive." "If an honest man [approves] of the measures of the Executive," he asked, "is he not equally interested in the prosperity of our common countryas those who exclaim against him?" The Federalists questioned Republican patriotism in light of the party's adherence to radical French ideals of democracy.(22) The above *Middlesex Gazette* author wondered if Lyon truly supposed

that the [Republicans'] unintermitted complaints against [the] administration, [their] opposition to every measure of federal men, [their] scurrilities constantly vented against every public proceeding, and [their] profuse admiration of French doctrines, principles, and proceedings, [were] the politic method of conserving harmony with the French Republic[.] [Did] he believethat disunion and disorganization at home [was] wisely adapted to procure good treatment?(23)

Party zeal was rampant in the chambers by late January 1798; discussion of foreign relations was replete with partisan rhetoric and factional bickering, creating an ideal environment of tension and turbulence to produce such a congressional fracas. One witness to House proceedings wrote that during debate, "all the eloquence and ingenuity of the disputants was called into immediate action with all the acrimony and virulence of high party spirit."(24) Republicans were becoming more vocally opposed to the government. Wrote one man in the *American Mercury*, "It is remarkable that the *Jacobin spirit* is never satisfied with a settled and orderly state of society [the Republicans] wish to denounce when they *are* opposed in their views, and *lest* they should be opposed." This Federalist's remarks reveal the heightened strength of the opposition party: he grumbled that "When they have the power, they come forwards at once, and attack the citadel, [and] when they are "*the virtuous minority*," they begin at a distance to sound the alarmand afterwards grow more desperate." He concluded by charging the Republicans with "a deep rooted hatred both to [the] Constitution and Government."(25) The 1798 fracas did not create partisan tensions that were not already present in the House; rather, it exacerbated them and publicly exhibited them.

Roger Griswold was attuned to this and wrote to his brother about the "discordant parties which agitate[d] the government." Indeed, Griswold thought that partisan virulence had the potential to destroy the Union and contended that "either the government must yield to a convulsion or the party which opposes its measures must be subdued it is idle to expect that a government can existunder the pressure of such internal disorder, and we are certainly approachinga crisis which must strengthen or put an end to the Union."(26) Griswold's comments illuminate the Federalist fear that the government would be "at an end" were the Republicans to prevail; more generally, they echo the sentiments of many Americans who perceived partisanship as a great threat to the republic.(27) As modern onlookers may be apt to forget, Americans had not yet accepted the idea of a two-party republic because nowhere did the Constitution sanction a system of "legitimate opposition" to the incumbent government. Moreover, most Americans associated the concept of "political parties" with faction and anarchy, particularly with the unruly parties that had defied Parliament in England and had consequently sparked the seventeenth-century civil war there.(28) The Lyon-Griswold fracas thus starkly exposed to the nation the potential threat of an opposition party.

Lyon and Griswold had extremely different personal backgrounds as well, and this further contributed to the tension between them. "Rugged Matt" Lyon was born in Ireland and at fifteen sold himself as a "Redemptioner," or indentured servant, to a ship captain in return for passage to America.(29) After the Revolution, Lyon became a businessman who persevered through several election defeats to win a seat in the House of Representatives. Griswold's upbringing, in contrast, was one of wealth and prestige: he was born in the United States, into a family intimately associated with the eminent and politically powerful estate of Oliver Wolcott.(30) The class differences between them no doubt created unease between the two men. In fact, Griswold directly ascribed Lyon's excitable temperament to his lower-class Irish breeding. He wrote to a friend in late February, 1798: "Thestories of his being sold for his passage from Irelandare likewise true--in shorthe is literally one of the most ignorant contemptible and brutal fellows in Congress--and that is saying a great deal." Indeed, many of the House Federalists shared similar "class animosities" with Griswold.(31)

But polar political sentiments and distinct character differences cannot fully explain the behavioral choices that Lyon and Griswold made in the House that January morning. At the outset, for instance, Griswold had the option of simply not dignifying Lyon's ranting with a response. In fact, in a letter composed several days after the spitting, he reported that while "much that Lyon saidhad proved highly provocative and had aroused resentment," it did *not* make him feel "indignant." He did not even believe that it warranted a serious retort, much less an "expression of resentment." Griswold then

justified his "wooden sword" quip as having been a light-hearted recognition of Lyon's insults, merely intended to "excite a laugh in [his colleagues] and in that way put an end to [Lyon's] improper observations." He claimed to have been shocked that such an innocent wisecrack aroused such fury in his Vermont colleague.(32) Yet his repetition of the remark to Lyon's face when Lyon failed to respond suggests that it was more than just an innocuous gibe. Likewise we must question Lyon's choice to spit, a most vulgar retaliation. There must have been something more than political or personal disagreement guiding this exchange.

Lyon and Griswold fought according to an internalized rulebook of behavior that modern observers often overlook. A code of political honor equipped both combatants with a set of social expectations and regulations along with the tools to fight for political ends on a personal level, and this honor code explains the Lyon-Griswold altercations' form. A politician in the United States in 1798 was at once an elected official and a gentleman, ultra-conscious of his reputation and ceaselessly striving to maintain the utmost deportment. He did not take affronts to his integrity lightly, for such offenses slapped at his entitlement to a position of political leadership. Therefore, the slightest sign of impertinence was an official challenge not only to a politician's honor but also to his career. Aaron Burr addressed this honor code when he cautioned Alexander Hamilton before their duel in 1804: "political opposition can never absolve Gentlemen from the necessity of a rigid adherence to the laws of honor and the rules of decorum."(33) The political elite were thus always ready to defend themselves indignantly against character attacks that modern onlookers might not deem very serious. These "laws of honor," however, were open to interpretation and offered a gamut of possible behavioral choices in any given political situation. For example, in 1797 James Monroe considered a range of responses to a character attack he received from President John Adams; his options included including ignoring the President, dueling him, or publishing a derisive pamphlet about him.(34) Thus the code of honor was a substantive but malleable set of rules for socially and politically acceptable behavior. The "laws of honor" allowed for varied interpretation and selective application.(35)

Understanding this, the Lyon-Griswold fracas was as clearly a contest of honor as one of partisanship, a game of personal attack and defense, a struggle guided by this unwritten but understood and highly adaptable code of gentlemanly conduct. The real ammunition in this battle was not any ideological charge, but the much graver act of *dishonoring* a peer--subjecting him to public humiliation, assaulting his personal character, injuring his self-image, branding him a coward. Lyon's comments were clearly intended to "derogate from the political integrity of the Representatives of Connecticut." (36) He made his invectives with the purpose of assaulting the dignity and honor of the Federalists, of Connecticut, and of the nearby Roger Griswold. When Lyon labeled them unfit for office and claimed the power to dethrone them in a veritable partisan "revolution," he mounted a challenge to the Federalists which Griswold instantly recognized and against which he defended himself with the "wooden sword" comment, attacking Lyon's honor to reinstate his own. Shamed in front of his colleagues, Lyon chose an incomparably vulgar form of disrespect and dishonor by spitting at Griswold, the climax of a political tennis match of challenge and defense.

