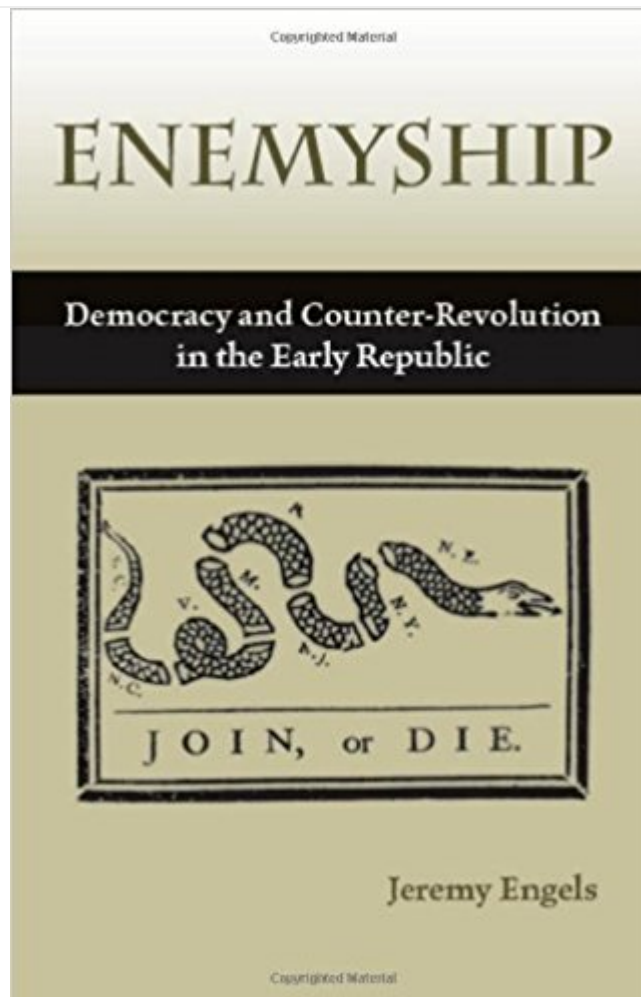


# {essays in history}

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## Enemyship: Democracy and Counter-Revolution in the Early Republic



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### Reviewed Work(s)

*Enemyship: Democracy and Counter-Revolution in the Early Republic.*  
By Jeremy Engels (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010).  
Pp. 316. Hardback, \$59.95.

In 1776 the American colonists justified violent rebellion against their king by arguing that revolution against a corrupt government was just. This legitimatization of revolt threatened political stability once Americans themselves formed their own independent government. Over the past few decades, historians have demonstrated that American elites used counter-revolution as a means to subdue the democratic, egalitarian impulses of the American Revolution. In *Enemyship*, part of the Rhetoric and Public Affairs book series of Michigan State University Press, Jeremy Engels investigates this apparent contradiction by examining the rhetorical devices used by the American political elite to reconcile the Declaration of Independence, which sanctioned violence, with the Constitution, which attempted to eliminate revolutionary sentiments. As the nation's founders attempted to consolidate economic and political power they used the rhetorical device of "enemyship" to subdue the radical democratic spirit in the post-Revolutionary period.

Engels draws his title from a term first coined by Thomas Paine in *Common Sense*. It was Paine, Engels argues, who fostered a national unity between American colonists by emphasizing their common enemy in King George III. Engels claims that Paine employed "enemyship" as "rhetorical architecture" (35), and that the American political elite used this device to create the presence of an enemy "in order to achieve desirable rhetorical effects, which, in the early Republic, included unity, hierarchy, and deference" (13). By projecting fears of revolution and civil unrest upon a perceived enemy, enemyship made the fear of the enemy a catalyst for pacifying democratic behavior among the people. Engels cites Shays's Rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion, and Fries's Rebellion as prime examples of revolutionary political action made into expressions of enemyship in order to forge popular loyalty to the government.

Engels argues that Shays's Rebellion gave the elite the opportunity to use enemyship as a justification for abandoning the Articles of Confederation in favor of creating a new government that was less responsive to public pressure. Drawing from the rhetoric of the Declaration, the dissidents of Shays's rebellion surmised that they could legitimately disobey and even overthrow a government which failed to protect their interests. By naming an enemy – Daniel Shays – who represented the dangers of democracy in the hands of ordinary people, federalists used the incident to gain support for the creation of the Constitution; average citizens could not be trusted controlling the economy and political machinery of a republic.

Likewise, Engels maintains that the nation's leaders used enemyship during the Whiskey Rebellion to demonstrate the power of the new federal government in restraining democratic protest. The massive army of private citizens raised to repel the protesters was disproportionately large in comparison to the number of rebels. Enemyship in this case made citizens the guards of the Constitution, willing to defend it from perceived rebellious foes. Thus, government power was seen as consensual, not coercive (153). To prevent further democratic uprisings on the frontier, the elite promoted the idea of Indians as enemies. By identifying Indians as such, the state justified violence as a means to protect the people while at the same time turning the grievances of frontiersmen away from the government and towards natives.

The most interesting case of enemyship that Engels presents is Fries's Rebellion, which the author claims was not a protest against the Constitution, but against the perceived unjust taxes levied by the Federalists. Although Fries and his compatriots supported the Constitution, Federalists such as Alexander Hamilton and John Adams nevertheless painted them as enemies of the nation. The Federalist vilification of Fries and their implementation of the Alien and Sedition Acts demonstrated the limits of enemyship. The government's use of force in the name of protection and stability, especially when used against other American citizens, appeared too much like coercion. Consequently, Adams was one of the first politicians in America to fall victim to the consequences of enemyship.

Beyond these examples of rebellion, the author also explains the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of enemyship in the

writings of Thomas Hobbes and Alexander Hamilton. In arguing for a stronger federal government under the Constitution, Hamilton bet on Hobbes's "gamble" that people were willing to trade liberty for security by permitting a more coercive government. Enemyship fostered this exchange between personal liberty and personal safety. Ultimately, the Federalists were undone because they devoted so much energy to promoting enemyship that Americans lost confidence in the capacity of Federalist policies to provide protection.

The book convincingly demonstrates that enemyship was a political weapon used by the privileged class. However, the author fails to prove that this political rhetoric actually affected the revolutionary sentiments of the average American. For example, those who lived on the western frontier seemed more than eager to attack Indians without the motivation of any political rhetoric. Further, Engels occasionally makes his arguments in a historical vacuum. He describes the importance of *Common Sense* as though Thomas Paine were primarily responsible for convincing Americans as a whole that the British were their enemies. As shown, however, in the work of Fred Anderson, the American experience in the French-Indian war was paramount in fostering a colonial impulse against British authority.<sup>[1]</sup> Paine may have exploited that impulse, but it would be misleading to conclude that he created it. Finally, as a study in rhetoric, the work thoroughly ignores the powerful religious rhetoric of unity under the covenant of God that was especially prevalent in New England during the early republic.

Despite its narrow scope and unaddressed issues, this is a compelling book that explains how political rhetoric can be used to influence citizens and foster obedience to the government. It is particularly useful for emphasizing the importance of political philosophy and uses of political rhetoric in the Revolutionary and early Republic periods. As such, the book is a welcome addition to the study of political discourse in early U.S. history.

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[1] Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: the Seven Years' War and the fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).



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