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FROM THE COLLECTIONS

“A Letter from Joshua Cushman”

BY MATTHEW MASON

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IN LATE 1820, Mainers sent their new state’s first two senators to Congress. It was a triumphant time for those who had pushed long and hard for Maine’s separation from Massachusetts and admission into the Union. They greeted the seating of their delegation to Congress in November 1820 with great relief, for from early January through early March of that same year they had seen their state’s admission tied to the extremely controversial admission of Missouri. Only if Missouri could be admitted without a restriction on its citizens’ right to hold slaves, the congressional leadership had declared, could Maine enter.

The linkage of the two states put Mainers in an unusual position. While the rest of the Union knew this controversy as “the Missouri question,” Mainers tended for good reason to call it “the Maine and Missouri question.” The demand for statehood worked in favor of Maine’s congressional representatives who opposed the proposed restriction on slavery in Missouri. These men, known as “doughfaces,” had an extra, locally powerful, argument to add to the usual doughface case that the restriction was unconstitutional and inexpedient: they could also argue that it was the only thing standing in the way of Maine’s timely admission to the Union. Such was doughfaceism’s power in Maine that other members of Maine’s congressional delegation who favored the restriction felt the need to justify their position to their constituents. Maine’s doughfaces also wrote to their constituents explaining their votes on this issue, but that did not distinguish them from doughfaces in other states – that restrictionists had to write such a letter was what made Maine unusual.

Still, even in Maine the doughfaces did not feel completely secure from restrictionist assaults. The controversy had become extraordinarily sharp and personal, so neither side was immune from attack. Moreover, the restrictionists’ position tapped into deep wells of antislavery sentiment in Maine just as it did in other northern states. Just days after the first Missouri Compromise had assured Maine’s admission, Ashur Ware wrote to fellow Maine politico William King from Portland warning that

the restrictionists there were “determined to avail themselves of the honest & natural repugnance that is felt for slavery to injure the political standing of” Representatives John Holmes and Mark L. Hill, who had voted in favor of the compromise. The party leadership should defend them on grounds of their having served the interests of Maine by their votes, Ware urged. The leadership followed this cue, helping both Holmes and Hill craft their letters in hopes that they would be able to put this divisive subject to rest — in their favor, naturally — forever.

They did not get their wish. On November 13, 1820, the same day that the Senate seated Maine’s Senators John Holmes and John Chandler, it also drew lots to determine when their respective terms of service would expire. This drawing determined that Chandler’s term would expire on March 4, 1823, and Holmes’ on March 4, 1821. It was not an auspicious omen for healing that the outspoken doughface Holmes, rather than the less controversial Chandler, would come up for reelection by Maine’s legislature in January 1821, when feelings were still raw from the Maine-Missouri crisis.

The state leadership’s worries about Holmes’ prospects soon centered on one particular document, a circular letter written by restrictionist Congressman Joshua Cushman. In early January, King sent Holmes “one of Parson Cushman’s circulars,” and pointed his attention to the forthcoming response thereto in the leading Democratic-Republican organ in the state, Portland’s *Eastern Argus*. Although he assured Holmes that it would “injure no one but Cushman,” King concluded only halfway reassuringly that “I think you have not much to fear.” The *Argus’s* response included a long train of vicious personal attacks on Cushman. One typical writer lambasted him as a senile, “vain, inconsiderate weak old man” who was so desperate for power that he allowed himself to become a tool of the despised Federalists.

Despite King’s dismissive reference to Cushman as a “Parson” who was out of his league fighting this political battle, Cushman had clearly struck a nerve with his circular. He certainly had Holmes worried. In response to a jittery letter written January 3, a supporter had to assure Holmes that he would never desert him, “notwithstanding what Mr. Cushman may say in his famous printed letters.” When informing Holmes of his reelection, this same crony dwelt on the comfortable margin of victory in the legislature, despite “friend Cushman’s circular letter.” He took pains to underline the fact that Cushman only received one vote for Senator, “& happy I am to say” that the vote did not come “from one of his constituents.” An editorial in a sheet with a national profile, the *Richmond Enquirer*, likewise exulted in Holmes’ victory as evidence

that “Joshua Cushman’s plot has exploded. His dark, insidious attempts to blast Mr. Holmes and to array a Northern party against the South” had failed. “The citizens of Maine,” the editor gloated, “are not to be tricked in this way. They love the Union; they love their brethren of the South; and they will ‘frown indignantly’ upon any man who attempts to array one part of the Union against the other. Let the other Joshua Cushman’s of the North, take timely warning.”

So what was this letter that had the state’s — and even to some extent the nation’s — political establishment so concerned that their victory over Cushman had to be decisive, even total? The only known copy, residing at the Maine Historical Society, is a rare document, for despite its notoriety, it was never published. Cushman clearly hoped to defeat Holmes and thus limited his audience to state legislators. So he had it printed, but declared in a postscript to its unnamed recipients that “this letter is not intended for publicity. It is addressed to you, and other confidential friends.” It was thus its content, and possibly its carefully targeted audience, that caused such consternation in the doughfaces’ ranks.