This leads us to question, then, why Griswold did not fight back that January morning why he did not immediately return the insult with his own saliva or at the very least with a verbal retort. That the House later felt it necessary to forbid Lyon and Griswold to "enter into any personal contest until a decision of [Lyon's expulsion] shall be had thereon" suggests that Congress recognized the violation of honor involved in the altercation and expected Griswold to regain his respect through retaliation. (37) Later testimony conflicts over Griswold's exact reaction to Lyon's attack. Fellow Federalist Representative Samuel Dana of Connecticut claimed that "Mr. Griswold turned towards the member from Vermont, fixed his eye upon him, and was slowly drawing back his right arm in a constrained

manner, when from his change of countenance and the cast of his eye I apprehended that my colleague recollected where he was; he then took out his handkerchief and wiped his face."(38) Griswold himself later explained that in any other setting he would have instantly taken vengeance, were it not for "the habits of order and decency in which every man from Connecticut has been educated" that advised against "personal violence on the floor of the House." It is unclear, though, whether this picture of a self-restrained and decorous Griswold is entirely accurate or whether it was simply an ex post facto attempt to distinguish Griswold as a gentlemanly victim. For instance, Theodore Sedgwick wrote to Ephraim Williams that, "Griswold at the time of the insult was offered would have inflicted ample vengeance had he not been restrained by his friends. [His friends] did wrong."(39) How his colleagues may have interceded is uncertain, but by this account, it was Griswold's Federalist peers who averted a retaliating blow to the face, not Griswold's own reserve.

In any case, whether it was entirely of Griswold's volition or rather at the discretion of his nearby political supporters, Griswold's restraint was perhaps a savvy political move in the game of honor. The House, of course, had witnessed Lyon's unparalleled act of indecency and perhaps either Griswold, his Federalist friends, or both understood how their party could use the "laws of honor" to its political advantage by allowing an expectedly outraged Congress to expel the "Spitting Lyon." Perhaps Griswold did in fact reason that retaliating on the spot would have only made him look just as ungentlemanly as his adversary. It is conceivable that Griswold attempted to capitalize on Lyon's indisputable barbarity by withholding his revenge and thus establishing himself as the unequivocal victim in the affray. If the House ousted the beast, it would both avenge Griswold's honor and remove a Republican vote from the chambers.

Griswold was right on one account Congress did unanimously regard Lyon's act itself as reprehensible.(40) The Republicans could certainly not deny its impropriety; Republican Representative Albert Gallatin of Pennsylvania, for example, commented that "all must agree in reprobating the mode [Lyon] selected to show his resentment, and the place where the act was committed."(41) One frustrated Federalist constituent conceded that even the Republicans "despise[d] in their heartsthe man who has committed such a daring outrage, an abominable and dirty actupon decency and decorum." Lyon made things worse for himself by rising to his feet during congressional debate and accusing his political enemies of "kicking [him] in the arse," further vulgarity that prompted another Federalist uproar. "The member from Vermont," fumed one Federalist, "made use of an expression so outrageous, so gross and indecent, that no gentleman yet [has] been able to repeat it."(42) Despite such reproachable behavior, however, Republicans sought to defend Lyon, leading Federalists to conclude that only partisanship could be behind such a response; as one protested, Republicans were pitifully sacrificing "noble and just sentimentsto the pride and ambition of party spirit and [the wish] to preserve a *vote at all events*."(43)

As word of the clash reached the public through newspaper accounts and correspondence, Americans became embroiled in a national partisan debate over whether Lyon was fit to remain in the House of Representatives. One newspaper commented on the hype and partisan frenzy by musing that Lyon had "ejected his saliva" explicitly as "an infallible cure for the locked-jaw," because "ever since the memorable *day of spittle*, the House and the public have been talking about it and about it."(44) The violence in Congress was a profound physical manifestation of the nation's ideological schism and it served Americans with a bitter dose of their country's political reality. Indeed, Lyon instantly became a household name that incited contempt from one segment of the population and support from another. The majority of newspaper editors fashioned their coverage of the story to satisfy their partisan biases, thus producing a deluge of contrasting accounts for the public to assess.(45) For example, some Federalist newspaper readers called the January 31 Republican *Aurora* report a

"misrepresentation of the [congressional] transaction" that intended to "injure the character of an injured man [i.e., Griswold]." The Federalist press retaliated with a "more correct statement of the fact" in a pro-Griswold version of the story.(46) Another man, angered by what he perceived as the *Aurora's* partiality to Lyon, complained that "the Editors of some Newspapers cannot tread the path of truth,[for it] immediately undergoes some horrid distortionand is cast forth the vile abortion of falsehood and malice."(47) The press thus promoted the ensuing partisan public debate over expulsion.

Federalists, both congressmen and their constituents, castigated Lyon for repulsive and ungentlemanly behavior, proclaiming Griswold to be the victim of a cowardly attack. Gallatin noted the severity of Federalist rhetoric in the House, particularly of Griswold's Connecticut colleagues. There was "but little delicacy in the usual conversation of most Connecticut gentlemen," he wrote, "[for] they have contracted a habit of saying very hard things, andconsidering Lyon as a low-life fellow, they were under no restraint in regard to him."(48) Malicious in attacking the outspoken Republican as a "beast" who was unfit for the Congress, House Federalists set out to destroy Lyon's character once and for all. Representative William Shepard from Massachusetts argued that "no gentleman or modest man could plead in behalf of such a man" and that "if [Lyon] must be a legislator, it should be in a part of the world where all decisions were made by *spitting* and *scratching*."(49) Representative Dana vowed to "put him away, as citizens removed *impurities* and *filth* from their docks and wharves." He scornfully dared his colleagues to support Lyon, for Dana did not "envy any gentleman the pleasure they would have in the company of such a *kennel of filth*."(50) Perhaps the most strident House rhetoric pressing for Lyon's expulsion came from the Speaker himself, New Jersey Federalist Jonathan Dayton. Dayton announced that Lyon had "done an act which would disgrace a blackguard" and had "insulted [the House] with words [of] defiance" that offended not only Griswold, but also every other Representative in his presence. Dayton concluded that if the House did not expel the brute, he would not hesitate to "address [Lyon] in words of *thunder* which would drive him from his presence."(51)

In the press, New England Federalists strove to dishonor Lyon by rehashing his past in a sense, they attempted to pick up where Griswold's "wooden sword" comment had been vulgarly cut off. Perhaps no newspaper editor was more outspokenly biased against Matthew Lyon than William Cobbett in his ultra-Federalist Philadelphia *Porcupine's Gazette*. A notoriously truculent London publisher, quite literally imported by the Federalists in 1792 to start a press with the purpose of slandering Republican opposition, "Peter Porcupine" wasted no time in calling public attention to Lyon's past "cowardice." (52) He reported that "the Philadelphians all want to have out the whole *history of the wooden sword*," because "there is certainly something at the bottom of this storythat the Honorable Member wishes to keep in oblivion. For, let the reader ask himself," Cobbett continued, "whether a gentle hint, like that of Mr. Griswold, was calculated to awaken resentment in anyone to whom it was not applicable, and in whose mind it did not revive something that he was very anxious to keep hidden from the world." (53) Cobbett also began including derisive poetry to jeer the "Spitting Lyon" for mock heroism; one such poem read:

"Not Hudibrass' Steel so trusty

Which lack of fighting has made rusty,

Nor yet la Mancha's sword so bright,

Kept by the watching, valourous Knight

Nor any Sword e'er girded thigh on

Can match this matchless Sword of Lyon.[(54)]

In particular, Federalist newspapers emphasized Lyon's heritage as evidence of his cowardice. One Federalist's letter to the *Norwich Packet* reminded the public that "Mr. Lyon was not born in America, but in Ireland!!!" and remarked that this was of "'the greatest consequence' [to his] enemies."[(55)] Another Federalist called Lyon "an imported patriot" who was a "dishonour to [the] country."[(56)] Still another clarified that the Irish were "either the most noble, brave, generous and best bred; or the most ruffian-like, dirty, and blackguard, of all the creation."[(57)] Massachusetts Federalist Representative Harrison Gray Otis "grieved that the saliva of an Irishman should be left upon the face of an American, and he, a New England man."[(58)] Federalists employed Lyon's Irish background and record of military cowardice to humiliate him as they believed he had humiliated Griswold.

