“Damn John Jay! Damn every one who won’t damn John Jay. Damn every one who won’t put lights in the windows and sit all night damning John Jay!” As Todd Estes notes, this message, chalked on a wall in New York as the debate over the Jay Treaty with Great Britain erupted in July 1795, captures the angry depth American reactions to the results of negotiations by President George Washington’s special envoy, Chief Justice John Jay. (104) In The Jay Treaty Debate, Public Opinion, and the Evolution of Early American Political Culture, Estes moves far beyond the intense political invective and the effigies of Jay consumed in bonfires at anti-treaty rallies to explore the debate carried out in town meetings, pamphlets, and petitions to Washington and Congress and the more significant changes emerging in the political culture of the United States.

As Jerald Combs notes in his review, Estes does not explore in depth either the American or British backgrounds for the treaty negotiations or Jay’s actual talks with the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Grenville. Estes relies, however, on very good sources on the negotiations, most notably Combs’ The Jay Treaty: Political Background of the Founding Fathers (1970) and Samuel Flagg Bemis’ classic Jay’s Treaty: A Study in Commerce and Diplomacy (1923). Instead of examining how America’s emergent political culture influenced the diplomacy of Washington and relations with the major European powers, Great Britain and France, Estes closely explores how the foreign policy crisis precipitated by the European war, which shaped the Jay Treaty and the ensuing conflict with France, affected the emerging changes in American political culture. Estes explores how the disagreements that emerged in the American Revolution, most significantly in the debate over ratification of the constitution, and which continued in the reactions to Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton’s economic program, were reinforced by the public debate over the Jay Treaty, and how in their competition with each other over ratification of the treaty, the Federalists led by Hamilton and the Republicans, more loosely directed by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, tended to promote a more democratic as opposed to deferential political culture.
The reviewers welcome Estes’ study and its focus, particularly the close attention to the public debate, although they do raise some questions about some of Estes’ conclusions, most notably

1.) Estes suggests that the Federalists were not as elitist and dismissive of public opinion as previously depicted. Instead, Estes indicates that in order to win the battle for ratification of the treaty in the Senate in June 1795 and approval for funding in the House of Representatives in April 1796, Federalists acted vigorously to shape public opinion in town meetings, in petition writing campaigns, in pamphlets, and in Hamilton’s and others essays widely printed in newspapers around the country. Seth Cotlar, however, questions whether the Federalists had really changed very much since the ratification of the constitution and whether they had really discarded much of their elitist views and dismissal of the public. The Federalists, Cotlar admits, “did not try very seriously to stop the process of democratization. They complained about it and often mocked it publicly, but at least they did not try to physically silence or imprison democratic activists. Well, at least they waited until 1798 to try that.” (4) William Weeks suggests that the Federalists stayed ahead of the Republicans in their democratic methods and endorses Estes’ suggestion that “while the Federalists were often ideologically elitist, they were also operationally democratic.” (9)

2.) Were there significant differences between the Federalists and the Republicans on how town meetings were conducted, who attended the meetings, and what political ideals were advanced? When Federalists organized a meeting of merchants to petition in favor of the treaty, there were probably importance differences from a meeting in a Southern state expressing strong opposition against the treaty.

3.) William Weeks suggests that Estes’ analysis demonstrates that President Washington exhibited significant skills in managing the treaty ratification process. By delaying on signing the treaty, Washington allowed time for the initial wave of criticism to crest and for Hamilton and his allies to marshal public support for the treaty. Washington then delayed submitting a request to the House of Representatives for funding to implement the treaty which again provided time for Federalists to shift the public debate and reverse the “no” votes.

