

This Post continues a series based on my notes taken while reading Contested Truths, by Daniel Rodgers

The People

The political phrase that rose to the forefront by the 1820's was "People". "We the People" became more powerful than the cry for Natural Rights. The issue was control: who was to control politics, elected officials, the government and its power.

Leaders to that time, the John Adams and the James Madisons, had put their faith in constitution and government procedures, detailed and controlled by checks and balances. They feared the People, more specifically the Majority: power in the hands of the majority of the people.

But "majoritarianism" became the cry of the masses.

They claimed the right to control political policies, their lives.

The new "principle of numbers" would be in control.

But the will of the greatest number of people would not be respected for the next 40 years.

Andrew Jackson built the Democratic Party on this mantra of "we the people"; but the Jacksonian Party backed off from the slogan when women, free blacks and slaves insisted they, too, were part of the "People".

"The dictum of popular sovereignty" had become double edged and dangerous (p.84).

However the rhetoric of power to the people was inherent in the popular definition of a "Republic" and it could not be denied. "All power is vested in and consequently derived from, the people" is the way it was put in the Bill of Rights of Virginia. Even Leaders who opposed popular sovereignty privately, such as John Trumbull, James Wilson and even John Adams, professed it publicly for political reasons (p.85). But they

saw to it that the people did not rule, only white males who were property holders could vote. And then they elected Representatives to make the laws and policies, including taxation on behalf of the people.

The only actual political act of all who could vote was to ratify the new Constitutions being written at the time.

KEY WORDS IN AMERICAN POLITICS, Part 2: THE PEOPLE

Written by Calvin Fox

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Soon however, by the 1840's the cry was to increase representation by enfranchising more people, farmers and labors, and electing them to the State Legislatures. The Democratic party, especially, supported this movement which was directed against the rich landowners, the banks and corporations.

The Whig Party soon was pressured into adopting the same goals and sought to be the true party of the people.

Demagogues preaching popular sovereignty abounded by the 1850's.

When Abraham Lincoln used the phrase,

'Government of the people, for the people and by the people', it was already well-worn.

"The greatest good for the greatest number" was a common slogan for politicians.

And this was expressed most clearly in constitutional revision conventions, when the people, through popularly elected delegates, claimed and exercised the power to run their State Governments with the approval of their Legislatures.

Actually, most of the debating was done behind the scene in closed door meetings (p.94f).

During the middle of the Century, half of all

States were being controlled this way. Eleven Southern States used their Conventions to secede from the Union- that was the will of the People.

After the War, the same Conventions were used to rebuild the South, during what is known as the Period of Reconstruction.

Conventions were far from being of, by and for all the People. They prohibited certain people and groups from taking part in the Convention itself. They made decisions that overrode their own State Laws and elected Legislators.

And nothing they decided had to be put to a popular or democratic vote of all the People- the will of the Convention was the will of the People!

And that will was Sovereign.

In reality, what was sovereign was the will of the Leaders, the insiders, of the Convention.

By 1850, the political dangers of all this became apparent to many. The word "People" had to be defined (!).

The groups left out had to be considered: women (half the population), those who did not own land or capital, immigrants, free blacks and- eventually- slaves who were yet to be emancipated.

There was also the issue of the majority of States (the Union) invading a minority of States.

In the 1840's there were actually two governments (the constituted one and the People's Convention) claiming to be the legal government of Rhode Island. The conflict almost came to military conflict. but went to Court. Ultimately, the Supreme Court decided in favor of the Legislature.

The latter eventually compromised with some of the Convention's demands, but the entire Nation was finally made to realize the inherent (absurd) problems and impossibility of the

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(so-called) People

practicing absolute "sovereignty" in a Democracy.

It leads to factionalism, sectionalism, power struggles and conflict.

After the Civil War, the idea of the Sovereignty of the People was replaced by the Sovereignty of Government.

"Government" was the next powerful Abstraction.