The crux of the debate over Lyon's expulsion rested on the identification of the initial aggressor in the fracas. Federalists excused Griswold for his reference to the wooden sword by arguing that Lyon's offensive bravado had induced it. One such partisan, identifying himself in the *Porcupine's Gazette* as a "Friend to Order and Decency," summarized his party's logic by arguing that while the wooden sword affront would have been inappropriate in most contexts, it *did not* carry the full weight of slander, given Lyon's provocation:

That Mr. Griswold would have been guilty of great indiscretion and breach of delicacy in mentioning in such a place the dreadful *wooden sword*, without being provoked by having his public character so *grossly* insulted, there can be little doubt. It would surely have been highly improper for one member to *hint* [in] a way not to be misunderstood at an affair which could not fail to irritate, to produce ill will, or to create resentment of the strongest kind, without being first so keenly insultedas to hear his duty and integrity to his constituency not only arraigned, but condescend[ed to], and in a bellying and braggadocio manner.[(59)]

It was inappropriate enough that Lyon took offense at Griswold, argued this Federalist, but responding "in so dirtyand *cat-like*" a fashion was absolutely condemnable. "Had the *filthy being*struck Mr. Griswold either with his fistor with a stick," he continued, "[Lyon] would not perhaps have been consigned by all men of noble sentimentto that shamefrom which he can never be restored." Therefore, the explicit choice to *spit* over all other possible comebacks was evidence that Lyon lacked the "smallest particle of true courage, of honor, of delicacy, or of manly sentiment." In short, he was wrong for responding but unforgivable for choosing such a barbaric response.[(60)]

Other New England Federalist publishers likewise drew from the canons of the honor code to rebuke Lyon. One declared him "a most unmanner'd ruffian" who had assaulted "Mr. Griswold [with] an insult never to be endured." In contrast to Lyon's cowardly and brash conduct, Griswold's cool restraint after Lyon's attack left no doubt of the Connecticut Representative's "highly honourablepresence of mind." To this author, the honor code wholly justified Griswold to "redress himself" and regain his lost dignity:

Mr. Griswold should most inflexibly resolve to beat this fellow daily and every day, untill [sic] one or the other of them shall be compelled to leave that house; for surely Mr. Griswold should never sit again with him as an equal and a gentleman. If Lyon is to be protected and justified, and [Griswold] is to be expelled for taking a just vengeance on his brutality, he will have little cause of regret at leaving a body so insensible to its own dignity, and so unjust to his injuries."[(61)]

All in all, this Federalist would rather have seen Griswold ejected, for his own sake, from a House of Representatives that did not respect the rules of honor. This letter was dated February 1 --fourteen days later Griswold indeed took this prescribed course of vengeance. While there is no evidence that he had read this particular call to arms, it is significant to note the similarity in thinking between the two Federalists: some form of revenge was the expected, proper, and necessary response to Lyon's insolence. The Federalist newspapers thus employed the honor code to delegitimate Republican opposition by deriding Matthew Lyon.

Most Federalists, however, did not condone the idea of Griswold avenging himself on the House floor because they had reproached Lyon for *his* choice to retaliate in this public manner. Likening Lyon to a low-class scoundrel, one Federalist had "never heard that any member ever *assaulted* another, *any where*, much less *in the Hall, and while the House was sitting*;except in some dirty grog-shop blackguard brothel."(62) Likewise, Federalist Representative Robert Goodloe Harper of South Carolina condemned all violence within the walls of Congress because there was a "time and place to obtain justice" from an attack. Because "the distinction between words and personal attackis a distinction well understood," and that "no language could be sufficiently provoking to warrant a blow," he argued that "in well-bred society, when a man receives an affront, he [must repress] his feelings" and seek justice in private.(63) Federalists thus argued that Lyon was a coward in comparison to the self-restrained Griswold, whom they lauded as a "worthy and respectable member" of the House for his "amiable command of temper" and "respectful attention to the *time and place* which should have secured a just punishment to the *nasty beast*."(64) One Federalist laid out his idea of the appropriate, chivalrous public response to a personal assault by musing how a "well bred gentlemanstanding in the place of the *nasty Lyon*" would have behaved:

He would have said, "Mr. Griswold, the weapon to which you allude, was unjustly decreed to me But, whether just, or otherwise, you neither manifest delicacy, or true courage, by throwing it up to me in this place we shall not be here always" and would then have returned to his seat with dignity and composure. But, instead of this, he spit! Oh indelible disgrace!"(65)

These comments reveal that, while unanimous in censuring the nature of Lyon's response, not all Federalists denied the degrading impact of Griswold's comment. Some conceded that Lyon had had a right to reclaim his honor, but it would have only been appropriate to have done so *outside* the House chambers.

The congressional debate and aggressive press coverage appeared to crush Lyon's sense of dignity. Ceaseless references to his temporarily terminated service in the Continental Army compelled Lyon to clear his name and his past before his colleagues. "Evidence has been introduced into this House," he recited on the floor of Congress, "that I left Colonel Warner's regiment in dishonor; that I am a person of disrepute; that I have been in the habit of receiving insult with impunity Had I a reasonable opportunity," he declared, "I could provethat when I left it, I left it with the regret of much of the greater part of the officers and all the soldiers I could prove my having taken my musket and marched to the lines every day I could also prove, that when an officer offered me an insult, I chastised him before the officers of that regiment." Seemingly hurt and humiliated, Lyon concluded that "by these things, and by my standing in this House, I could prove that I have always been respected in the country I represent,where I have lived these twenty-four years." This speech illuminates the distinct impact of a political character attack in the early republic. Griswold's affront imbued Lyon with a sense of shame, dishonor, and embarrassment strong enough to warrant this defensive public address. (66)

In a letter to his Vermont constituents, Lyon further defended himself. He justified his participation in the discussion of Representative Nicholas's foreign intercourse amendment by reminding his voters that he cared deeply whether or not the "property as well as the liberty of [his] fellow citizens [were] in a measure exposed to the arbitrary will of the President." Lyon called any "man holding and exercising such powers as they please" a "Monarch, whether he be hereditary or elective." Moreover, Lyon claimed that the "expressions, jests and observations" of his colleagues "most provoked sentiments from [him] which altho' [he] really believed good manners had taught [him] to surpress [sic], the run of the conversation justified [his] expressing them." The House, he added, aimed to "keep up the spirit of keen satire and irony against [him]," and Lyon self-righteously claimed to have "bor[n]e all this and many severe sarcasms with good humor, until a member of congress premeditatedly and repeatedly [threw] in [his] face an affront too much for a person tamely to suffer." (67) He further informed his constituents that the Federalists "have ransacked the English language for villifying and approbrious [sic] expressions to abuse the gentlemen who would not join with them in the expulsion."(68) So Lyon proclaimed himself to be the victim in the fracas.

