

1800 Republican Takeover: Jefferson's Revolution

John Adams's Presidency was tumultuous. By 1800 a torrent of what he called "squibs, scoffs, and sarcasms" was descending on him.¹ The Republicans continued to doubt his commitment to republican institutions, deplored the drift toward war with France, and blasted the Alien and Sedition Acts which he sponsored in 1798 to stifle critics of his administration. But the High Federalists (or Hamiltonians) liked him as little as the Republicans did. They thought he was an appeaser. When he sent a peace mission to France in 1799 after the disgraceful "XYZ Affair" of 1797, Hamilton and his supporters decided the President was hopeless. They rumbled and grumbled—and moaned and groaned—about Mr. X, Mr. Y, and Mr. Z. That was the way Adams had referred to the three French agents who tried to bribe American diplomats in Paris when he reported the incident to Congress.

As the 1800 election approached, Federalist leaders swallowed hard and, when Washington, shortly before his death, refused to run for a third term, they selected Adams again and put South Carolina's Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, brother of Adams's running mate in 1796, on the ticket with him. Pinckney was famous for having cried, "not a six-centalist had made their choices, Republican leaders designated Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr as their candidates for a second time. And then Alexander Hamilton leaped into action.

Hamilton had come to loathe Adams. Not only did he oppose the President's efforts at conciliation with France; he also resented Adams's refusal to defer to him as leader of the Federalist party. He finally decided that Adams was even worse than Jefferson. "If we must have an enemy at the head of the Government," he exclaimed, "let it be one whom we can oppose, and for whom we are not responsible, who will

not involve our party in the disgrace of his foolish and bad measures."² Far better than Jefferson, though, was the Federalist vice-presidential candidate. Hamilton hoped that General Pinckney would draw more electoral votes in the South than Adams and that if New England electors gave the two men equal votes the South Carolinian would take first place in the Electoral College. He took a trip to New England to further his plan. He also wrote a long letter blistering Adams's domestic and foreign policies in order to turn Federalist leaders against the President. " . . . I should be deficient in candor," he wrote, "were I to conceal the conviction, that he does not possess the talents adapted to the Administration of Government, and that there are great and intrinsic defects in his character which unfit him for the office of Chief Magistrate." Adams, he said, was petty, mean, egotistic, erratic, eccentric, jealous-natured, and hot-tempered.³

Hamilton's letter was not meant for general circulation; he wrote it mainly for Federalists in South Carolina who he hoped would come to prefer Pinckney. Unfortunately for the Federalists, Burr somehow got hold of a copy, turned it over to the press, and soon Republicans everywhere were chortling over *The Public Conduct and Character of John Adams*. Noah Webster responded with a loyal defense of the President and several other Federalist writers did the same. But the damage was done. Republicans made much of Hamilton's "Thunderbolt," as James Madison called it, during the 1800 campaign. For his part, Adams angrily dismissed Hamilton as "an intrigant, the greatest intrigant in the world—a man devoid of every moral principle—a bastard. . . ."⁴

But the Federalists did more than snipe at each other. They also attacked the fifty-seven-year-old Jefferson—Deist, champion of the people, friend of the French Revolution—with savage fury. Their favorite epithet was Jacobin, that is, French radical. For a high-toned people they waved an astonishingly low-level campaign. For a high-toned people they son had cheated his British creditors, obtained his property by fraud, robbed a widow of an estate worth ten thousand pounds, and behaved in a cowardly fashion as Governor of Virginia during the Revolution. Jefferson, wrote one Federalist, was "a mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed Indian squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father, raised wholly on hoe-cake made of coarse-ground Southern corn, bacon and hominy, with an occasional change of tricaesed bufflog."⁵ Queried one Federalist leaflet:

Can serious and reflecting men look about them and doubt that if Jefferson is elected, and the Jacobins get into authority, that those morals which protect our lives from the knife of the assassin—which guard the chastity of our wives and daughters from seduction and violence—defend our property from plunder and devastation, and shield our religion from contempt and profanation, will not be trampled upon and exploded?⁶

With Jefferson as First Magistrate, warned the *Connecticut Courant*, "Murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will all be openly taught and practiced, the air will be rent with the cries of the distressed, the soil will be soaked with blood, and the nation black with crimes."⁷

In 1800, as in 1796, Jefferson's religion was a primary target. Yale's Congregationalist clergyman-president Timothy Dwight had already set the tone. In a fiery sermon in 1798 he asked why good Americans tolerated such free thinkers as the Jeffersonians. "Is it," he thundered,

that we may assume the same character, and pursue the same conduct? Is it, that our churches may become temples of reason . . . the Bible cast into a bonfire . . . our children . . . chanting mockeries against God . . . our wives and daughters the victims of legal prostitution; sobriety dishonored; speciously polluted; the outcast of delicacy and virtue, and the loathing of God and man . . . our sons the disciples of Voltaire, and the dragons of Marat. . . ?⁸

