

Epistolary Propaganda: Forgery and Revolution in the Atlantic World

Russ Castronovo

In a letter dated June 12, 1776, General George Washington confided feelings to his cousin and plantation manager, which, had they been made public, might well have sounded heretical to his fellow revolutionaries. “We have overshot our mark,” he wrote of the colonies’ bid for independence. “We have grasped at things beyond our reach: it is impossible that we should succeed; and I cannot with truth, say that I am sorry for it; because I am far from being sure that we deserve to succeed.”¹ But the letter did not remain confidential: having supposedly fallen into British hands, it was printed in newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic and later bound together with six other letters and printed as a Loyalist pamphlet, *Letters*

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1. *The Spurious Letters Attributed to Washington: With a Bibliographical Note by Worthington Chauncey Ford* (Brooklyn, 1889), 46.

from General Washington to Several of His Friends in the Year 1776. Independence did not put an end to the embarrassment that the letters created for Washington. As late as the 1790s, these pirated epistles continued to circulate to the chagrin of the general become president.

This set of seven letters, however, is not a factual document but rather the work of a propagandist seeking to sow doubts about the Revolution by purportedly revealing Washington's secret misgivings. The ruse rested on the conceit that Washington's mulatto slave had been captured while carrying a packet of letters addressed to his wife, adopted son, and cousin. The fabrication contains a lot of truth: Washington did own a mulatto slave who was taken prisoner in 1776; he did write his family to express reservations about independence; some of his letters had in fact been intercepted by the British. Revisiting this episode in 1788, Washington acknowledged that the forger had done more than a passable job in sprinkling the letters with just enough detail to lend "the greater appearance of probability to the fiction."² In admitting the plausibility of the counterfeit, Washington's remarks offer insight about the interconnections between literary convention and political propaganda. Forged, stolen, and intercepted letters are all stock features of the epistolary novel that migrate to the world of popular politics.³ As a forgotten bit of eighteenth-century intrigue, epistolary propaganda displays how formations of public opinion depend on fictional patterns. Public opinion, we might say in a double sense of the word, is often *forged*.

While motivated by blatant partisan purposes, the letters comprise a genteel sort of propaganda. In the 1770s, when the transatlantic press parodied colonial rulers and pilloried rebels, this forgery is notable for its restraint and decorum, presenting a leader who is neither venial nor dishonorable, perhaps to enhance its air of believability. Although the nineteenth-century editor of Washington's authentic correspondence sniffs that these "insidious" epistles depict the general "expressing sentiments totally at variance with his conduct," the forgery is not outrageous or slanderous.⁴ "Washing-

2. George Washington to Mathew Carey, October 27, 1788, in *The Writings of George Washington*, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford, vol. 11, 1785–1790 (New York, 1889–1893), 340.

3. Authority, authenticity, and circulation of letter writing are put under pressure in epistolary novels. See Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 25–26.

4. Jared Sparks, *The Life of Washington* (Boston, 1853), 246. The British press generally portrayed Washington in a sympathetic light, emphasizing his virtue and command. See

ton” in these documents appears as a man of integrity and candor who is merely unburdening himself to his closest friends. The fake Washington’s confession that it was “sorely against my will . . . to accept of the command of this army” hardly seems an indecorous lie in light of Washington’s actual disclosure in November 1775, “Could I have foreseen what I have, and am likely to experience, no consideration on earth could have induced me to accept this command.”⁵ Replete with tidbits about hemp production and Washington’s personal life (years after the Revolution the president surmised that the letters “were evidently written by some person exceedingly well acquainted with my domestic and general concerns”), the forgery smacks of enough authenticity that Washington himself understood why many would believe him as its author.⁶ Blending an aura of private feeling and partial truths about domestic intimacy, epistolary propaganda functions as a sort of cottage industry in the manufacture of public opinion.

Public opinion is of course often manufactured, and the petitions, rallies, newspapers, and pamphlets of the late eighteenth century indicate that early America had no shortage of media devoted not simply to reflecting but also to creating popular sovereignty. Walter Lippmann famously describes this process as “the manufacture of consent,” referring to modern methods of persuasion and manipulation, which, in his view, have made a self-willing citizenry a thing of the past.⁷ The need to create consent has been around for a long time, but as Lippmann’s stress upon a process associated with modern industrial society—manufacturing—implies, the twentieth century requires new and improved methods, an “improved . . . technic,” for removing unpredictability and spontaneity from political life.⁸ The manufacture of consent, for Noam Chomsky, has muzzled genuine dissent so totally that among US citizens opposition to American military aggression in places such as Vietnam, Nicaragua, and El Salvador is reduced to quibbling over tactics rather than systemic critique. “Propaganda is to democracy what violence is to totalitarianism,” quips Chomsky, equating

Troy O. Bickham, “Sympathizing with Sedition: George Washington, the British Press, and British Attitudes during the American War of Independence,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 59 (2002): 102–22.

5. *Spurious Letters*, 49; Washington quoted by Ford at 50n. Ford’s privately printed edition of *The Spurious Letters Attributed to Washington* (1889) correlates the lies of “Washington” with the words truly written by the American general.

6. Washington to Carey, in *The Writings of George Washington*, 11:340.

7. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 158.

8. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 158.

modern media in democracy with the brute force of repressive regimes insofar as each produces the forcible impression that the people must consent to what their government does.⁹ While Chomsky invests propaganda with a more sinister bent than Lippmann does in *Public Opinion*, each identifies consent as a hegemonic operation that pawns off a sorely constricted range of perspectives as true democratic debate. Lippmann goes so far as to declare that the modern blitz of propaganda makes it impossible “to believe in the original dogma of democracy,” but the Washington counterfeit tells a different story, holding out the possibility that propaganda could be integral to democratic practice.¹⁰

Not many have sought to tell a story in which the fabrication and propagation of information—as well as misinformation—enhance public debate, open access, or other aspects of democracy. Exploring the significance of propaganda to left politics would seem a fraught enterprise, a risky undertaking to pursue in light of the often irreparable damage done by distortions and even outright lies. Yet propaganda remains unavoidable. “Any modern state, even a democratic one, is burdened with the task of acting through propaganda. It cannot act otherwise,” writes Jacques Ellul.¹¹ Propaganda often functions as a means of gentle coercion that makes people tractable to being governed because they have, after all, been cajoled, urged, pressured, and convinced to give their consent. Without this “engineering of consent,” as Edward Bernays, the so-called father of public relations and spin, argues in first using this phrase, inefficiency and disorder paralyze even the most liberal and open-minded citizenry.¹² Such technocratic optimism is the flip side of Ellul’s despair: the language of advanced mechanization common to both Lippmann and Bernays resounds with the hope that a professional class of social managers can streamline the

9. Noam Chomsky, “Propaganda, American-style,” accessed November 6, 2008, <http://www.zpub.com/un/chomsky.html>. For more on this idea, see Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

10. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 158.

11. Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 128.

12. See Edward L. Bernays, “The Engineering of Consent,” in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 250 (March 1947): 113–20; and *Public Relations* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), 160. Stewart Ewen considers Bernays’s attempts to justify the technocrat’s management of public opinion in *PR!: A Social History of Spin* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 4–35.

messiness of public opinion into coherent, unambiguous social policy. Propaganda offers a safeguard against political entropy.

Intended to slow the dissolution of the colonial system in America, the Washington letters would seem to confirm propaganda as a stragem employed by elite interests to manage public opinion. The association with elitism underpins some rather outlandish claims that, for instance, the dynastic classes of Mixtec, Zapotec, Maya, and Aztec civilizations first developed the tools of propaganda.¹³ More trusted are etymological accounts that trace the concept back to 1622, when Pope Gregory XV convened the *Congregatio de propaganda fide*, a group of cardinals entrusted with the mission of spreading the Catholic faith among infidels, which, at the time, included the many lambs who had been led astray by the Protestant Reformation. Propaganda radiated in one direction, outward from the Vatican to the rest of the world as part of a concerted effort to reestablish the religious authority of Rome that seemed everywhere to be disintegrating but also everywhere expanding as the prospect of converting New World populations suggested. Propaganda has always been about the Americas. The idea, it might be said, was to create a “world literature,” not in the cosmopolitan sense of the globe’s multiple and diverse literary traditions, but in terms of disseminating texts about the one true faith to the rest of the world. To facilitate this pastoral undertaking, the conclave of cardinals decreed that the Vatican Post Office would not require any levies for documents sent out under the auspices of the *Congregatio*.¹⁴ The circulation of doctrine is as crucial as the doctrine itself. But it is almost always circulation with tight controls: one-way communication is typically a defining feature of propaganda that emanates from a technocratic set, church, colonial administration, or other institution.

But the spurious Washington letters hardly fit with this typical account of propaganda. Far from circumscribing communication within narrow limits, eighteenth-century propaganda exposed public opinion to oppositional and often anarchic crosscurrents. In contrast to contemporary views of propaganda as unified around the state and the corporate interests that it supports, the forgery opens a window onto a moment when pro-

13. See Anthony R. Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion* (New York: W. H. Herman, 2001), 11.

14. See Josef Metzler, “Foundation of the Congregation ‘de Propaganda Fide’ by Gregory XV,” in *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide Memoria Rerum* (Rome: Herder, 1971), 1:95.

paganda appears less villainous, less the tool of public relations practiced by governments and corporations spreading misinformation or outright lies, and more a set of practices for disseminating heterodox truths.

Letters, even faked ones, bear the imprint of exchange and circulation. Colonial American correspondence, according to William Warner, can best be described as a “communication network” that radically revises the direction of propaganda.¹⁵ Unlike traditional political appeals that move up from the people to the sovereign, epistolary discourse such as the documents produced by the Boston Committee of Correspondence in the 1770s travels outward along multiple paths. “It is this change in direction of address—from up to out, from the King in Parliament to the people—that carries revolutionary potential,” writes Warner.¹⁶ Even the most famously conservative correspondent during the era of eighteenth-century revolutions, Edmund Burke, recognizes that letters and print culture allowed for the uncontrolled spread of information. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Burke repeatedly warns of “propagators” who are spreading radical ideas across Europe, unhinging the public mind not only in Paris but potentially in places like Prussia and England. Originating in “a correspondence between the Author and a very young gentleman at Paris,” Burke’s *Reflections* claim “the freedom of epistolary intercourse” in weighing in on the excesses of the French Revolution.¹⁷ Burke thinks that he controls the flow of information; after all, he writes hundreds of pages to a French aristocrat about liberty become license. But as *Reflections* recounts the activities of “propagators” both in England and France, alarming details emerge about correspondence among radical intellectuals, conspirators, and foreign governments. As much a part of transnational print culture as the dangerous writings that Burke abhors, *Reflections* is enmeshed in the very communication networks that have fueled fanaticism.

Print is not inherently revolutionary. Rather, it is the circulation of print culture—sermons, pamphlets, letters—that poses a threat to public tranquility. This spreading outward, this “propagation of tenets,” as Burke calls it, carries with it an anarchic charge that raises the possibility of manufacturing democratic propaganda. When Ellul, in *Propaganda: The Forma-*

15. William B. Warner, “The Invention of a Public Machine for Revolutionary Sentiment: The Boston Committee of Correspondence,” *Eighteenth Century* 50 (Summer/Fall 2009): 161.

16. Warner, “The Invention of a Public Machine,” 150.

17. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1966), 14, 21.

tion of Men's Attitudes (1962), still the most influential study of the topic, asks, "Is it possible to make democratic propaganda?" he is less than optimistic that the content could correct for abuses of the form.¹⁸ But when propaganda spreads outward, when it flows along transnational currents, when its direction becomes multiple, its political value and potential change correspondingly. In Burke's phrasing, the "propagators of novelties" give "rise to new and unlooked-for strokes in politics and morals."¹⁹ Unwelcome political strokes and unplanned changes that alarm Burke begin to emerge in the back-and-forth transit, the crisscrossing, the exchanges, which, like a series of letters, characterize democratic formations in the revolutionary Atlantic world. As we will see with the transmission and recirculation of *Letters from General Washington*, propaganda can serve as a focal point for radical republican sentiments that exceed the initial design of the counterfeit and spread beyond national boundaries.

1. "Propagators of Novelties"

"Understanding the American Revolution is a literary pursuit," writes Robert Ferguson.²⁰ As helpful as this statement is in describing the aesthetics of colonial insurgency, it also clouds the issue by dislocating writing from a charged transatlantic atmosphere in which writing is also propaganda. According to Ferguson, Americans invested literature with a generally conservative function designed to guide citizens toward shared conclusions and thereby produce accord. Such "consensual literature" depended on an Enlightenment faith in rationality that all people—with the proper aesthetic encouragement—can be induced to discern fundamental truths.²¹ But literature may also be propaganda, intended to divide, conquer, vilify. Even after the successful creation of an independent nation, these highly partisan aims remained very much part of American literary pursuits; twenty years after the British were defeated, new editions of the spurious Washington letters continued to appear. The reasons behind the forgery's circulation in the 1770s and again in the 1790s lay not simply in local national circumstances but in larger revolutionary movements of the Atlantic world, particularly the French and Haitian Revolutions as well as the Anglo-American

18. Ellul, *Propaganda*, 235.

19. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 126, 187.

20. Robert A. Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment, 1750–1820* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1.

21. Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment*, 20.

counterreaction to these democratizing events. The forgery found its widest audience not during the American Revolution but twenty years later among citizen-readers dissatisfied with the Federalist consensus. In its strange career, *Letters from General Washington* transformed from pro-British propaganda to an alternative register of public opinion. The document's fictionality accorded it a flexibility useful for getting at the truth in ways other than those circumscribed by Enlightenment rationality or national consensus. Instead, epistolary propaganda combined a false show of private feeling with the ferment of transatlantic republicanism to widen political discourse beyond either the strictly empirical or official public opinion. This broader zone might be construed as a "democracy of propaganda" that disperses authority across public spheres by challenging standards of authenticity, evidence, and truth located in the narrowness of national letters.

But first the context of the forgery's initial appearance in 1777: the propagandist's hope in fabricating Washington's letters likely was to employ fictional techniques associated with the epistolary novel to publicize the general's private sentiments. The epistolary novel had special currency in revolutionary America, where tales of seduction and infidelity found ready ears among colonials worried about turncoats, shifting loyalties, and sexual betrayal. Even as letters were received as "genuine expressions of some kind of authentic self," the unverifiable nature of their claims and even their provenance rendered epistolary communication "a powerful tool for artifice and emotional counterfeiting," writes Elizabeth Hewitt.²² *Clarissa* and other novels of seduction were popular, as Jay Fliegelman explains, because "they spoke to the large preoccupation not only with deception, but more specifically with the seductive power of the potent word to convince others to surrender themselves freely to one's will."²³ In the world of Anglo-American pamphleteering and bookselling, the faked letters easily fit the literary marketplace and were advertised alongside *Pamela* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

The forgery proffers a private glimpse for those wishing to unmask Washington's true feelings about the colonists' cause. In addition to expressing qualms over the rush to independence, the general voices secret contempt for Patrick Henry, Thomas Paine, and his military sub-

22. Elizabeth Hewitt, "The Authentic Fictional Letters of Charles Brockden Brown," in *Letters and Cultural Transformations in the United States, 1760–1860*, ed. Theresa Strouth Gaul and Sharon M. Harris (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 79.

23. Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Law, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 37.

alters. A handwritten inscription in a copy of *Epistles Domestic, Confidential, and Official from General Washington* (the forgery circulated with more than one title) attributes the entire scheme to “a Mr. V—then a young Episcopal Clergyman, who came from New York in order to make his fortune *here* in the character of a loyalist.”²⁴ But the gambit did not succeed, and *Letters from General Washington to Several of His Friends*, the most common title given to the pamphlet, failed to make much of a splash. A few London papers reprinted some of the letters, hardly encouragement for provincial newspapers to give space to the supposedly private epistles. When the forgery arrived in the insurgent colonies, loyalist newspapers printed a few of the letters, and George’s letter to Martha lamenting his and compatriots’ “future to be deemed traitors to so good a King!” circulated as a broadside.²⁵

So might the story of the spurious letters of Washington end here. The creation of a forgery for partisan political purposes never achieved the popularity of the epistolary novel whose form it mimicked. But because *Letters from General Washington* enjoyed a second life that was more popular and fractious than its first incarnation, its longevity stands as a linger-

24. This note appears in the Huntington Library copy of *Epistles domestic, confidential, and official, from General Washington, written about the commencement of the American contest, when he entered on the command of the Army of the United States. With an interesting series of his letters, particularly to the British admirals, Arbuthnot and Digby, to Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, Lord Cornwallis, Sir Guy Carleton, Marquis de la Fayette, &c. &c. To Benjamin Harrison, Esq. Speaker of the House of Delegates in Virginia, to Admiral the Count de Grasse, General Sullivan, respecting an attack of New-York; including many application and addresses presented to him with his answers: orders and instructions, on important occasions, to his aids de camp, &c. &c. &c. None of which have been printed in the two volumes published a few months ago* (New York, 1796). The “Mr. V—” trying to smear Washington has been identified as John Vardill, assistant rector at Trinity Church and propagandist loyal to the Crown (Julian P. Boyd, “Silas Deane: Death by a Kindly Teacher of Treason,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 16 [July 1959]: 320). Vardill operated as a spy and on more than one occasion intercepted confidential letters between Benjamin Franklin and the Continental Congress. In a statement to a postwar parliamentary commission investigating remunerations for Loyalists, Vardill lists the propaganda pamphlets he authored under the names “Poplicola” and “Cassandra” but does not include *Letters from General Washington*. Given that Vardill wanted to impress Parliament with his Tory support, it seems unlikely that he would drop this line from his curriculum vitae of espionage and propaganda. Historians also identify John Randolph as a probable author of *Letters from General Washington*. Not to be confused with John Randolph of Roanoke, this John Randolph was the royal attorney general of Virginia, the last person to hold that post before the Revolution swept away such colonial sinecures.

25. *Spurious Letters*, 76.

ing symptom of the uncertain relationship between foreign sympathies and public opinion. In the early republic, consent needed to be secured at a national level, but the high tide of popular political sentiments often spilled over domestic borders and ran toward transnational contexts, especially those of revolutionary France. What if consent were at odds with public opinion? Could citizens at once feel national and express loyalty to wider currents of hemispheric republicanism? *Letters from General Washington* hardly answered these questions; instead, the purpose of this epistolary propaganda was to pick at this suture, making it still more raw and irresolvable.

During Washington's second term as president, at least eight new editions of the counterfeit appeared. On the surface, the reprinting seems intended merely to satisfy antiquarian curiosity by delivering "an INTERESTING view of AMERICAN POLITICS" to supplement "the official letters of General Washington" that had been recently published first in London and then Boston.²⁶ But antiquarianism may harbor motives other than those of the disinterested scholar: as a companion to official documents, *Letters from General Washington* forms a critical supplement, which, upon its republication in 1795, two decades after the original appearance, joined a larger partisan battle over the manufacture of consent. Epistolary propaganda drove a wedge between public opinion and consent, exploiting the gap in an effort to address readers whose republican sympathies overran strictly national loyalties. In an attempt to sow doubts about the Revolution of 1776, the propagandist gave voice to Washington's supposed apprehension concerning divided loyalties, his own included. The general laments that all Americans do not share the same principles and confides to Martha that "our young Virginia men . . . dislike their northern allies."²⁷ This schismatic account of public opinion acquired new vitality when *Letters from General Washington* was republished in the last decade of the eighteenth century as the divisiveness between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans reached its height. The pamphlet's reappearance registers how the president fell prey to changing public opinion, unable to depend on the national patriotic contexts that safeguarded his reputation. Propaganda attacks on Washington's character throughout the summer of 1796 pulled public opinion away from a strictly national orbit toward potentially more global feelings. These feelings ran toward revolutionary France and

26. Quoted from an advertisement in the *Aurora General Advertiser*, March 19, 1796, p. 4.

27. *Spurious Letters*, 78.

the cause of transatlantic republicanism. While the Washington administration tried to achieve consensus around its rapprochement with Britain, Americans in the streets of Philadelphia and elsewhere were greeting one another as “citizen” and toasting the French Revolution.