Not surprisingly, Lyon's constituents were among his most ardent supporters, and a number of these Republicans communicated to the *Vermont Gazette* their wholehearted approval of his conduct. To them, Griswold's impudence completely justified Lyon showing "the highest resentment," for he had certainly endured "a scandalous aspersion known to be founded on falsity, cast in his face, in public company." These constituents went so far as to take *personal* offense at Griswold's comments, deeming "[his] sarcasm [to have been] levelled more at them, than at their representative." "The people of Vermont," they indignantly remarked, "would not willingly send a poltroon to represent them." They were "therefore glad Mr. Lyon did not neglect to let Mr. Griswold understand that his wooden sword was high tempered enough for him."(69) Vermont's humiliation and loss of respect was real enough, as many were inclined to think less of the state by its association with Lyon. One letter to a Connecticut newspaper asserted that "the first and largest portion of dishonor falls to the district in Vermont, which has chosen Lyon to represent it."(70) A *Porcupine's Gazette* entry cried: "Delicate member of Congress!--Enlightened Vermonters, to send such a man!"(71) To the Republicans of Vermont, dishonoring Lyon was tantamount to dishonoring those who had voted him into office, thus evincing the strong relationship between individual and state honor.(72)

Further, Lyon's defenders brought attention to his ability to endure perpetual defamatory press against him. "The body of people consider Col. Lyon as an injured man," wrote one, for "he had not arrived in Philadelphia, last year, before scurrility and buffooneryattempted to degrade and injure him."(73) Republican Representative John Nicholas of Virginia agreed when he defended Lyon in testimony, stating that "it appeared that, for some purpose or other, which he pretended not to know, Mr. Lyon's history wasraked up for twenty years past."(74) The Republicans argued that character attacks on Lyon were cowardly because his integrity was, in fact, impeccable. Lyon had consistently "met his foes and public clamor" in a "manly and regular manner," whereas Griswold's conduct had always been "unmanly." Colonel Lyon was "esteemed by his neighbours, for his friendly intercourse with all ranks, [and] for his good offices to all." He was "hospitable and generous, the benefactor of the clergy of every denomination, and an active encourager of the industry, manufactures, commerce, and prosperity of the nation." In sum, Lyon was a gentleman of the highest degree and he "ought to have been safe from personal abuse or assault from Mr. Griswold."(75) To the Republicans, Lyon was the noble victim of many unjust assaults.

It was natural, then, for the majority of Republicans to use the "laws of honor" to justify Lyon's spitting as a warranted response to Griswold's cowardly verbal effrontery, despite the atrocity of his

act. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson, James Madison contended that "if Griswold [was] a man of the sword, he should not have permitted the step to be taken [i.e., Lyon's spitting]; if not, he does not deserve to be avenged by the House. No man ought to reproach another with cowardice who is not ready to give proof of his own courage."(76) Another Republican wrote to the *Chelsea Courier* that although "for one man to spit in the face of another is both indecent, and insulting," it is "defencible in the ratio of the provocation." The indecency "may be considered as existing in an evanescent state when the provocation is in the extreme." Griswold had "*assailed* Mr. Lyon with a *sarcasm* which he (Mr. G.) well knew to be a provocation of the highest hue, and of such a nature as Mr. Lyon would not suffer to pass unnoticed." The fact that Griswold had repeated his insult gave his "philippic the greater degree of acrimony" and even further justified Lyon's retort.(77) Republican rhetoric thus made Griswold's status as the victim very precarious.

Federalists responded by using the "laws of honor" to deride Lyon's defenders in outraged and sarcastic letters to the press. "In a previous, unenlightened age," preached one, it would have been shocking for a man to "undertake the justification of so *nasty a thing* as one man's spitting in the face of another. But in this age of refinements," he mocked, "such advocates are not wanting. If anything can exceed the meanness of Mr. Lyon's conduct, on this occasion, it is the attempt to justify it."(78) In a direct response to Representative Nicholas's testimonial defense of Lyon, another Federalist proclaimed it absolutely impossible to "call Lyon's offencean offence of the *same nature* as [Griswold's comment]." This man called for bipartisan "abhorrence" of the action, for "there is something in it so abominably nasty, low, and degrading, that it soils the lips which can utter a syllable in its extenuation."(79) Another irate reader of *Porcupine's Gazette* instituted a mock "knighthood" into which he inducted all those "partisans of Indecency" who justified the act of spitting in another's face. Nicknaming Lyon's supporters the "Knights of wooden sword," this Federalist endowed the Republicans with both a "superb dagger of lath" and the "privilege of spitting upon any man who shall on any occasion use the expressions 'burning shame,' 'wooden sword,' 'hickory club,' 'neat's leather,' or 'tobacco spittle.'" Their armor, mocked this Federalist, would be "a Lion rampant, girt with the wooden sword of the order, in the act of spitting on all around him."(80) Bitterly amused, a fellow Federalist responded to this advertisement several days later pretending to be a man of "pusillanimous constitutions" and "native imbecility," fittingly called *Dan Simon Slabberchaps*. "Remarkably fond of chivalry, butconstitutionally such a coward that [he] never dare[d] think of being initiated" into any knighthood, *Slabberchaps* was intended to represent, indeed, Matthew Lyon himself and all Republicans who were "cowardly" enough to back him.(81) The Knighthood of the Wooden Sword epitomizes Federalist efforts to denigrate and dishonor a unified Republican party.

When a final vote was taken, the 52-44 tally in fact favored expulsion, but the Federalists failed to gather the required two-thirds majority to eject Lyon. With several exceptions, the vote was on party lines, though this came as little surprise, after fourteen days of such heated deliberation.(82) During the hearings, one Federalist wrote in the *Connecticut Courier*: "I greatly fear we shall not have the constitutional numbers to effect his expulsion. Shameful and disgraceful in the extreme will it be, if this shall not be done. To our great mortification and disgrace it is, that we have such an animal among us. But greater will the shame and reproach if he is permitted to retain his seat."(83) After the vote, the Federalists were furious. One protested that "Lyon stood before the house convinced of crimes which would have *expelled* from the [any] societyin the United States, whether legal, Convivial, or even *Jacobinic*, yet a faction retained him there. Lyon [kept]his seat for the honor and interest of his constituents."(84) *Porcupine's Gazette* immediately listed in a "conspicuous point of view" the "*forty-four*" Republicans Representatives who "[thought] such a man company for them."

Cobbett warned his readers, "Hushed be every tongue; and above all, let every one *keep at a distance*."(85) The Federalist *Chelsea Courier* published a bitter poem explicating the vote: "In sympathy [Lyon's] friends drew near | And kept its foes at bay, | For every beast, has friends, 'tis clear, | As every dog, his day." The poet went on to say that retaining the "creature" had established Congress as "A filthy Lyon's den." It was "the malignant and groveling influence of a party," held another Federalist, that "alonedetermined in the negative the question of the expulsion. The interest of the [Republicans] would be weakened by the loss of one of their number. Thus the merits of the question [were] wholly set aside, and [the Republicans voted] against expelling the culpritfor the more serious apprehension of losing a vote in the political questionsbefore Congress."(86) To the incensed Federalists, it was partisan politics that retained the indecorous Lyon.

Federalists claimed that this House vote even embarrassed Republicans because the partisanship behind it was so blatant and shameless. William Cobbett remarked that Lyon's "*supporters,* his *friends*, and his equals, were extremely anxious to avoid debate on the subject[because] they wished to keep the thing as much as possible hidden from their constituents, as well as from the world in general."(87) A witness to the vote observed that "if the minority had possessed sufficient spirits to raise their hanging heads and downcast eyes," they would have seen "contempt and indignation depicted in every feature of men feeling the tormenting disgrace now indelibly attached to the name of their country."(88) Many Federalists and Republicans alike, therefore, were disturbed that partisanship had prevailed over unbiased judgment.

