It may read like a modern headline, but don’t be fooled — we’re referring to the down-and-dirty election of 1800, considered one of the most divisive in American history.

From the beginning, the stage was set for a serious political showdown. Thomas Jefferson, then vice president, was running against incumbent President John Adams. Jefferson was a Democratic Republican; Adams a Federalist.

It was a rematch of the 1796 presidential election, when Adams emerged victorious. This time around, many believed Jefferson would have the edge, thanks to a shifting mood across the country. Historian John Freeman notes that “public discontent had risen due to the Alien and Sedition Acts, a direct tax in 1798, Federalist military preparations and the use of federal troops to crush a minor tax rebellion … in Pennsylvania.”

In modern terms, presidential approval was at an all-time low.

The stakes could not have been higher: The Constitution was 25 years young, the national government was, in Freeman’s words, “still a work in progress” — a democratic experiment yet burdened in other corners of the world. There was genuine concern that the transfer of power from one political faction to another might lead to civil war. According to Freeman, “The United States was new, shaky and likely to collapse, a precluding anxiety that could not help but have an ominous impact on the period’s politics.”

Jeffersonian Republicans knew they would have to carry New York to win the election, a state they tied with Aaron Burr, U.S. senator from New York. As Jefferson’s running mate, Adams and the Federalists selected Charles Pinckney of South Carolina.

In the end, the battle for the presidency wasn’t waged on the debate stage or in town hall meetings. The candidates themselves were conspicuously absent from the discourse over who should be elected. Instead, mud was slung in the 350 newspapers of the day — partisan publications that unsurprisingly favored either the Federalist president or his Republican contender.

One example: the Philadelphia Aurora, a paper supporting Jefferson, described “Things as They Have Been” under Adams:

The principles and patriots of the Revolution considered …

The nation in arms without a foe, and divided without a cause.

The reign of terror created by false alarms, to promote domestic discord and foreign war.

A Sedition Case …

An established church, a religious test, and an order of Persecution.

And on the other side of the aisle, Philadelphia’s Federalist paper, the Gazette of the United States, painted Jefferson as a dangerous atheist:

THE GRAND QUESTION STATED

At the present acmen and momentous epoch, the only question to be asked by every American, laying his hand on his heart, is Shall I continue to altenage to GOD — AND A REGULOUS PRESIDENT? or implicitly declare for JEFFERSON — AND NO GOD!?

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, John Adams, David McCullough summed up the political attacks against each candidate in these terms: “If Jefferson was a Jacobin, a shameless southern libertine, and a ‘howling atheist,’ Adams was a Tory, a vain Yankee sould, and, if truth be known, ‘quite mad.’”

Such smear tactics were considered politics as usual in the turn of the 19th century. In a 1798 letter to his daughter Martha, Jefferson wrote of the nation’s capital: “…politics and party hatred destroy the happiness of every being here; they seem, like salamanders, to consider fire as their element.”

In the end, the 1800 election resulted in a surprising tie in the electoral college — between Jefferson and running mate Aaron Burr. As a direct result of this procedural hiccup, the country would later ratify the 12th Amendment, requiring electors to vote separately for president and vice president.

It fell to Congress to determine the final outcome. Today, the rivalry between Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton is the subject of a hit Broadway musical — it may surprise you to learn it was at Hamilton’s urging that Federalists threw their support behind Jefferson, ultimately securing his victory. In a letter dated December 25, 1800, Hamilton wrote, “In a choice of evils let them take the least – Jefferson is in every view less dangerous than Burr.”

In his 1801 inaugural address, with the vitriol of the campaign still fresh in his mind, he expressed conviction that the American people could find common ground: “… every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principles. We are all Republicans. We are all Federalists.”

After retiring from public office, Jefferson took his own advice to heart, rekindling his friendship with Adams. In Jefferson’s words, “I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, in philosophy, as a cause for withdrawing (from a friend) (1803).”

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**ADAMS vs. JEFFERSON**

**JOHN ADAMS**

**THOMAS JEFFERSON**

**FAMOUS PHRASE**

“Give me liberty, or give me death.”

“Let those who are not content ..."