



Thomas Jefferson and the Revolution of 1800

Writing to Judge Spencer Roane in the summer of 1819, Jefferson recalled the tumultuous events leading up to his election to the presidency nearly two decades earlier. The “revolution of 1800 ... was as real a revolution in the principles of our government as that of 1776 was in its form; not effected indeed by the sword, as that, but by the rational and peaceable instrument of reform, the suffrage of the people.” By 1819, Jefferson’s victory over Federalist rivals had taken on mythic proportions. With the overwhelming support of the citizenry, Jefferson and his followers had overcome the politics of faction and intrigue, turned back the tide of counter-revolution, and restored the country to its true republican course. After his election, Jefferson ascribed an air of inevitability to his triumph. “The storm through which we have passed, has been tremendous indeed,” he wrote in March 1801. “The tough sides of our Argosie have been thoroughly tried.” But prospects had not seemed so bright in the dark days

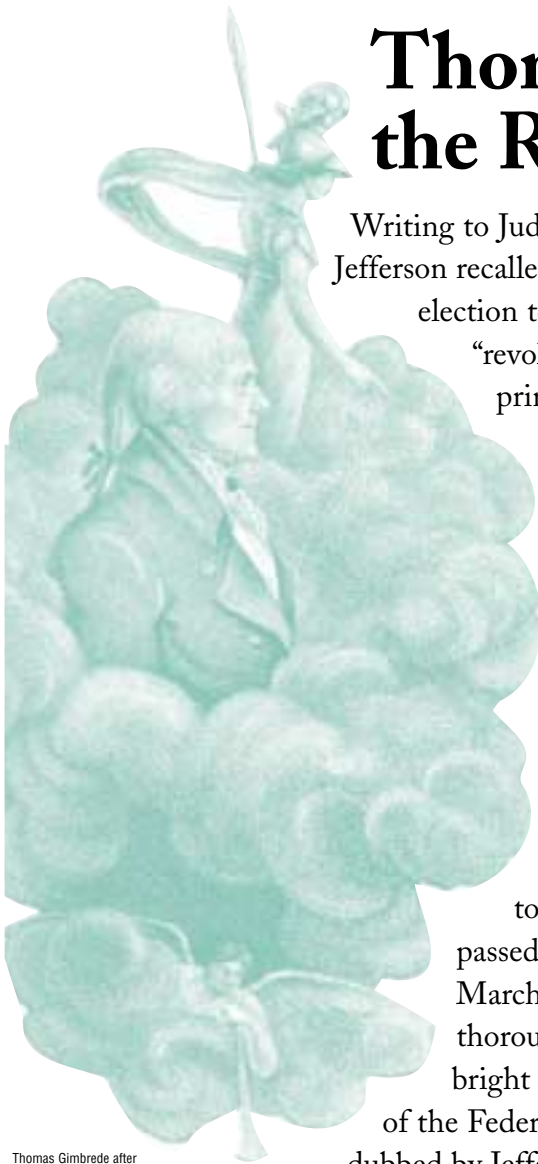
of the Federalists’ ascendancy, dubbed by Jefferson the “reign of

witches,” nor the eventual outcome so certain. During the 1790s the country’s political fabric was so rent by the “baneful spirit of party,” its leaders so polarized in their opinions, that it appeared scarcely possible the young republic would escape disunion and civil war.

On taking up his post as Secretary of State in Washington’s administration in 1790, Jefferson recalled his “wonder and mortification” that much of the political table talk in government circles

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Thomas Gimbrede after Charles B.J.F. de Saint-Memin, engraving (1809). TJMF, gift of Theodore Fred Kuper.

After the bitterly contested election of 1800, Jefferson served two terms as President. This engraving, published at his retirement in 1809, shows the former president in heavenly clouds, with Minerva, Goddess of Wisdom above him, and Fame below.

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MONTICELLO



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revolved around “a preference of kingly over republican government.” His observation would set the tone of his opposition to Federalist policies throughout the decade. Jefferson’s republicanism was grounded on an emphatic rejection of monarchical and aristocratic rule on the one hand, and an unshakable belief in the primacy of individual rights and the sovereignty of the states, as guaranteed by the constitution, on the other.

What he saw unfolding during the 1790s, first under Washington and then under Adams, in his view, was nothing less than the subversion of the constitution and ultimately the

undoing of the nation’s revolutionary settlement of 1776. Hamilton’s plans for the government’s assumption of the country’s debts and establishment of a national bank threatened to erect a new kind of monied aristocracy and to undermine the constitutional balance between the states and central government by permitting the latter to take on powers not delegated to it by the states.

Worse was to follow. The inglorious terms extracted by the British in the Treaty of 1795 negotiated by John Jay appeared to confirm the pro-British leanings of the government. “In place of that noble love of liberty and republican government which carried us through the war,” Jefferson wrote to Philip Mazzei in April 1796, “an Anglican monarchical aristocratical party has sprung up, whose avowed object is to draw over to us to the substance, as they have already done the forms of the British government...” Referring to Washington and other revolutionary heroes, he continued, “It would give you a fever were I to name to you the apostates who have gone over to these heresies.”