Not the least of those disturbed, of course, was Roger Griswold, who promptly bought a sturdy hickory cane and took the responsibility of vengeance upon himself.(89) Griswold later wrote that he was "reduced to the necessity either of leaving Congress with disgrace to [himself]and in addition thereuntoto leave a stigma on the state which wou'd be constantly thrown at our Representatives, or to wipe off the stigma by inflecting a public chastisement."(90) As for his decision to inflict punishment in the chambers, Griswold deemed that "to have gone into the streets would have been descending to the condition of a bully. The House had sanctioned violence within those walls when the insult was offered. That was the proper and only place for doing it."(91) Other Federalists agreed with his reasoning. "By [the House's] negative upon the question of expulsion," argued one, "they have justified the dirty deed, and have made the Constitution of the United States sanction shame and spitting. 'He who does not repel vile acts, participates in the infamy.'"(92) Thus perhaps Griswold's intent was equally to disgrace the House of Representatives, the legislative body that had failed to restore his integrity, and to dishonor the "Spitting Lyon" himself.

Eyewitness representatives reacted to Griswold's cudgeling on February 15 in an intensely partisan manner. Specifically, some Republican representatives testified that Speaker Jonathan Dayton showed particular bias against Lyon, claiming that he bemusedly looked on as Griswold pounded upon Lyon's face while the two combatants grappled on the floor.(93) Moreover, claimed these Republicans, when fellow representatives pulled at Griswold's legs in an attempt to end the fray, Dayton reportedly snickered and sarcastically criticized them-- "That is not a proper way to take hold of him . You ought to take hold of him by the shoulders"-- apparently stalling for time so that Griswold could deliver more blows to Lyon. By contrast, as testimony further suggests, Dayton was swift to suppress the second brawl at the water table with his first official call to order because here Lyon had initiated the violence. Some of Lyon's incensed constituents reported to the *Vermont Gazette* that when "Mr. Griswold had the advantage [in the] affray, the speaker did not call to order here," but when "afterwards Mr. Lyon engaged Mr. Griswold, here they were equal and the speaker called to order." (94) These Republicans accused Dayton of "a partiality, too glaring for a legislator, and totally

inconsistent with the dignified station he [held] in the house."[(95)] Another of Lyon's supporters accused Dayton of conspiring with Griswold, claiming that "there [were] many circumstances which [looked] as if the Speaker was made acquainted withand had approved of the intentions of Mr. Griswold *previous* to the commencement of his hostile attack upon Mr. Lyon. If Mr. Dayton had no knowledge of a premeditated attack on Mr. Lyon before it was actually made," he continued, "why did he give the assailant so good an opportunity to gravity [sic] his vengeance in the representatives hall?" Foreknowledge or not, Republicans condemned Dayton for having "declined to exert his whole influence and power, to put a stop to such turbulent, hostile and disgraceful conduct and quell the riot."[(96)] They also rebuked Federalist representative Samuel Sitgreaves for displaying similar partisan bias in furnishing the unarmed Griswold with his cane during Lyon's later attack at the House water table.[(97)] Given that Representatives reportedly gathered around the two combatants and took sides in the affray, it is understandable why some referred to the House as the nation's new "boxing ring."[(98)]

The central partisan debate over this second congressional fracas was whether or not Lyon saw Griswold approaching him before he was caned. House Republicans held that he did not, and branded Griswold a coward for attacking an oblivious Lyon from behind. Federalist testimony, on the other hand, claimed that Lyon was cognizant of Griswold's impending attack upon the first stroke to his shoulders.[(99)] Conflicting accounts that set out to make one combatant appear victimized and the other to appear cowardly and aggressive once again inundated the country. The editor of the *Norwich Packet*, for example, excerpted two stories from other newspapers and warned his readers that "the preceding accounts [were] very contradictory," attributing this to "the party rage which exists amongst the American Citizens."[(100)] For the second time in a month the American partisan debate drew from the gentlemanly code of honor.

A resolution for the expulsion of both Lyon and Griswold for their "violent and disorderly behavior" fell through, again to the hands of partisanship.[(101)] "I am curious to see how the zealots for expelling Lyon will treat the deliberate riot of Griswold," remarked Madison to Jefferson, before the vote. "The whole affair has been extremely disgraceful, but the dignity of the body will be wounded, not by the misconduct of individual members, which no public body ought to be answerable for, but by the misconduct of itself, that is, of a majority; and it is to be feared that the majority in this case are ready for every sacrifice to the spirit of party which infatuates them."[(102)] Now that one of their own had committed an act of even grosser indecency, the Federalists ceased to be vehement supporters of expulsion.[(103)] J. Fairfax McLaughlin, a great-grandson to Lyon, wrote over one hundred years after the event and echoed the Republican outrage at this Federalist about-face:

Lyon was not expelled; Griswold was not even censured. The spasm of virtue which broke out among the Federalist sticklers for the proprieties when Mr. Lyon was the offenderand the purists and saints [who] were bent on purging the temple of the [Republican] sinnerevaporated into thin air as soon as Griswold rushed in with his stick and proved the arguments of his friends to be the idle vaporings of humbug and false pretenses. The reader will now find[that the] guardian[s] of the good order and dignity of the House [i.e., Federalists] suddenly converted into [partisans] of free fighting on the floor of Congress and apologist[s] of the most disgraceful scene of rough and tumble pugilism and disorder, with cudgel and tongs accompaniments, which has ever taken place in the House of Representatives throughout the entire history of the country.[(104)]

At the same time, Federalists despised the fact that many Republicans suddenly voted in favor of the ouster now that there was a Federalist on the ticket. Wrote one man to the *Porcupine's Gazette* about

Representative Nicholas, "[he] would not vote for the expulsion of *Lyon*, when he was the only offenderand the man who *began* the whole disgraceful business; butwhen there was a federal member coupled along with him, Mr. Nicholas was ready enough to listen to the proposition for expelling him, though he had committed no new offence at all!"(105) In almost every respect, this second fracas and its ramifications constituted a repeat performance of the most disgraceful political theater imaginable to the American public. The reversal of Federalist and Republican attitudes regarding the expulsion of Lyon and Griswold is further testament to the malleability and subjectivity of the "laws of honor." Politicians argued for opposing partisan ends using the same framework of acceptable political and personal behavior.

"*A Congressional Display of Spit and Cudgel*" (106)

The altercations between Lyon and Griswold not only engendered partisan debate, but they also raised concern about the national political process. Many took no side at all in the fray because they lamented the very notion of rampant party spirit itself. A little more than a week into the proceedings around Lyon's expulsion, Representative Gallatin noted the unproductiveness of partisan debate in a letter to his wife, reporting that the House was "still hunting the Lyon, and it [was] indeed the most unpleasant and unprofitable business that ever a respectable representative body did pursue." Sickened by what he saw as factional interest clearly superceding rational discussion, Gallatin both denigrated the Federalists for wearing an "affectation of delicacy" in "express[ing]horror against illiberal imputations and vulgar language" and criticized his fellow Republicans for immorally exonerating Lyon. The "business went beyond forbearance," he said, "and the whole of the proceeding [was] nothing more than an affected cant of pretended delicacy [and] the offspring of bitter party spirit."(107) James Madison wrote to Thomas Jefferson in February 1798 that "the affair of Lyon and Griswold [was] bad enough in every way, but worst of all in becoming a topic of tedious and disgraceful debates in Congress."(108) As New York Republican Representative Edward Livingston summarized, gentlemen expressed "their abhorrence of abuse in abusive terms and their hatred of indecent acts with indecency."(109)