Despite the president’s attempts to distance himself from French republicans like Citizen Genêt, *Letters from General Washington* was pulled into swirling currents of transatlantic revolution. After being wrenched from its original context of the American Revolution, the forgery resurfaced alongside advertisements for primers on radical republicanism such as Robespierre’s *Report on Political Morality*, revolutionary calendars and songbooks, and popular histories memorializing key events in the overthrow of French aristocracy. In the pages of the *Aurora General Advertiser*, the forgery sold for twenty-five cents along with translations of various French revolutionary texts, including *The Morality of the Sans Culottes of Every Age, Sex, Country, Condition; or, The Republican Gospel*, a pamphlet whose title alone is enough to conjure up the specter of working-class radicalism gone global. To the consternation of social conservatives, working-class white males, white women, and blacks lent their support to demonstrations in support of America’s new sister republic. Alarm only increased, even among radical republicans like Jefferson, when revolutionary developments spread from France to the island of Saint-Domingue. Slave revolt was well past the limit for pushing republicanism beyond a national geography. Might Jacobins—including the black Jacobins described by C. L. R. James—represent the latest incarnation of the American Revolution? Might the French and Haitian Revolutions rekindle the flames of its American prototype, engulfing proletarians and the racially oppressed at home? As William Appleman Williams writes, “It seemed, at least for a time, that there might be a third American revolution more influenced by events in France than developments in France were guided by the American example.”²⁸ Since this pronouncement, historians such as David Waldstreicher, Simon Newman, David Brion Davis, and Joyce Appleby have documented how the hundreds of festivals, parades, and other celebrations staged in support of the French Revolution gave radical republicanism an energetic public presence in the United States. A partisan edge sharpened the tone and spirit of these popular gatherings, as “the Republicans made remarkable use of the French Revolution to drive home their criticisms of a nascent

28. William Appleman Williams, *America Confronts a Revolutionary World: 1776–1976* (New York: William Morrow, 1976), 46.

aristocracy.”²⁹ Not to be outdone, Federalist orators sought to shore up postrevolutionary society against this tide and followed Burke by painting the confluence of French and American republicanism as a dangerous conspiracy.³⁰ Paranoia had its uses: by 1798, the Federalists had successfully implemented the Alien and Sedition Acts to muzzle their partisan opponents.

The reappearance of Washington’s counterfeit letters amplified the transatlantic scope of their original publication to include notions of popular democracy associated with French Jacobinism. Loyalist propaganda was revamped in a second performance intended to deepen American sympathies with French revolutionaries. *Letters from General Washington* illustrates how revolution was not exceptional to the United States but rather was a shared legacy that united citizens with *citoyens* across the Atlantic. Back in 1776, the image of Washington second-guessing his rebellion against the king had been calculated to help put the brakes on American revolutionary nationalism. By 1795, the landscape had changed: “evidence” of Washington’s lingering affection for Britain revealed in the letters was now construed as an obstacle to the revolutionary sentiment that viewed Jacobin France as the next installment of 1776. Yet in the eyes of Washington’s detractors the landscape had not changed at all: Washington was still being seduced by Britain, this time preferring the interests of Anglo-American trade to the republican values of France. Republication of the Washington imposture carried the charge that the Federalist consensus was based on an overidentification with British aristocracy at odds with popular public enthusiasm that aligned the postrevolutionary United States and revolutionary France. According to this outlook, the United States might not be postrevolutionary but still revolutionary.

The forgery relocates national prospects within a comparative framework. Were Americans better off with a king or a band of self-doubting rebels? When *Letters from General Washington* asked this question in 1777, “Washington” provided the answer by regretting his precipitous break with a kind monarch. But by the 1790s, both the question and answer had become more complex than the choice between colony and nation. Added

29. David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 114–15.

30. David Brion Davis examines how the millennial optimism associated with the French Revolution turned sour in the wake of the slave uprising on Saint-Domingue (*Revolutions: Reflections on American Equality and Foreign Liberations* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990], 47).

to the mix were considerations that opened out on to the lure of radical republicanism in France, slave revolt in the West Indies, and the profits of oceanic trade. Propaganda suggested a transatlantic comparison that shaped public opinion around units other than the nation. This literary imposture, especially as it was framed and publicized by the Democratic-Republic press, in particular, the *Aurora General Advertiser* of Philadelphia, encouraged an idea of America not as an exceptional nation but as a nexus of comparison.

And what was being compared? The importance of French colonial possessions in the Caribbean cannot be underestimated, as ports in Martinique and Saint-Domingue provided American shipping interests with access to slaves and sugar. With the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution, American merchants were able to buy at fire-sale prices the goods of West Indian planters and ship them back to France. When war erupted between France and Britain, US crews carrying French commerce soon found themselves under the guns of the British navy. After the slave revolt on Saint-Domingue, American vessels sought to enter this temporary trade vacuum and seize the bulk of the transatlantic commerce running between the United States, France, and Haiti. The British cabinet reacted with an Order in Council authorizing the Royal Navy to board any vessels trading with Martinique and other French colonies, and hundreds of American ships were caught in the net.³¹ In response to British predations, Washington urged appropriations for improving naval defenses. Federalists in Congress supported their president and voted to increase the excise tax on distilled spirits to raise the necessary revenues. The result, as students of American history know, was the Whiskey Rebellion, but what often gets glossed over is that this episode of domestic unrest began in no small part with French, British, and American reactions to the Haitian Revolution.

The West Indian context quickly worked its way back to the president. In contrast to the thoroughly national ring of “father of his country,” the forgery renewed the insinuation that excessive Anglophilia tempered

31. In response to the French loss of control on Saint-Domingue, the British Order in Council implemented a no-sail zone to discourage US merchants from exporting raw materials from or resupplying the island. The plan “was carried out by the British naval officers with even more than their usual callous brutality,” according to Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, and soon “succeeded only in enraging every sector of the American republic” (*The Age of Federalism* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], 403). See also Joseph M. Fewster, “The Jay Treaty and British Ship Seizures: The Martinique Cases,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 45 (July 1988): 426–52.