John Mason, New York preacher, took up the cry. In *The Voice of Warning to Christians on the Ensuing Election* (1800), he warned that Jefferson was an infidel "who writes against the truths of God's word; who makes not even a profession of Christianity; who is without Sabbaths; without the sanctuary, without so much as a decent external respect for the faith and worship of Christians."⁹ And in *Serious Considerations on the Election of a President*, William Linn, another New York minister, lifted quotations from Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* to shock people and blasted the Vice-President's "open profession of Deism."¹⁰ A writer for the *Connecticut Courant* summed up the case against Jefferson on September 29:

Look at your houses, your parents, your wives, and your children. Are you prepared to see your dwellings in flames, hoary hairs bathed in blood, female charity violated, or children writhing on the pike and the halbert? . . . Look at every leading Jacobin as at a ravening wolf, preparing to enter your peaceful fold, and glut his deadly appetite on the vitals of your country. . . . GREAT GOD OF COMPASSION AND JUSTICE, SHIELD MY COUNTRY FROM DESTRUCTION."¹¹

But the Republicans did some smearing of their own. They called Adams a fool, hypocrite, criminal, and tyrant, and said that his Presidency was "one continued tempest of malignant passions."¹² They also spread the story that he planned to marry one of his sons to one of George III's daughters, start an American dynasty, and reunite the United States and Britain. To this tale they added the story that when Washington heard what Adams was up to he went to him wearing a white uniform and begged him to give up his plan, but that Adams refused. So Washington returned a second time, dressed in black, but was again rebuffed. Finally he donned a Revolutionary uniform, visited the President a third time, and threatened to run him through with a sword. At this point, according to the story, Adams finally agreed to abandon

his plan. To the dynasty tale the Republicans added an improbable one about Adams's licentiousness. Adams, they said, sent General Pinckney, his running-mate, to England on a U. S. frigate to procure four pretty girls as mistresses, two for Pinckney and two for the President. "I do declare upon my honor," chuckled Adams when he heard the story, "if this be true General Pinckney has kept them all for himself and cheated me out of my two."¹³

There was, to be sure, some discussion of serious issues in 1800. The Federalists warned that Jefferson's victory would mean dismantling Hamilton's funding system, wrecking the economy, and submitting meekly to French depredations on American commerce. And the Republicans denounced the Federalist party's hawkish policy toward France, its beating of the war drums, and its suppression of domestic dissent. Yet the "spicissitude of black liquor," as Adams called it, was the main feature of America's first—and in some respects worst—vituperative presidential campaign.¹⁴ Abigail Adams lamented that enough "abuse and scandal" was unleashed in 1800 "to ruin and corrupt the minds and morals of the best people in the world."¹⁵

Things looked promising for the Republicans. In May they won control of the New York legislature, partly because of Burr's great skill in mustering votes in New York City. New York, a crucial state with twelve electoral votes, had supported Adams in 1796; in 1800 the legislature was bound to pick Republican electors. In desperation Hamilton wrote Governor John Jay urging him to call the old Federalist legislature back into session and seek legislation taking choice of electors away from the legislature and giving it to the people voting in districts. He told Jay frankly that "in times like these in which we live, it will not do to be over scrupulous"; the important thing was "to prevent an atheist in religion, and a fanatic in politics, from getting possession of the helm of State." Jay did not bother to answer Hamilton; he simply filed Hamilton's letter away with the notation: "Proposing a measure for party purposes which I think would not become me to adopt."¹⁶

For a time the Federalists gleefully circulated a story that Jefferson had died. But the Vice-President was very much alive; it was a slave by the same name who had passed away at Monticello. Late in November, as the campaign raged around him, Jefferson went up to Washington, to which the federal government had moved in June, and calmly awaited victory. During November the sixteen states chose their electors, some by popular vote and some by legislative action; and on December 3 the electors cast their votes for President in their respective states. As reports of the voting began trickling into Washington, it became clear that the Republicans had come out on top. "The Jig's Up!" crowed the *Baltimore American*. "Be glad America!" exulted the *Readinger Adler* in Pennsylvania.¹⁷ At parties, festivals, and banquets throughout the land Republicans proclaimed "the reign of terror is past—the dawn of the

