

Th. Jefferson

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NATION DIVIDED OVER PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Political Mud-Slinging, Personal Attacks Rule the Day in Closely Fought Presidential Election

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 Joanne 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 11 years young. The national government was, in Freeman's words, "still a work in progress" – a democratic experiment yet untested 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 prevailing anxiety that could not help but have an enormous impact on the period's politics."

Jeffersonian Republicans knew they would have to carry New York to win the election, so they chose Aaron Burr, U.S. senator from New York, as Jefferson's running mate. Adams and the Federalists selected Charles Pinckney of South Carolina.

In 1800, 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

ADAMS vs. JEFFERSON



JOHN ADAMS

AGE	65
POLITICAL PARTY	Federalist
PRIOR EXPERIENCE	Second U.S. President; first U.S. Vice President; U.S. Minister to Great Britain; Founder
EDUCATION	Harvard College
RELIGION	Unitarian
HOMETOWN	Braintree (now Quincy), MA
FAMOUS PHRASE	"Liberty, once lost, is lost forever."
NICKNAME	Atlas of Independence



THOMAS JEFFERSON

AGE	57
POLITICAL PARTY	Democratic Republican
PRIOR EXPERIENCE	Second U.S. Vice President; first U.S. Secretary of State; U.S. Minister to France; Founder; Author of the Declaration of Independence
EDUCATION	College of William and Mary
RELIGION	No Formal Affiliation
HOMETOWN	Charlottesville, VA
FAMOUS PHRASE	"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ..."
NICKNAME	Sage of Monticello

in the 250 newspapers of the day – partisan publications that outwardly 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 condemned ...

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

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

A Sedition Law ...

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

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

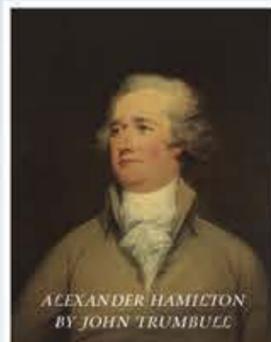
At the present solemn and momentous epoch, the only question to be asked by every American, laying his hand on his heart, is: Shall I continue in allegiance to GOD – AND A RELIGIOUS PRESIDENT; or impiously declare for JEFFERSON – AND NO GOD!!!

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, *John Adams*, David McCullough summarized 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 scold, and, if truth be known, 'quite mad.'"

Such smear tactics were considered politics as usual at 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 the president and vice president.)



ALEXANDER HAMILTON
BY JOHN TRUMBULL

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 – so it may surprise you to learn that it was at Hamilton's urging that

Federalists threw their support behind Jefferson, ultimately securing his victory. In a letter dated December 23, 1800, Hamilton wrote, "in a choice of Evils let them take the least – Jefferson is in every view less dangerous than Burr."



JEFFERSON BY
JOHN TRUMBULL

Some 200 years later, what can we learn from the Jefferson-Adams presidential race? A pessimist might say that given our track record, there's little hope for civility in American politics. But Jefferson offered a different view.

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" (1800).

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These Truths



By Jamie Wjeth

We Hold These Truths:
The Campaign for Monticello is a landmark effort to safeguard and share both the mountain and the mind of Thomas Jefferson – for all people, for all time. Please visit monticello.org/campaign to learn more about our campaign priorities and their impact.