Washington's nationalism. Over the twenty-year lifetime of the counterfeit, the letters inscribed Washington as an Atlantic subject. In 1777, the letters disclosed a Creole nationalist confessing that he is actually a fallen British colonial; in 1795, the confession is recontextualized by the Napoleonic Wars and the economic importance of the West Indies. The pro-British sentiments of "Washington" now confirmed the president's alignment with reactionary forces battling the spread of French republicanism. The propagandist had Washington experience the strain of "being perpetually obliged to act a part foreign to our true feeling."³² This admission of feeling "foreign" would take on different meanings over the years, but what remains consistent is the charge that Washington wore a false countenance, pretending to support liberty, whether it is American liberty in 1776 or the more radical French variant in 1795, while harboring affection for aristocracy. Epistolary propaganda sought to change not just what people thought about Washington but, more broadly, the geography of public opinion. Was popular feeling another word for national patriotic sentiment, or was it potentially a more expansive category of sympathy for Atlantic republicanism more broadly? In the context of such questions, *Letters from General Washington* revived scurrilous rumors that Washington remained smitten with British authority, ready at any moment to turn his back on France and the broader cause of transatlantic liberty.

The biggest blow to Washington's popularity was yet to come. British seizures of American vessels had nearly "brought the U.S. and England to the brink of war," and in 1794 relations between the two countries remained fragile.³³ To meet the crisis, Washington dispatched John Jay to England, at which point the president's troubles really began. Jay's mission, and the treaty that he eventually secured, touched off a bitter propaganda war in which Federalists and Democrat-Republicans fought over "the legality of popular participation in politics."³⁴ Up until Jay returned from England to meet accusations that he had sold out the transatlantic spirit of equality to British financial interests, Washington's reputation had been encircled by a political halo. This aura dissolved under charges that the agreement negotiated by Jay was perfidious on several counts: for opponents, the treaty forced the United States to turn its back on France, its ally during the Revo-

32. *Spurious Letters*, 45–46.

33. Jerald A. Combs, *The Jay Treaty: Political Battleground of the Founding Fathers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 140.

34. Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 55.

lution of 1776; it privileged commercial interests over political principles; it safeguarded the importation of luxury goods from England, creating a culture at odds with a republican ethos; it seemingly embroiled Washington and his administration in backroom deals that ran counter to notions of democratic openness and transparency. From the beginning, Jay's appointment as special envoy to England aroused suspicion since his sympathies were assumed to lie with British aristocrats and not French revolutionaries. The diplomatic accord he brought back to the United States intensified those suspicions, not because of any specific provision but because its contents were kept secret for months by Washington and the Senate. Public opinion fed on rumor, and the debate over the treaty, in Washington's words, became "enveloped in mist and false representation."³⁵

Even though the treaty was highly unpopular, it became one of the best-selling items put out by the *Aurora* when the paper's editor, Benjamin Franklin Bache, printed it as a pamphlet after its contents were leaked to him by a disgruntled Republican member of the Senate. The ploy hinged on the idea that a confidential document—like the private letters of a general to his wife—was now available to the public. While the *Aurora's* editor traveled to New England to sell copies of the treaty, his wife reported that not long after sunrise crowds had formed outside the printing house to buy the treaty along with the day's edition of the *Aurora*.³⁶ Publication of the once secret treaty was perhaps not so much a propaganda tactic as an exercise in public information. Then again, it is the spread—the propagation—of knowledge as well as rumor that makes information into propaganda. At any rate, Bache's activities did not go unchallenged. The Federalist poet Lemuel Hopkins fired back in verse via a mock epic, entitled *The Democratiad* (1795), which takes a dim view of the links among popularity, print culture, and public opinion. Hopkins distorts Bache's concern into the counterimage of a Jacobin mob spewing sedition and whipping public feelings into a frenzy. Beginning with a satiric dedication to Bache, the poem employs rhymed couplets to savage the editor and his Democrat-Republican cronies: "Now wretched Type runs raving round the streets, /

35. Washington quoted in Washington Irving, *Life of George Washington* (New York, 1861), 5:217.

36. On Margaret Bache and her letter to her husband describing public interest in copies of the treaty, see James Tagg, *Benjamin Franklin Bache and the Philadelphia Aurora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 247; and Jeffrey L. Pasley, "*The Tyranny of Printers*": *Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 82.

Accosting every Democrat he meets.”³⁷ Hopkins was one of the Connecticut Wits, and the witticism here is the pun on “Type,” which conflates Bache with the product of his profession—printing type—so that it is not just his person that is let loose in public, but, more dangerously, the swill he prints at his Philadelphia offices, including pirated copies of the Jay Treaty and forged Washington letters.

The “streets” of the early republic covered much more than local ground. According to Newman, “The French Revolution . . . dominated the politics of the street during Washington’s presidency.”³⁸ As Bache ran about the public thoroughfares, he fulminated against the treaty on grounds that its ratification would undercut popular sovereignty. The *Democrat* imagined the newspaper editor saying, “I’ll bet my ears and eyes, / It [the Jay Treaty] will the people all *unpopularize*.”³⁹ Hopkins’s neologism associated popularity with misinformed public opinion and the unregulated spread of print culture. Unpopularizing the people, from Hopkins’s perspective, was not such a bad thing and may even have provided a necessary check on the propaganda that sought to pull people into the wider currents of transatlantic revolution. Bache was exactly the sort of “propagator” that made Burke nervous. What Bache printed was not so much cause for concern as the fact that he traveled the eastern seaboard selling his pamphlets, that his newspaper communicated with other presses, that the *Aurora* provided foreign news, in a word, that he propagated. Brought to France and Switzerland for an education among *philosophes* by his famous grandfather, Benjamin Franklin, Bache cultivated contacts that later lent an impressive continental flavor to the *Aurora*, a paper considered by historians of print culture as one of the best sources of European news in the early United States. Dubbed “Young Lightning Rod” by his detractors, Bache used the *Aurora* to charge public opinion with radical political currents. But as his reprinting of the treaty showed, it was not necessarily the content of what he printed that proved scandalous. The worry instead was that he printed at all. He did so without following any protocol, dumping issues of the *Aurora* as well as the treaty pamphlet on the public indiscriminately. He tapped the democratic potential of propaganda by recognizing its ability to spread laterally across public spaces. The Jay Treaty was under control in the Senate,

37. Lemuel Hopkins, *The Democrat*, a Poem in Retaliation for the “Philadelphia Jockey Club,” *Magazine of History with Notes and Queries* 29 (1926): 187.

38. Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 135.

39. Hopkins, *The Democrat*, 189.

but its public dissemination became the stuff of public ferment, one of the “unlooked-for strokes” that Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* sees residing in the unchecked circulation of information.

The spread of popular resentment over the proposed treaty had its source in political affection for the French, a sense of loyalty owed to the European power that had thrown its weight behind the thirteen colonies’ revolution and that was now experiencing its own revolution. Democrat-Republicans like Bache charged that Jay did not have the interests of their sister republic at heart and instead cared more about the pocketbooks of the merchant class. Historians have often given credence to these suspicions, concluding that Jay did not press his hand when dealing with Lord Grenville, though it remains a matter of debate how much leverage the US envoy had in securing an accord to protect American shipping while addressing unresolved issues from the American Revolution, such as Britain’s control of the Great Lakes forts. At a gut level, however, Jay and other Federalists most certainly sided with Anglo-American business interests over transnational republicanism. In this diplomatic and political context, *Letters from General Washington* reappeared, reviving insinuations that Washington had too much feeling for the British. As epistolary propaganda, the counterfeit implied that the American general’s unguarded political sentiments in the past gave evidence of the president’s danger of once again being seduced by the British.