Whig millenium appears in view—and the clouds of aristocracy are passing away as the vapors of the morning."¹⁸ The Federalists began wearing such long faces, joked the Republicans, that barbers had to double their prices for shaving them. When the year reached its end, one Republican writer exuded a warm turn-of-the-century sentiment: "Here ends the 18th Century. The 19th begins with a fine clear morning wind at S. W.; and the political horizon affords as fine a prospect under Jefferson's administration, with returning harmony with France—with the irresistible propagation of the Rights of Man, the eradication of hierarchy, oppression, superstition and tyranny over the world."¹⁹

Although not all the returns were in, Jefferson felt confident enough to write Robert R. Livingston on December 14 asking him to become Secretary of Navy in his administration. He also wrote Burr the following day congratulating him on his election as Vice-President and noting that although some of the electors had undoubtedly withheld votes from the New Yorker, he would still probably get at least four or five more votes than Adams. He expressed regret, too, that as Vice-President Burr wouldn't be able to play as active a role in the new administration as Jefferson would like him to. And he mentioned in passing that "several of the high-flying Federalists" were hoping for a tie between him and Burr so they could try for a Federalist President in the House of Representatives. Burr wrote back to say that if the matter came to the House he was sure that Jefferson would get the vote of at least the states, which was all he needed to win.²⁰

By the end of December it was clear that the improbable had happened: not even one of the Republican electors had withheld his second vote from Burr after all and as a consequence there was a tie for first place: 73 votes for Jefferson, 73 for Burr, 65 for Adams, and 64 for Pinckney. This meant that, according to the Constitution, the "high-flying Federalists" were going to have their way: it was now up to the House of Representatives, controlled by lame-duck Federalists, to choose the President. The obvious choice was Jefferson; everyone who had voted in 1800 knew he had been running for first place. But what was obvious wasn't necessarily palatable to die-hard Federalist Congressmen; many of them preferred Burr if only because they disliked Jefferson so much. And Burr did nothing to dissuade them from supporting him for first place, though he did nothing directly to advance his cause.

On February 11, 1801, the House of Representatives met in the unfinished Capitol building in Washington to pick a President. The town was crowded with people; hotels and boarding houses were chock-full and in one place fifty men slept on the floor with their coats as blankets. When the balloting began in the House chamber, every Congressman but two was present; and one of the two, who was ill, lay in bed in an adjoining committee room and had his ballot brought in for him to

sign. Each state had one vote, which was determined by a majority of the state's delegation; but if the delegation was tied the state cast a blank ballot. On the first ballot Jefferson failed to get the nine votes necessary for election; eight states went for him, six for Burr, and the other two were evenly divided and did not vote. So the Congressmen tried again—and again and again. As the balloting continued with no change in the results, many of the Congressmen sent out for nightcaps and pillows and took short naps between ballots in their chairs or on the floor wrapped in coats and shawls. Six more days and thirty-five more votes produced the same outcome. It began to look as though March 4, designated as inaugural day by Congress in 1792, would come and go without Adams's successor being chosen. Outside the Capitol building there were noisy demonstrations for Jefferson. A score of men in a huge sled went shouting through the streets waving a big banner bearing the words, "Jefferson, the Friend of the People."²¹

There were numerous efforts to break the deadlock. Some Federalists approached Burr promising him their support if he agreed to carry on Federalist policies if he became President. Burr resolutely refused to give any such assurances; he held back, though, from bowing out of the contest for first place. But Hamilton, who had helped bring Adams down, now intervened to prevent a Burr victory. He had not really changed his mind about Jefferson; but he held Burr in even lower esteem. He regarded the New Yorker as the "Catherine of America," utterly without principle, public or private, who would employ "the rogues of all parties to overthrow the good men of all parties." Jefferson, by contrast, though a "contemptible hypocrite" and "incurred with fanaticism," at least had some "pretensions to character." "I trust the Federalists will not finally be so mad as to vote for Burr," he wrote New York Senator Gouverneur Morris. "I speak with an intimate and accurate knowledge of character. His elevation can only promote the purposes of the desperate and profligate. If there be a man in the world I ought to hate, it is Jefferson. With Burr I have always been personally well. But the public good must be paramount to every private consideration."²²