And it was not only Republicans who were outraged at all the partisanship. One Federalist asked, "What must we think of all this? Must political opinions and party spirit constantly be seen to influence every question introduced into that Body? What in the name of Heaven, has the brutal insult of one member towards another to do with the different politics of the times?"(110) Some Americans then, of both parties, disliked the House's and the public's party-driven reaction to these congressional events more than the disgraceful events themselves. The Lyon-Griswold fracases shamed and angered much of the country and thus brought the idea of political parties to the forefront of American consciousness. Many citizens became increasingly concerned that their once-virtuous United States would degenerate under a government ruled by factions. An editorial in the *Chelsea Courier* declared that the country should be "moved with indignation when men who are entrusted with the inestimable *liberties* and *privileges* of their fellow-citizens, [should sacrifice] to mean and selfish viewswithin the very walls of that house where they ought to stand forth to *support, protect,* and *defend*the invaluable rights, liberties, and property of their constituents." This was a "justly alarmingperiodto these United States," this writer proclaimed, in which the "country and Constitution[were] in the most imminent danger, and [the] government [was] on the verge of immediate destruction."(111) While this may seem to be a rather apocalyptic prophesy, Americans truly had a lot to be insecure about. The United States was a young, fragile, unstable experiment and the world was watching it squirm under uncontrollable, divisive, ideological forces while it combated France's naval power in a Quasi-war that fanned the flames of partisan hostility at home. One correspondent to the *American Mercury* pleaded for a quick end to the Lyon-Griswold business, "earnestly [soliciting] the members of the house of representatives

for their own and their country's respectabilitythat they will not spin out a tedious acrimonious debate on the [scandal], which certainly would spread wider and wider the disgrace unfortunately attached to the occurrence."(112) Another man wrote to the *Connecticut Gazette* that "the polished nations of the earth [loaded the American] government with contempt and hissing."(113) Still another anxious American citizen warned that "the honor of congress [was] deeply wounded and degraded at home and abroad" by this "rascally and dishonorable business."(114) Indeed, even the English Parliament was beginning to look more civilized than the House of Representatives. Quipped one reader of *Porcupine's Gazette*, "I wonder now what the people of England would have said, if Sir John Sinclair had replied to Mr. Pitt by *spitting in his eye!*"(115) In another letter, the author asks an imaginary Englishman whether he had "ever [heard] of a member of [his] Parliament *spitting in another member's face* even amongst strumpets and bullies, or amongst any body but the democratic, the partizans of France?"(116) Another dimension to the early national honor culture, then, was the intimate relationship between an individual politician's honor and national honor: not only did Lyon and Griswold disgrace themselves with their congressional scuffle, but in the eyes of many, they tarnished the respectability of the United States as a whole. The failure of their republican experiment at the hands of factions, particularly in front of a watching world, was perhaps America's worst nightmare. The affair between Lyon and Griswold led many citizens to doubt their fledgling government's stability by inducing in them a fear that this nightmare would in fact become a reality, that political parties would indeed destroy their republic.

Cartoons, satire, and epic poetry provided a humorous means of dealing with national embarrassment by mocking the absurdity of what had transpired in Congress. Broadsides depicted outrageous exaggerations of the events. In one, an enormous lion brandishing fire tongs threatens Griswold, portrayed as a "tamer" with a whip in his pocket.(117) Another cartoonist lampooned congressional partisanship by painting a wide mixture of frowns, smirks, and malicious grins onto the faces of eyewitness Representatives as they observed the "congressional pugilists" in combat. A poet versified the entire *Battle of the Wooden Sword*, from spit to cudgel, to the tune of *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. "We all must blush, and cry out hush | At what has pass'd so recent," he sings, for "Within the wall of C--s hall, | O la! 'twas too indecent." The verses maintain impartiality while lamenting the whole affray as both laughable and pitiful.(118) Parodying the fracas was one means of coming to terms with the grave implications that it seemed to have for the young American republic.

The honor culture of early national America played a significant role in the development of American partisanship. The episode between Lyon and Griswold led most Americans to ponder what one *Middlesex Gazette* reader asked: "If every public measure, however important, [was] to be decided by the spirit of PARTY, what [could] be expected but a perpetual deviation from the line of rectitude? If party victories [could] but be obtained, it [would be] of little consequence [to some] whether the interests of the Country [were] promoted or sacrificed."(119) Perhaps Matthew Lyon did "bring on his own condemnation," as one man observed, by acting so barbarically.(120) Or, perhaps Roger Griswold provoked the entire affair with one malicious and sarcastic reference to a wooden sword. Choosing one man as the culprit and one as the coward is futile because the code of political propriety was a flexible and often ambiguous concept that could support both points with equal felicity. Both Federalists and Republicans used it to fight for their opposing ends. Asked one reader of the *Chelsea Courier*:

If [just provocation] was right in [Griswold's] case, why not in [Lyon's]? The latter had his feelings highly irritated with the politics of Connecticut, and [to] the *unsufferable sarcasm* of a Connecticut representative, he[returned] what he [felt] to be justice. According to [the] principle [of defending

one's honor], where is the wrong in all this? Every *alternate blow*is what the parties call *justice*--Where is the essential difference? Where will this principle and practice end? I ask by whom will the conduct of Mr. Griswold be considered thus innocent and honorable? *By none except those* who adopt your principle--and you *yourself* and your whole classwill abandon the principle, when either of youbecome liable to experience its operation(121)

The Lyon-Griswold controversy thus raised profound questions about the national political process. It prompted Americans to step back and critically appraise their highly undeveloped political system, provoking in the country a fear that spitting and cudgeling would become the congressional norm, that parties would continue to infest the republic, and that the country would collapse under their weight. Public reaction to the Lyon-Griswold fracas prominently exposed the improvisatory and apprehensive nature of early national American politics. No political cartoon, satire, newspaper editorial, or congressional plea could justify the emerging partisan spirit, but without precedents or clear-cut rules to serve as guidelines, no one could say for sure how the American government was, in fact, supposed to function. More generally, the Lyon-Griswold affair of honor illuminates the personal side to early national American politics. One cannot ignore the honor culture and fully understand the political culture of this period.

Notes

1. George Thacher to unknown correspondent, February 17, 1798, Thacher Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

2. See congressional testimony in the United States Congress, *Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States*, 5th Cong, 1st and 2nd Sess. (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1850), 1047-58. Hereafter referred to as *Annals of Congress*.

3. Jonathan Mason to Harrison Gray Otis, Feb. 19, 1798. Quoted in Aleine Austin, *Matthew Lyon, "New Man" of the Democratic Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), 100.

4. Federalist Henry Van Schaack, for example, wrote to Federalist Theodore Sedgwick: "As to Mr. Griswold, I trust, he will take personal vengeance when his hands are untied--Vengeance is called for every where among the sound part of society." Van Schaack to Sedgwick, February 19, 1798, Theodore Sedgwick Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

5. *Annals of Congress*, 955-1067.

6. The violence between Representatives Lyon and Griswold has had concise treatment in a number of works but has never been extensively analyzed within the context of America's early national political culture. For accounts of the altercations and brief discussions of their partisan implications, see Austin, *Matthew Lyon,* and J. Fairfax McLaughlin, *Matthew Lyon, the Hampden of Congress*, (New York: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Company, 1900), 252-3. For a brief discussion of the honor implications of these events, see Rita Mary McBride**,** "Roger Griswold, Connecticut Federalist," (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1943), 74. For treatment of the emergence of partisan politics in the United States, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); Joseph Charles, *Origins of the American Party System* (Williamsburg, Virginia: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1956), and William N. Chambers, *Political Parties in a New Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963). On honor and politics see Edward I. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice, Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South*

(New York, 1984); Bertram Wyatt Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982); "Honor and American Republicanism: A Neglected Corollary," *Ideology and the Historians*, ed. Ciaran Brady (Dublin, 1991), 49-65; Evarts B. Greene, "The Code of Honor in Colonial and Revolutionary Times, with Special Reference to New England," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, 26 (1927), 367-88; and Joanne Freeman, "Dueling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr-Hamilton Duel," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, vol. 52 (1996), 295-7.

