



The Birth of Empire: DeWitt Clinton and the American Experience, 1769-1828

Evan Cornog

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DeWitt Clinton (1769-1828) dominated the politics of New York State during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, serving as mayor of New York City and then governor of the state. At the same time, he was influential on the national scene, running for president in 1812 and only narrowly losing to James Madison. Although patrician in his sentiments, Clinton nevertheless developed new forms of party politics, including the spoils system. He was an early champion of the nomination of candidates by convention rather than legislative caucus, and as a United States Senator contributed the draft language for the Twelfth Amendment, which embedded party politics in the fabric of the Constitution.

Clinton's greatest achievement was the Erie Canal, the establishment and implementation of which he championed as early as 1810. Construction of the canal began in 1817, and even before it was completed, eight years later, it had brought profound changes--economic, cultural, and social--to the state and the nation. As Evan Cornog illustrates in his detailed and compelling narrative, the Erie Canal hastened the economic expansion of the country, altered its political geography, set an example for activist government, and decisively secured New York City's position as America's foremost metropolis. It was a project unlike anything the Empire State--or the United States--had seen before, and was only the most successful of Clinton's many efforts to implement his view that government should play an active role in the economic and intellectual development of American society.

The Birth of Empire chronicles not only the life of an important political leader but the accomplishments that underlay his success. As mayor of New York City, for example, Clinton was instrumental in the founding of the public-school system. He sponsored countless measures to promote cultural enrichment as well as educational opportunities for New Yorkers, and helped to establish and lead such institutions as the New-York Historical Society, the American Academy of the Arts, and the Literary and Philosophical Society. An amateur scientist of some renown, Clinton also wrote essays on geology, botany, entomology, archaeology, anthropology, and ichthyology.

As shown here, Clinton's career was marked by frequent attempts to integrate his cultural and scientific interests into his identity as a politician, thus projecting the image of a man of wide learning and broad vision, a scholar-statesman of the new republic. Ironically, the political innovations which Clinton set in motion--the refinement of patronage and the spoils system, appeals to immigrant voters, and the professionalization of politics--were precisely what led to the extinction of the scholar-statesman's natural habitat. However visionary, the latter-day philosopher-king would eventually have no place in the modern world. DeWitt Clinton was born into the aristocratic culture of the eighteenth century, yet his achievements and ideas crucially influenced (in ways he did not always anticipate) the growth of the mass society of the nineteenth century.

With this book, Cornog engagingly guides readers through the colorful maze of early nineteenth-century New York politics and society, illustrating both the depth of achievement and breadth of influence of one of its most important leaders. Those who wish to understand the development of American politics, the flowering of a distinctly American cultural life, the progress of the market revolution, and the growth of America's largest city will find many valuable insights in *The Birth of Empire*.

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