On February 17, six days after the voting had begun, several Federalist Congressmen who had been supporting Burr and failed to get any commitments from him decided to cast blank ballots and end the deadlock. On the thirty-sixth ballot that morning, one Vermont Congressman and four from Maryland abstained from voting and thus gave those states to Jefferson; and Delaware and South Carolina, previously for Burr, cast blank ballots. The outcome: Jefferson won with ten votes to Burr's four. As news of the House's decision spread through the land, exuberant Jeffersonians fired guns, rang bells, and proposed toasts to Jefferson, the Mammoth of Democracy.²³ But the Federalist *Gazette of the United States* huffily reported that the price of whiskey and gin

had risen since Jefferson's election and snuffed: "The bells have been ringing, guns firing, dogs barking, cats mewling, children crying, and Jacobins getting drunk."²⁴ Jeffersonians had jeered that Adams was "President by three votes" in 1796; Federalists now retaliated by calling Jefferson "President by no votes" because of Federalist abstentions in the House.²⁵ Later on some of them insisted he had given assurances that "certain points of Federal policy . . . would be observed" if he became President. Jefferson vigorously denied giving any such assurances; but it seems likely that some of his supporters sought to reassure the Federalists about what he would do if he became Chief Executive.²⁶

The election of 1796 showed that there could be a peaceful change of Presidents in the new republic; 1800 showed there could be a peaceful change of parties. But it was a narrow squeak. Some ultra-Federalists, blinded by their hatred of Jefferson, talked of prolonging the deadlock in the House of Representatives beyond March 4 and then either calling for a new election or making the President *pro tempore* of the Senate (a Federalist) Adams's successor, or even passing an act making the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court the interim President. When Jefferson heard rumors of such plans, he warned that it would mean civil war. Some of his associates even went so far as to advise Republican states to refuse to submit to a "usurper President" and have the militia ready to march to Washington "for the purpose, not of promoting, but of preventing, revolution, and the shedding of a single drop of blood."²⁷ To James Monroe, Governor of Virginia, Jefferson himself wrote: "We thought it best to declare openly and firmly, one and all, that the day such an act passed, the Middle States would arm, and that no such usurpation, even for a single day, should be submitted to." The Republicans, he said, were not only determined to resist the "usurpation by arms," but also to call for a convention "to reorganize and amend" the Constitution if the Federalists persisted in their folly.²⁸

Jefferson may have exaggerated the peril. The fact that the House deadlock was finally broken on February 17 may be evidence that even if it had continued beyond inauguration day there would still have been a peaceful resolution of the crisis in the end. As Vice-President and thus presiding officer over the Senate, Jefferson would have been able to rule out of order any motion to legislate a President; and, in fact, he had contemplated doing just that if the occasion arose. Still, upsetting the national timetable—the pioneers in American government put great emphasis on exact terms of office and precise dates for oath-taking—might well have had disastrous consequences for the young American political system. After the election, Madison, who had feared the Federalists would resort to force in order to stay in power, expressed enormous relief at the peaceful outcome of the contest: ". . . what a lesson to America and the world," he wrote Jefferson, "is given by the efficacy of the public will, when there is no army to be turned against it."²⁹ And

the *National Intelligencer*, Republican tri-weekly, thought the peaceful settlement of the crisis proved that the "republican system" surpassed the government of "an hereditary despot or a military usurper."³⁰ To avoid another situation like the one that faced the nation in 1801, the Twelfth Amendment, requiring the Electoral College to vote separately for President and Vice-President was added to the Constitution in 1804. It was a frank recognition of the existence of political parties in the American system.

Cleful Republicans called Jefferson's victory "the Triumph of democratic Representatives in Congress over the tools of the Anglo-monarchic Aristocratic faction: the Triumph of the sovereign people over their rebellious servants, and of Human Nature or of Humanity over the accursed Persecutors of the Human Race."³¹ Jefferson himself liked to refer to his election as "the revolution of 1800." He claimed it meant that a party committed to more popular participation in politics had come into power.

Still, the election of 1800 was an extremely close one. In the Electoral College Adams received only eight fewer votes than Jefferson and if he had taken either New York or South Carolina he would have won the election. By his break with Hamilton and the High Federalists, however, and by his quest for peace with France, Adams had moved a long way from his own party toward Jefferson and the Republicans by the end of his administration. From this point of view, the change of parties in 1801 was less momentous than Jefferson believed it was. The new President admitted as much when he announced in his inaugural address (which Adams deliberately missed): "We are all Republicans; we are all Federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union, or to change its Republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it."³² After the inauguration Margaret Bayard Smith, wife of the editor of the *Jeffersonian National Intelligencer*, politely poured tea for three Federalist Congressmen.³³ Hamilton himself retired from national politics and Jefferson went on as President to retain many of his old enemy's economic policies.

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Safe Place

A Federalist lady in a little Connecticut town was so afraid of what would happen to the family Bible if Jefferson became President that she took it to the only Jeffersonian she knew and asked him to keep it for her. The Jeffersonian tried to convince her that her fears about Jefferson were groundless, but she remained unpersuaded. "My good woman,"