7. These are Griswold's words in a caricature of the second fracas, *Cudgeling as by Late Act in Congress, U.S.A.,* cartoon, 1798, Early American Imprints (microfilm).

8. The "bar" was a railing between the Representatives' seats and the wall. See Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, 96.

9. See Charles W. McCollester, "'The Spitting Lyon' of Vermont," *New England Galaxy* 17.1 (1975), 29.

10. *Annals of Congress*, 961. For a concise summary of the events, see Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, 96-100.

11. When Matthew Lyon served as second lieutenant of the Continental Army in 1776, his company revolted at Jericho under the threat of Indian attack. Lyon was discharged, and though he was later promoted to captain of the northern campaign, the expulsion haunted his later political career. In August, 1797 the Federalist Philadelphian *Porcupine's Gazette* reminded its readers of the Jericho incident by calling Representative Lyon the "redoubtable hero who, a few years before was sold for his passage from Ireland, and who for his cowardice in the American war, was condemned by General [Horatio] Gates to wear a wooden sword." At this time, Lyon asserted that "if anyone at Philadelphia, or if any member of Congressshould insult him with [this], or pretend to mention it to him, it should not pass with impunity." See Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, 17-8, 95-6. The "wooden sword" bore particular relevance to Lyon's Irish heritage; ancient Irish soldiers combated with "wooden swords" made from the oak trees of the Shillalah Forest. See Robert Lee Blackwell, "Matthew Lyon, a Forgotten Patriot Recalled," *Filson Club Quarterly* 46 (1972), 221.

12. *Annals of Congress*, 961-2.

13. For evidence of the conflicting ideologies of Lyon and Griswold, see Austin, *Matthew Lyon* and McBride, *Roger Griswold*.

14. Hofstadter, *Idea of a Party System*, xi.

15. Hofstadter, *Idea of a Party System*, 90.

16. For a brief discussion of the foreign intercourse bill, see McBride, *Roger Griswold*, 63.

17. *American Mercury*, February 8, 1798.

18. See Blackwell, "Matthew Lyon," 220, 229.

19. *Annals of Congress*, 972.

20. See McCollester, "'The Spitting Lyon' of Vermont," 28-9. For the rising voice of the Republican party, see Hofstadter, *Idea of a Party System*, 107-121.

21. Italics added.

22. Hofstadter contends that "Each party saw the other as having a foreign allegiance, British or French, that approached the edge of treason. Each also saw the other as having a political aspiration or commitment that lay outside the republican covenant of the Constitution: the Federalists were charged with being 'Monocrats,' with aspiring to restore monarchy and the hereditary principle; the Republicans with advocating a radical, French-inspired democracy hostile to property and order." See Hofstadter, *Idea of a Party System*, 90.

23. *Middlesex Gazette*, March 16, 1798.

24. *American Mercury*, February 8, 1798.

25. *American Mercury*, February 15, 1798. Richard Hofstadter asserts that the Republican opposition was growing in strength in 1798: "the steady progress the Republicans had been making in the organization of an opposition [to the Federalists] since 1792 continued through the crisis of the XYZ affair and the Sedition laws, and in 1800 the Republicans won the necessary margin to control the presidency and both houses of Congress." The Federalist-imposed Sedition Act of 1798 had made Americans "criminally liable for almost any criticism of the government or its leading officers or any effort to combine for such a purpose." Republicans had vehemently opposed the Sedition Act, along with its counterpart, the Alien Act; Hofstadter contends that "The [Republican] opposition was no small or paltry minority." See Hofstadter, *Idea of a Party System*, 107-121.

26. Roger Griswold to his brother, February 27, 1798. Roger Griswold Papers, Yale University Library.

27. Griswold to his wife, March 3, 1798, Griswold Papers.

28. On American distaste for political parties, see Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System*, 11-15. Specifically, Hofstadter argues that "the anti-party thinkers in the main stream of Anglo-American thought considered party an evil[because it] drew on English experience, andmost Englishmen looked back with relief upon the passing of that long, convulsive epoch of English history that occupied the seventeenth century and the first two decades of the eighteenth, in which they saw clear party divisions at work, with consequences they disliked to contemplate."

29. For biographical discussion of Matthew Lyon, see Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, McLaughlin, *Matthew Lyon*, McCollester, "'The Spitting Lyon' of Vermont," and Blackwell, "Matthew Lyon."

30. There is little biographical discussion of Roger Griswold; the most extensive coverage is found in McBride, *Roger Griswold*. For background on the politically prominent Wolcott family, see Stanley Elkins & Eric McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 626-8.

31. Griswold to an unknown correspondent, February 25, 1798, Griswold Papers. See Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, 100.

32. See McBride, *Roger Griswold*, 73-4.

33. Burr to Hamilton, June 21, 1804, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett, 27 vols. (New York, 1961-1987), 26:250.

34. Monroe to Madison, June 8, 1798, in *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. Robert Rutland, *et al*. (Chicago and Charlottesville, 1962-), 17:146.

35. For an extensive discussion of the role of honor in early American politics, see Joanne Freeman, "Dueling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr-Hamilton Duel," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 52.2 (April 1996): 295-7. Freeman asserts that "Honor wasmuch more than a vague sense of self-worth; it represented ability to prove oneself a deserving political leader. A means of empowering oneself while deposing one's foes, of asserting one's merit while remaining self-righteously defensive, the code of honor was a powerful political tool." McBride briefly discusses the honor implications of the affray at *Roger Griswold*, 74-6. For more on the early American honor culture, see note 6, *supra*.

36. *Annals of Congress*, 961.

37. *Annals of Congress*, 956.

38. See Dana's testimony in the United States Congress, *The Testimony Given before a Committee of the Whole House of Representatives of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1798). Contradictory evidence suggests that Griswold had to be restrained by his Federalist colleagues and that this was not a case of self-control. Note 31, *supra*.

39. Theodore Sedgwick to Ephraim Williams, February 1, 1798, Theodore Sedgwick Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

40. Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, 98.

41. Gallatin to Hannah Gallatin, February 3, 1798, *The Papers of Albert Gallatin* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1985).

42. *Annals of Congress*, 981.

43. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 13, 1798.

44. *Porcupine's Gazette,* February 12, 1798. For brief discussion of the spread of the story through the press, see Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, 98; and McBride, *Roger Griswold*, 68. For more extensive discussion, see McLaughlin, *Matthew Lyon*, 235-248.

45. Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, 98.

46. *Porcupine's Gazette*, January 31, 1798. This Federalist rendition of the events focused on Griswold's steady decorum throughout the exchange.

47. *Gazette of the United States*, February 1, 1798.

48. Albert Gallatin to Hannah Gallatin, February 3, 1798, *The Papers of Albert Gallatin*.

49. *Annals of Congress*, 982.

50. He continued: "Let them press him to their heart, and salute him as their brotherLet them be designated as the companions of Mr. Lyon," and thus become instantly vulnerable to the world's "reproach." See Dana's testimony, *The Testimony Given Before a Committee*.

51. *Annals of Congress*, 1003.

52. See Blackwell, 230. On Cobbett, see Mary Elizabeth Clark Andrews, *Peter Porcupine in America: the career of William Cobbett, 1792-1800* (Philadelphia: Times and News Publishing Co., 1939);

George Spater, *William Cobbett: The Poor Man's Friend* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982); and Marjorie Bowen, *Peter Porcupine: a study of William Cobbett*, 1762-1835 (New York: Longmans, Green, 1936).