2. “True History”

Fake did not necessarily mean untrue. According to this logic, epistolary propaganda could disclose the true colors of a false patriot. This casual regard for facts corresponds to theories and practices of fiction emerging in the eighteenth century. As Catherine Gallagher explains, under “the rise of fictionality,” novelistic narrative bears a stronger relation to truth than mere facts, not in spite of but because its invented particulars are readily taken to suggest general facets of the human condition. If “fiction somehow suspends, deflects, or otherwise disables normal referential truth claims about the world,” then it also enables irregular truth claims founded in plausibility, insinuation, or other unverifiable assertions.⁴⁰ In the case of the Washington counterfeit, letters privately exchanged are put into public circulation in

40. Catherine Gallagher, “The Rise of Fictionality,” in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti, vol. 1, *History, Geography, and Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 338.

a process best associated with epistolary fiction. As the preface to a 1796 edition put it, the epistles offer a view of the famous man in his “real character” gleaned from “private reflection and domestic concerns” that vies with official reputation.⁴¹ Their truth value inheres in the belief that intimate correspondence, despite the layers of untrustworthy statements, disguise, and even forgery, nonetheless offers a reliable index of where loyalties actually lie. The American commander inhabits a world of false appearance, confessing that he “wear[s] a countenance dressed in the calm serenity of perfect confidence, whilst my heart is corroded with infinite apprehensions.”⁴² “Washington” extends the deception beyond his private self by claiming that a fiction underwrites the entirety of the colonists’ cause: “It has been our policy . . . to hold out false lights to the world. There are not an hundred men in America that know our true situation; three-fourths of the Congress itself are ignorant of it.”⁴³ The truth of Washington’s forged letters is that the general tells lies. Even as fiction goes to great lengths to establish its historical verisimilitude, “early novelistic narrative . . . also partook of a standard of truth-telling alternative to the empirical,” as Michael McKeon writes.⁴⁴ Secret loyalties, covert allegiances, masked sympathies, unstated agendas—all of which resist empirical proof—are political truths ferreted out by the inventions of propaganda.

It is perhaps William Godwin who in 1797 first assessed the political import of such inventions. In what amounts to a theory of fiction, he suggests that exaggeration, fable, romance, and letters oftentimes communicate a deeper, truer truth than fact-driven history. As though Godwin had *Letters from General Washington* in mind, he writes that in order to gain real knowledge of any individual, “I would see the friend and the father . . . as well as the patriot.”⁴⁵ This pursuit leads beyond public persona, necessitating receptiveness to epistolary creations—“I would read his works and his letters, if any remain to us”—that supplement official, state-sanctioned knowledge about political actors. Facts rarely illuminate anything about the

41. *Epistles domestic, confidential, and official, from General Washington*, vi.

42. *Spurious Letters*, 45.

43. *Spurious Letters*, 45.

44. Michael McKeon, “From Prose Fiction: Great Britain,” in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 603.

45. William Godwin, “Of History and Romance,” accessed October 22, 2009, www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/godwin.history.html. Subsequent quotations from Godwin’s essay are from this unpaginated electronic source.

motive, desires, and interests that determine action. This turn away from the empirical toward what Godwin calls “the operation of the human passions” is not simply about substituting psychological impressions for tangible bits of evidence. His concern lies instead with fiction’s pedagogical functions, its ability to explain as well as motivate action. Burke had anxiously viewed this potential for writing’s real-world impact as an “unlooked-for stroke” that emanates from the pen of propagators. Godwin, in contrast, privileges the effects of a romance or novel over its factual basis. Such unconcern with standard measures of ascertaining veracity leads to a dethroning of history and the elevation of a discourse “which bears the stamp of invention.”

Godwin’s indifference to the formal study of history, his disregard for the proprieties of historical investigation, and his impatience with accepted historical generalities produce a significant recalibration: “I ask not, as a principal point, whether it be true or false? My first enquiry is, ‘Can I derive instruction from it? Is it a genuine praxis upon the nature of man? Is it pregnant with the most generous motives and examples? If so, I had rather be profoundly versed in this fable, than in all the genuine histories that ever existed.’” These are the criteria not of Enlightenment rationality but of propaganda. As opposed to unhelpful distinctions between truth and falsity, Godwin introduces “genuine praxis” as an alternative benchmark. While it is tempting to understand *praxis* here as practical activity that provides a basis for social and political change, as in contemporary usage influenced by Marxist thought, more likely Godwin’s sense of the term correlates with the now obsolete meaning of “an example or collection of examples to serve for practice or exercise in a subject, esp. in grammar” (*OED*). A *praxis* is a material artifact of print culture that circulates, and it becomes genuine or real as it fulfills its pedagogical function. Rather than instructing people how to make it through Latin declensions, propaganda and other inventions supply a praxis for understanding human motivations. Names, dates, and other facts may inform what happened and when, however, such a chronicle illuminates little since the end result is a lifeless structure stripped of all possibility for action.

Godwin’s method for distinguishing factual accounts from fictive history bristles with anarchic energies. Like Burke, he surveys the French Revolution, but his perspective is far more buoyant. Suppose the task is to understand the events leading from the fall of the Bastille to the execution of Louis XVI. To aver that a mob on July 14, 1789, stormed a prison tells us nothing, just as knowing that the French monarch was guillotined

at the Place de la Concorde hardly begins to explain momentous political and social upheaval. A *Jeopardy*-like array of facts supplies only “the mere skeleton of history. The muscles, the articulations, every thing in which the life emphatically resides, is absent.” The contrast is both instructive and chilling: history can be received in forms as impersonal and as inert as Louis XVI’s headless body, or it can be experienced as a realm of motive power. Sticking to facts (the mere bones of history) leaves praxis as but a dead possibility. Muscles instead allow for movement and action, but as Godwin no doubt knew (perhaps in anticipation of the gruesome body that his daughter, Mary Shelley, would imagine in *Frankenstein*), soft tissue decomposes more quickly than bone. What remains is the skeleton of history, an evidentiary trace, which, like a ruin that can be visited or a date that can be verified, cannot move as it hardens into fact. To bring history back to life, fiction and invention—Godwin speaks of the insight provided by fable, romance, story—stimulate a musculature of character, sentiment, and morality. Not only does the skeleton of history begin at this point to move; more importantly, it begins to move us.