4.) Did Hamilton and other Federalist writers clearly defeat the Republicans in the public debate? Estes gives the impression that Hamilton trounced the second-level Republicans that attended to contest his “Camulus” essays and the writings of other leading Federalists. Furthermore, Estes depicts Jefferson in semi-retirement at Monticello as being unwilling to take on Hamilton and unable to persuade Madison to take up his pen against his collaborator in the ratification contest. Matthew Hale and Cotlar, however, raise the possibility that, as Hale notes, “Jefferson and Madison stayed out of the rough-and-tumble of political combat in part because they knew Federalists held the upper hand in the mid-1790s?” (4) However, the absence of Jefferson and Madison discussing this strategy in their correspondence, the significant shift of votes in favor of the treaty in one month, including Frederick Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania whose desertion from the Republican position prompted his stabbing by his brother-in-law, and the closeness of the final votes
from one to three in favor of the treaty suggest that the outcome was anything but predetermined. (181-188)

5.) The question of “which side are you on,” according to Cotlar, “has long dogged studies of the 1790s. With varying degrees of intensity and self-awareness, historians of that decade have tended to line up on one side or the other of the partisan divide.” (3) Bemis and Coombs were not uncritical of Jay’s negotiations and the terms of the treaty but they and others such as Bradford Perkins in The First Rapprochement: England and the United States, 1795-1805 approved Washington’s diplomacy to settle what issues he could with England, such as British occupation of forts on the American side of the northern border, and avoid armed conflict. Cotlar finds Estes’ depiction of the Republicans as writing harangues, as rushing to a negative judgment on the treaty, and as taking out their frustration by denouncing the elitism of the Federalists to be misleading. Cotlar notes that the Republicans had developed over the previous five years an increasing distrust of the Federalists and disagreement with their economic policies, noting similarities between British and Federalist criticism of democratic groups.

Participants:

Todd Estes is Associate Professor of History at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan where he has taught since 1995 when he received his Ph.D. from the University of Kentucky. A specialist in early American political history, Estes has published, in addition to The Jay Treaty Debate, Public Opinion, and the Evolution of Early American Political Culture, a variety of articles in scholarly journals such as Journal of the Early Republic, Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, The Historian, The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society, and The History Teacher. He has presented his work at leading academic conferences such of the meetings of the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, the New England Historical Association, and the Newberry Library Seminar in Early American History. The recipient of many research grants and author of numerous book reviews, Estes has also won a couple of teaching prizes including the 2001 Teaching Excellence Award from Oakland in 2001. He is currently at work on a book manuscript, tentatively titled The Campaign for the Constitution: Political Culture and the Ratification Contest which explores the Federalist/Anti-Federalist newspaper debate over ratification in 1787-88 and is also working on several articles on various aspects of early U.S. political culture.

Seth Cotlar is an associate professor of History at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. He received his Ph.D. in American History from Northwestern University in 2000. His articles on popular politics in the 1790s have appeared in Beyond the Founders and Periodical Literature in Eighteenth Century America, and he is finishing a book manuscript on that topic for the University of Virginia Press. His next project will be a cultural history of nostalgia in the years between the American Revolution and the Civil War.

Matthew Rainbow Hale is an assistant professor of history at Goucher College and the 2007-2008 Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies Gilder Lehrman Junior Research Fellow. He did his graduate work at Brandeis University, where he earned his Ph.D. under the direction of David Hackett Fischer, Jane Kamensky, and James Kloppenberg. He is currently working on a book about the French Revolution’s impact on the United States. Part of that work will appear as an article, “On Their Tiptoes: Political Time and Newspapers during the Advent of the Radicalized French Revolution, circa 1792-1793,” in a forthcoming issue of the Journal of the Early Republic.

Matt J. Schumann is a lecturer in the Department of History and Philosophy at Eastern Michigan University, having received his Ph.D. in History from the University of Exeter in 2005. A student of Jeremy Black, he specializes in international relations in the mid-eighteenth century Atlantic world. He has written articles on diplomatic history from the Pennsylvania backcountry to the Baltic Sea, and has recently published his first book, The Seven Years War: A Transatlantic History (Routledge, 2008), co-authored with Karl W. Schweizer.