Any hope that John Adams’ election to the presidency in 1796 would bring about a reconciliation between the two warring parties and end the intense factionalism that had emerged in Congress and in the country soon collapsed. Growing tensions with France appeared to put the nation on course for war with her sister republic, possibly in alliance with Britain. For Republicans, the Naturalization, Alien, and Sedition Acts of 1798 exposed the repressive character of the administration and its contempt for the revolutionary principles that had forged the nation. By early 1799 both parties, Republican and Federalist, were convinced of the other’s determination to subvert the government and overthrow

John Adams by Mather Brown (1788),
courtesy Boston Athenaeum.



Despite their differences, Thomas Jefferson would keep this portrait of his Federalist opponent, John Adams, at Monticello.

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the constitution. Hamilton argued that the attempt “by Virginia and Kentucky to unite the State Legislatures in a direct resistance to

certain laws of the Union can be considered in no other light than as an attempt to change the government,” and warned that supporters of the federal government should be ready if necessary “to make its continued existence a question of force.” William Cobbett, the arch-Federalist writing under the pseudonym Peter Porcupine, predicted fearful consequences if the government did not take a firm stand: “Now the crisis is advancing. The abandoned faction, devoted to France, have long been conspiring, and their conspiracy is at last brought near to an explosion. I have not the least doubt but they have fifty thousand men, provided with arms, in Pennsylvania alone. If vigorous measures are not

taken; if the provisional army is not raised without delay, a civil war, or a surrender of independence is not more than a twelvemonth’s distance.”

Republicans had no intention of taking up the sword however. Instead, as he had done a quarter of a century earlier, Jefferson took up the pen convinced that if the people were apprised of the threat posed to their liberties they would put out the government by constitutional means at the earliest possible opportunity. Through the rest of the year and into 1800 the Republicans mounted an intense campaign against Federalist policies in the press, at public meetings, and through the organization of democratic societies and clubs across the country.

The presidential campaign of 1800 that pitted Jefferson and Aaron Burr against John Adams and Charles Cotesworth Pinkney was bitterly contested in the press and in the pulpit, but when the final results came in, it was clear the Republicans had swept away Federalist



Anonymous etching, ca. 1800. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

Jefferson’s French sympathies are ridiculed in this political cartoon which shows the then Secretary of State kneeling at the “Altar to Gallic Despotism.” An American eagle is rescuing the Constitution from a fire fed by the flames of radical writings.

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opposition. Yet at the moment of triumph a fresh crisis emerged. Jefferson and Burr had tied for the presidency with 73 electoral votes each and consequently the sitting House of Representatives, still dominated by Federalists, was called upon to break the deadlock. The opportunity for defeated Federalists to prevent Jefferson from gaining the presidency by voting for Burr, or at the very least to extract concessions from the Republicans in return for voting for Jefferson was too hard to resist. Early in the new year rumors began circulating that Burr would be elected, or that the Federalists intended to throw “things into confusion by defeating an election altogether, and making a President ... by act of Congress.”

Amid renewed fears of civil war, the House assembled on February 9, 1801, but after several days of balloting the outcome was still unresolved. Outside, in the streets of Washington, an eyewitness estimated over a hundred thousand people had gathered and were growing increasingly impatient with Federalist obstinacy. Finally, on February 17, on the thirty-sixth ballot, the opposition cracked and Jefferson was elected, ending “the fruitless contest” that had “agitated the public mind” and nearly plunged the nation into conflict. Jefferson’s election was one of his greatest political victories, vindicating his belief that “the sovereign people” would repel attacks on their liberties and the enduring republican principles of 1776. “As the storm is now subsiding, and the horizon becoming serene,” he wrote to a political ally, “[w]e can no longer say there is nothing new under the sun. For this whole chapter in the history of man is new. The great extent of our Republic is new.... The mighty wave of public opinion which has rolled over it is new.... The order and good sense displayed in this recovery from delusion, and in the momentous crisis which lately arose, really bespeak a strength of character in our nation which augurs well for the duration of our Republic.” Recovery and reconciliation was a central theme of his Inaugural Address of March 4, 1801: “Let us, then, fellow-



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Music written in honor of Thomas Jefferson’s election in the “second American Revolution.”

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citizens, unite with one heart and one mind. Let us restore to social intercourse that harmony and affection without which liberty and even life itself are but dreary things.... We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.” The fever had broken. Faction and party were behind them. For Jefferson, the Republican triumph reunited the people behind the “strongest Government on earth,” and restored the nation to its historic mission as a shining example to other countries of the felicities of freedom, the “world’s best hope.”

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'JH' with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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COMMENTS? newsletter@monticello.org