53. *Porcupine's Gazette*, January 31, 1798.

54. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 12, 1798.

55. *Norwich Packet*, February 20, 1798.

56. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 7, 1798.

57. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 13, 1798.

58. McCollester, "'The Spitting Lyon' of Vermont," 30.

59. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 13, 1798.

60. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 13, 1798.

61. *Gazette of the United States*, February 1, 1798.

62. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 2, 1798.

63. McLaughlin, *Matthew Lyon*, 262.

64. *Connecticut Courant*, February 9, 1798; *Middlesex Gazette*, March 2, 1798.

65. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 13, 1798.

66. See *Annals of Congress*, 971-6. Several days earlier, Lyon had made a formal apology to the House of Representatives, claiming to not have known it was formally convened at the time of his spitting. See *Annals of Congress*, 959; and also Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, 98.

67. Matthew Lyon's outspoken nature had indeed earned him the mockery of many Federalists Lyon was the "butt not only of mounting acrimony but of jibes and caricatures as well," particularly from William Cobbett in the *Porcupine's Gazette*. One derisive broadside, for example, sarcastically read "I'm rugged Matt, the Democrat." See Elkins and McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism*, 710.

68. Matthew Lyon, *To the Freemen of the Western District of Vermont*, February 14, 1798. Reprinted in the *Chelsea Courier*, March 22, 1798.

69. *Vermont Gazette*, February 13, 1798.

70. *Connecticut Gazette*, February 28, 1798.

71. Reprinted in the *Vermont Gazette*, February 10, 1798.

72. Vermont was an upstart state in 1798, perhaps making it especially vulnerable to affronts.

73. *Vermont Gazette*, March 6, 1798.

74. *Annals of Congress*, 986.

75. *Vermont Gazette*, March 6, 1798.

76. Madison to Jefferson, ca. February 18, 1798, *Madison Papers*, 17:82. See also Freeman, "Dueling as Politics," 299.

77. *Chelsea Courier*, March 8, 1798.

78. *Vermont Gazette*, February 20, 1798.

79. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 2, 1798.

80. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 9, 1798.

81. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 12, 1798.

82. Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, 98. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact partisan balance in the House of Representatives in 1798 because the idea of political "parties" was still new. According to official congressional records, thirty-one Federalists, twenty-six Republicans, one "Jeffersonian Democrat," one "Anti-Federalist," and forty-seven representatives without any declared party affiliation comprised the fifth Congress. Most of those representatives with no declared affiliation, however, sided with either the Federalist or Republican ideology. As the Griswold-Lyon affair reveals, subscription to either the Federalist or Republican ideology on the part of either congressmen or constituents did not yet necessarily involve labeling oneself a "Federalist" or a "Republican."

83. *Connecticut Courier*, February 9, 1798.

84. *Middlesex Gazette*, March 2, 1798.

85. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 13, 1798.

86. *Connecticut Gazette*, February 28, 1798.

87. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 15, 1798.

88. *Gazette of the United States*, March 15, 1798.

89. Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, 100.

90. Roger Griswold to his brother, March 19, 1798, Griswold Papers. Here again, we see state honor intimately linked with individual honor.

91. Griswold to unknown correspondent, February 25, 1798, W. G. Lane Papers, Yale University Library.

92. *Connecticut Gazette*, February 28, 1798.

93. Dayton was also accused of "mischief making talents" in inciting the initial confrontation between Griswold and Lyon. *Middlesex Gazette*, March 9, 1798.

94. See the congressional testimony of New York Representative Jonathan Havens and others in *The Testimony Given Before a Committee*.

95. *Vermont Gazette*, February 27, 1798.

96. One week later a defensive Federalist responded to this letter by arguing that there was absolutely no evidence of wrongdoing on the part of Jonathan Dayton and that the accusations of partisan bias were "mere speculations." See *Middlesex Gazette*, March 9, 1798.

97. See *Vermont Gazette*, February 27, 1798. Note also the testimony of Republican Representatives Richard Stanford, Jonathan Havens, and Lucas Elmendorf, in *Report of the Committee of Privileges, to whom it was referred* (1798).

98. One man noted the Representatives' "cudgiling, pulling hair, spitting in the face, boxing, applying shovels and tongs to each other's faces and heads." *Norwich Packet*, March 6, 1798.

99. Contrast, for example, the differing testimony of Federalist Representatives Samuel Sitgreaves, Peleg Sprague, James Imlay, William Shepard, and William Gordon, all of whom had voted to expel Lyon, with that of Republican Representatives Jonathan Havens and Lucas Elmendorf, who had voted to retain Lyon, in the *Report of the Committee of Privileges , to whom it was referred*

100. Newspaper editors seem to have taken even more liberties in reporting this second fracas. A February 27 letter to the *Norwich Packet* claims "the most ridiculous, absurd, and inconsistent publications have appeared in many of the American newspapers, respecting Messrs. Griswold and Lyon . Several of those papers whose editors are opposed to the political principles of the former gentleman, have daily published to the world numbers of blackguard, dirty and infamous observations upon his character, conduct, and principles." Another writes in this same issue that "no less than five different accounts have been already published in Philadelphia, respecting the 2nd Fracas in Congress." See also contrasting accounts in *Gazette of the United States*, February 15, 1798 and *Vermont Gazette*, February 27, 1798.

101. The vote was 73 to 21 in favor of retaining both congressmen. Austin notes that "one of the few committee members who put principle above party considerations was [Federalist Connecticut Representative John Wilkes] Kittera, who wrote that although he was inclined to 'support whatever measures my friends may think best to be adopted to promote the public good, I do however still think the honor and the dignity of this government call for the expulsion of both.'" Thus national honor was linked to an individual politician's honor. See Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, 102.

102. Madison to Jefferson, March 4, 1798, *Madison Papers*, 17:89.

103. Austin, *Matthew Lyon*, 102.

104. McLaughlin, *Matthew Lyon*, 300, 245.

105. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 19, 1798.

106. This is the title of a satirical poem, one of many that appeared following the congressional violence.

107. Gallatin to Hannah Gallatin, February 8, 1798, *The Papers of Albert Gallatin*. See also Gallatin to Hannah Gallatin, February 3, 1798, Ibid.

108. Madison to Jefferson, c. February 18, 1798, *Madison Papers*, 17:82.

109. *Annals of Congress*, 1002.

110. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 13, 1798.

111. *Connecticut Courant*, March 8, 1798.

112. *American Mercury*, February 15, 1798.

113. *Connecticut Gazette*, February 28, 1798.

114. *Gazette of the United States*, March 3, 1798.

115. *Porcupine's Gazette,* February 5, 1798.

116. *Porcupine's Gazette*, February 10, 1798.

117. Underneath was the doggerel, "My sword tho' good, and made of wood," | Behind the desk has idle stood; | "But to redress my grievous wrongs, | Behind the desk I fought the tongs, | When Griswold with a fist of Brass, | Laid my nose level with my face."

118. See *The Battle of the Wooden Sword, or, the Modern Pugilists. A New Song--in 2 parts,* 1798, Early American imprints

(microfilm). See also Geoffry Touchstone, *House of Wisdom in a Bustle; a Poem,* Philadelphia: 1798, Early American Imprints (microfilm) and John Woodworth, *The Spunkiad: or Heroism Improved, a Congressional Display of Spit and Cudgel*, (Newburgh: D. Denniston, 1798).

119. *Middlesex Gazette*, February 23, 1798.

120. *American Mercury,* February 15, 1798.

121. *Chelsea Courier*, March 15, 1798.