Ideas and impressions conveyed by a novel or other fiction augment an otherwise impassive chronicle fact with scenes of emotion. A feeling for what Godwin calls “the empire of motives,” a region not on any map, provides a model or praxis for gauging human virtue. The pedagogical qualities of “instructive inventions” reside precisely in their inventive attributes. Knowledge of sympathies, loyalties, and other affective attachments constitute the connective tissue that makes a fictive history more consistent and edifying, in other words, truer, than any onslaught of facts. As Godwin puts it, “true history consists in a delineation of consistent, human character, in a display of the manner in which such a character acts under successive circumstances.” One might say that “true history” is necessarily fictive and, in extreme cases, perhaps as fake as a series of forged letters that nonetheless purport to reveal the truth by offering a coherent portrait of a subject’s private motives. Consider that when *Letters from General Washington* first appeared, the falsified documents were said to shed true light on Washington’s character, even by those who saw through the sham. A British journal scoffed that “we cannot look upon these letters as genuine,” but in the next breath the editors nonetheless maintained that “they would do great honour to General Washington, could his claim to them be indisputably established.”⁴⁶ The verisimilitude of the forgery rested on its claim to

46. *Spurious Letters*, 9–10.

represent a private view of the man even if that perspective was not based strictly on facts. The real Washington resembled his invented counterpart.

Consistency, in fact, underwrites the most vilifying charge leveled by the fake letters. How to explain why a lover of liberty in 1776 would twenty years later side with an aristocratic order over republican sympathies? How to account for a leader who would disregard an accord with France, its ally during the American Revolution, to broker a treaty with its former enemy? A “true history” in Godwin’s sense, *Letters from General Washington* offered answers by inventing a paper trail that showed how the father of his country had always harbored pro-British sentiments. Not public facts but imagined private disclosures and unverifiable confessions made in one’s closet provided an instructive narrative of political character. Much as private letters revealed the general’s abiding Anglophilia, now the president seemed to be conducting public politics in private by insisting that the specifics of the Jay Treaty remain out of sight, its contents shielded by the locked doors of the Senate.⁴⁷ Behind false fronts and secret government proceedings, so the slander implied, lay the truth of Washington’s duplicitous nature. At the very least, the manner in which Washington kept the treaty under wraps reinforced suspicions both that anti-French sentiments were guiding foreign policy and that the whole scheme showed disdain for transparency. When a copy of the treaty that Jay had negotiated at last completed the Atlantic crossing (previous copies had been tossed overboard when a French privateer closed in on the ship carrying the diplomatic papers), the Senate had adjourned, while the president, citing executive privilege, saw no reason to make the contents of the document public.

During the recess, the print war between factions intensified, and, by the time the Senate reconvened, charges about Republicans as godless Jacobins and countercharges about neo-tyrannical Federalists were flying fast and furious. Although the Federalists eventually won the battle, passing the treaty by the slimmest of margins, they lost the larger ideo-

47. The Jay Treaty provided an early test case over presidential powers. Washington interpreted the Constitution as relegating treaty making to the executive branch in consultation with the “advice and consent” of the Senate. Republicans in the House of Representatives were furious, protesting that these secret proceedings undercut democratic principles. Out of this rancor the party system was born in the United States according to historians. In 1790, Republicans and Federalists in the House crossed still amorphous party lines 42 percent of the time. By the time of the Jay Treaty debates, this number fell to 7 percent (see Joseph Charles, “The Jay Treaty: The Origins of the American Party System,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 12 [October 1955]: 583).

logical war by appealing to public opinion in ways “that helped to hasten the acceptance of a more open, democratic culture espoused by the Republicans.”⁴⁸ In opposition to the public debate waged in newspaper columns, the Senate conducted its discussions of the treaty behind a veil. When the House of Representatives protested the lack of transparency, the president laid out his case in a March 1796 letter informing congressmen that he would not buckle to their demands, because in his view “the nature of foreign negotiations . . . must often depend on secrecy.” He then proceeded to school Congress on the extent of executive authority, stating that treaty-making powers lay with the president “with the advice and consent of the Senate.”⁴⁹ After all, as Washington reminded the representatives, he was there when the Constitution was written and this particular point established. The upshot was that the House had no say in passing treaties. Because the decision to side with the British Crown over French republicans had been made in secret, without public discussion, and with no input from the people’s representatives, the insult rankled that much more keenly. Viewed as a counterforce to the Senate’s elite and restrictive nature, the House, many of its Republican members felt, had been cut out of the governing process.

Although few citizens had actually read the treaty until it was leaked to the press, everything about the document, from its drafting to its ratification, seemed to confirm Democrat-Republican suspicions over the government’s antidemocratic tendencies. Its genesis lay in a counterrevolutionary impulse hostile to French liberty. Its passage bespoke a shift toward a unitary concentration of power. And its implementation gave depressing proof that the people’s representatives had been made auxiliary. “Jay’s Treaty of surrender,” to use Paine’s inimitable phrase, was unpopular in the truest sense of the word: for Bache at the *Aurora* and his fellow Democrat-Republicans, there was nothing *populāris* about the matter; the treaty hardly seemed to be belonging to the people as a whole.⁵⁰ These struggles over the meaning of the popular breathed new life into the propaganda of the faked Washington letters.

48. Todd Estes, *The Jay Treaty Debate, Public Opinion, and the Evolution of Early American Political Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 3.

49. George Washington, “Message to the House Regarding Documents Relative to the Jay Treaty, March 30, 1796,” accessed May 25, 2011, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/gw003.asp.

50. Thomas Paine, “Letter to George Washington,” in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), 1:714.

For weeks in spring 1796, the Philadelphia *Aurora* ran notices for a new edition of *Letters from General Washington* published by the Federal Press. The advertisements neglected to mention that the Federal Press was in actuality Bache's printing house, but it would have been clear to any reader that the *Aurora* was in the thick of the fracas.⁵¹ The conflict over the Jay Treaty had given the *Aurora* the first major scoop of the republic when Bache broke the seal on its secret contents and circulated its contents after a copy had been smuggled out of the Senate. This move displayed not so much an eagerness to profit on the sensation of what everyone was talking about (although profit would have been welcome to this printer whose republican sympathies discouraged would-be advertisers) but rather an activist commitment to democratic openness and the virtues of an informed citizenry. The new preface tacked on to *Letters from General Washington* also traded on the idea of propaganda as publicity by "furnishing an interesting appendix to the Official Letters" written by Washington as military commander.⁵² Exactly what amounted to "interesting" may have been open to interpretation, but, as a matter of propaganda, the gist was clear: in a climate where the official government seemed to operate behind a veil of secrecy, unofficial documents provided the only legitimately popular source for forming public opinion.