Cushman began by noting doughfaces’ and southerners’ “*moanings*” about New England’s near unanimity in the House of Representatives in favor of restriction. They had charged repeatedly that such a sectionalist stance would jeopardize national unity. Why, he asked, should the anti-restrictionists affect to be so much more alarmed by “the union of the one grand division of our country, than the other? In the south you behold eleven states, all contiguous, some proud and aspiring, all united to a man. In this unanimity there seems to be perceived no danger,” but in New England’s unity against the extension of slavery, “they seem to spy out something like treason — some dark design — some nefarious plot . . . to dismember our grand confederated republic!” Why, he demanded, should northern unity raise such selective outrage? “Is southern wisdom *unerring*, and southern patriotism immaculate; while those of the north are dim-sighted, misguided, spurious, and adulterated? Why this predilection for the south?”

This was an effective restrictionist argument, and Cushman put it well. One of its advantages was its accuracy; anti-restrictionists both North and South had proven remarkably selective in their declamations against northern, but not southern sectionalism. This point also proved a good political tool, for it allowed restrictionists to paint doughfaces as not the friends of the Union they claimed to be but rather the naive tools of haughty, power-hungry slaveholders.

Doughfaces were naive, pursued Cushman, because they did not know they were being used in this way. They “egregiously err, if they cal-

culate on obtaining any considerable boon from tameness of spirit, facility of temper, or subserviency to the views of their Southern brethren." The District of Maine, for instance, had stayed loyal to the southern-dominated Democratic-Republican party in power in Washington despite the fierce opposition to the War of 1812 in the rest of Massachusetts. And "what did Maine gain," Cushman demanded, "for all her dutifulness, loyalty, and patriotism, during embargoes, restrictions, and war?" This sort of loyalty, "which were it in a slave, would have procured kindness from a benevolent master," earned Maine treatment no different than if she had "taken an active part in the *Hartford Convention*." Southern congressional leaders' underhanded linkage of Maine's admission to the precarious Missouri question demonstrated that. Indeed, the South had proven that its representatives would act as a unit in exclusive devotion to "her own interest."

Powerful as this argument was, Cushman's message went beyond castigating the doughfaces as lapdogs of the South who had nothing to show for their submission. The ultimate moral of this sad story was that Mainers must realize that "Maine has a common interest" not with the South but "with her sister states in the vicinity. With them she ought to have a *common bond of union*," and she ought not "to forsake her natural friends, and to throw herself into the arms of strangers." The South was manifestly united and self-centered, and New Englanders needed to "learn wisdom from their rivals" and defend themselves against the South's drive for "*undue ascendancy*." "A balance of power" would be "hereby preserved." He anticipated that such a call would provoke doughfaces to brand him a sectionalist who menaced the Union. "Under the specious pretext of adding strength and perpetuity to the whole," he responded, "we should not weaken the parts. Of what is the whole composed but its parts?" In light of this, he concluded, "I question the correctness of that policy which would urge sacrifices on the altar of conciliation. Not on the indiscriminate offerings of peace, but on the *balance of power*, depends the safety of our republic" and the perpetuity of the union of those parts.

In such passages, Cushman offered a thoroughly sectionalist vision of American life. His emphasis on sections as the building blocks of Union anticipated John C. Calhoun in its insistence that only solicitude for all the parts would preserve the whole. His talk of a balance of power between de facto enemies — indeed, "strangers"! — was just as alarming for the friends of compromise and Union. "What," asked one Virginian when he heard such talk during the Missouri Crisis, "is the political atti-

tude of nations towards each other, supposed by a balance of power” between the North and the South? “Hostility,” he answered. And “what is the effect of hostility? War. A balance of power is therefore the most complete invention imaginable for involving one combination of states, in a war with another.”

But despite his rather extreme sectionalism and Maine’s doughfaced political mainstream, Cushman was convinced that popular opinion favored his position. “The moral sense and political sentiments in the Eastern section of the country,” he averred, “recoil from the very idea of slavery — at holding any portion of the human race in bondage.” And thus the restrictionist coalition, which encompassed both Federalists and Democratic-Republicans, likely presaged a coalition that would obliterate the old party lines. It was a promising coalition because “even in Maine, where it was contemplated by our most efficient characters, to put the advocates for restriction into the back-ground . . . the people have supported these advocates, and given them unequivocal proofs of approbation.” Holmes’ and Chandler’s appointment to the Senate “furnishes no fact, viewed in a true light, that leads to a different inference. There was no direct appeal to the people” in these appointments, and Holmes’ doughfaced course “did not facilitate, but rendered more difficult his election. But for the *Missouri question*, there would have been little, or no, opposition” to him. But with the albatross of doughfaceism around his neck, Holmes “could hardly have succeeded but for the influence of previous arrangements, his own address and management, and the uncommon exertions of *efficient* friends. No other man could have withstood the popular current.”

On one level, this argument was but the latest iteration of politicians’ standard claims to popular support. But in the case of Maine after the compromise that gained it admission at the price of slavery in Missouri, the equivocal response of the electorate gave both sides good reason to declare victory. Moreover, this passage nicely captured the operations of the doughfaced political machine headed by William King, also known as the “Junto.” While the Junto was not quite so out of touch with the electorate as Cushman charged here, this portrait did accurately convey the troubles King’s faction would encounter in the future. Some of those troubles came in the next presidential election, when the Junto endorsed southerner William Crawford in opposition to the popular choice, New England’s favorite son, John Quincy Adams. For all its hyperbole, then, both Cushman’s letter and the doughfaces’ response illustrate just how deeply divided Maine was as it strode onto the national stage.