Whether stolen by the British during the American Revolution (as the "Washington" letters supposedly were) or smuggled out of Congress (as the treaty was), the disclosure of private letters and papers contributed to popular knowledge. The epistolary novel's penchant for turning private matters into public ones set the stage for propaganda in the early republic to circulate, one might say, as a rogue version of the Freedom of Information Act avant la lettre. In the world of epistolary politics, forgery might prove an effective means for getting at the truth. Taking a page from the novel of letters, Bache, it is tempting to surmise, believed that fake letters accurately portrayed the true state of Washington's British sympathies. "Much has been done by the executive administration toward recolonizing us a new [sic]," the *Aurora* charged, identifying Washington's aristocratic pretensions and mercantile loyalties as the most pressing threat to repub-

51. On Bache's reprinting of the spurious letters, see Jeffrey A. Smith, *Franklin and Bache: Envisioning the Enlightened Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 140–41.

52. *Letters from General Washington to Several of His Friends, in June and July, 1776; in Which Is Set Forth an Interesting View of American Politics, at That All-Important Period* (Philadelphia, 1795), 5.

licanism.⁵³ Bache's newspaper made this allegation on July 4, 1796, a full six months after the Jay Treaty went into effect, suggesting that the time had come for a second American revolution. The anxiety that neocolonialism of a merchant class was taking root in the United States prompted printer-activists associated with the *Aurora* to report on the nation as foreign to itself, estranged from the core principles of republicanism. From this distance, domestic concerns appeared as though they were international matters. Attention to foreign affairs was precisely the thrust of the *Aurora's* propaganda: as opposed to the "republic of letters" so crucial to national formation, a democracy of propaganda employed print culture as the connective tissue of comparative revolutions in America, France, and, to a lesser extent, Saint-Domingue.

According to conventional wisdom of the twentieth century, public opinion is of domestic manufacture, which explains why consent seems more easily secured for war and other foreign policy decisions. A nation's leaders can reliably manage and manipulate public opinion in foreign affairs precisely because the public itself knows so little about international conditions.⁵⁴ In this setting, as World War I had confirmed for Lippmann, and as the history of secret wars in Central America suggests to Chomsky, propaganda provides little enlightenment. But within the democracy of propaganda, we witness an alternative practice that links fiction and forgery to the dissemination of information. Such information need not be accurate or factual to be true.

3. "War! War!! War!!!"

Instead, truth inheres in its propagation. If information is repeated and spread widely enough, it can attain the sort of consistency that Godwin saw as essential to the invention of "true history." So, too, while Burke recognized that the fanaticism of the French Revolution was easily demystified, he seemed less confident about combating political and moral heresy "inspired by a multitude of writings dispersed with incredible assiduity and expense."⁵⁵ The dispersal of print, like the transit of the counterfeit epistles across the Atlantic, reveals not a private truth about Washington but a public truth that heterodox communication and dissenting reports can be circu-

53. "Fourth of July," *Aurora*, July 4, 1796, 3.

54. See Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 154.

55. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 168.

lated. The propagation of connections, like “unlooked-for strokes” loosely allying American, French, and Haitian republicanism, suggests not the plausibility of Washington as a traitor to freedom but the possibility of transnational democratic formations.

In the midst of pushing a new edition of *Letters from General Washington*, the *Aurora* publicly advertised for the production and circulation of more propaganda to advance the cause of unbounded republicanism. The appeal was rife with sarcasm and irony. An “Advertisement Extraordinary” in the *Aurora* solicited fabrications that could be used to legitimate the Jay Treaty. Offering \$1000 for a “plausible story” that would rally public opinion around ratification, the paper advised that fictional invention best engineered not consent but opposition. “The bugbear of war is likely to prove most efficacious” in making people back governmental actions that run counter to popular interests. Only by stirring up fears that military conflict with Britain is imminent could the Federalists foist their fraud on the public.⁵⁶ Two weeks later in March 1796, just as Washington was reminding Congress of its place with respect to treaty negotiations, a contributor (most likely Bache or one of his staff) claimed the prize. The winning entry took the hint about “the bugbear of war” by ominously forecasting that the United States would be besieged on all sides by enemies if the House of Representatives blocked the Jay Treaty. Threatening “War! War!! War!!!” in its headline, this piece spun a far-fetched scenario in which “no less than five different wars” will be “declared against us immediately” if the ire of Britain is provoked. Joining the alliance against the United States would be Tipu Saib of India, who was resisting British forces led by Lord Charles Cornwallis (then currently reviving his career after Yorktown by fighting a different set of colonials). A recent pact between the sultan and the British would bring an invading Eastern force to the shores of America “to avenge the insult offered to his puissant ally” in the event that the British treaty is rejected. From the north “all the Indian nations are ready at a single war whoop” to stream over the border, while from the southern hemisphere prison ships loaded with prisoners from Botany Bay will be pointed to America in order to enforce the monarch’s will and tame the “jacobinic crew” opposing the president and his plans for rapprochement with England.⁵⁷ This sort of accusation also surfaced in *Letters from General Washington*, which the paper had advertised only days before: a dan-

56. “Advertisement Extraordinary,” *Aurora*, March 5, 1796.

57. “War! War!! War!!!” *Aurora*, March 23, 1796, 2.

gerous mixture of fear and love caused many at the highest levels of American government to overidentify with the British Crown.

Was the American public to be cowed by a pro-British faction that sided with an imperial power whose “forces [are] triumphant in every quarter of the globe,” or would people’s sympathies remain with its sister nation that in 1789 had continued the republican fight to do away with aristocratic social distinctions?⁵⁸ The battle waged in print culture by the *Aurora* was to defy not England but American Anglophiles. This stand meant extending the American Revolution of 1776 into the present, a task that could be best accomplished if revolution were viewed not as an American monopoly but as a condition experienced in other transatlantic locales. Propaganda contrivances such as “War! War!! War!!!” sought to keep popular support for transnational republicanism in focus even as it was becoming eclipsed by scenes of French revolutionary terror, the specter of Haitian slave revolt, and charges of sedition at home.

No one was expected to take the *Aurora*’s extraordinary fiction as fact. Neither India nor Sardinia with “100,000 picked troops” (one more power that would supposedly rally to Britain’s side) were set to invade America. The writer admitted, “I have invented lies enough to terrify all the old women in the Union.”⁵⁹ The obviousness of the satire calls attention to the role that fabrication and forgery play in manufacturing public opinion. Its subtlety, however, lies in pointing out how consent never is formed purely inside domestic settings but is instead a product of more global contexts. The lesson—and it is confined not only to this one case—is that supposed secret intelligence about war needs to be framed by a larger democracy of propaganda in which alternative histories circulate.

58. “War! War!! War!!!” *Aurora*, March 23, 1796, 2.

59. “War! War!! War!!!” *Aurora*, March 23, 1796, 2.