

# The Predicaments of the New Republic: America, 1789-1820

## An Online Professional Development Seminar

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**AMERICA *in* CLASS<sup>®</sup>**

*from the* National Humanities Center

We will begin promptly on the hour.

The silence you hear is normal.

If you do not hear anything when the images change, e-mail Caryn Koplik [ckoplik@nationalhumanitiescenter.org](mailto:ckoplik@nationalhumanitiescenter.org) for assistance.

## GOALS

- To provide fresh primary resources for use with students
- To suggest ways to examine primary sources—both visual and verbal—in the history classroom
- Understanding:

In the first thirty years after the ratification of the Constitution, Americans harbored a combination of hopes and fears about the success of their republican ‘experiment.’

## FROM THE FORUM Challenges, Issues, Questions

- How much doubt was there that this new nation might fail?
- Were the sentiments Webster expresses in his July 4th oration widespread in the nation?
- What internal conflicts threatened the unity of the nation in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century?
- To what extent did the differing political and economic philosophies of Hamilton and Jefferson contribute to these conflicts?
- To what extent did the banking system contribute to national division?
- What held the nation together at this time--political traditions, adherence to the Constitution, etc.?

## Framing Questions

- What did Americans see as the greatest threats to the U.S. republican experiment, circa 1800?
- What did Americans hope for and fear after the “Revolution of 1800”?
- To what extent did the US succeed in living the Revolution by 1820?

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*Sarah Johnson's Mount Vernon: The Forgotten History of an American Shrine* (2008)

*Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (1999)

*A History of the Book in America, Vol. 3 (The Industrial Book, 1840-1880)*, ed. (2007)

*Perspectives on American Book History: Artifacts and Commentary*, ed. (2002)

## TO BEGIN OUR DISCUSSION

How do you currently teach the early years of the nation's life?

- What did Americans see as the greatest threats to the US republican experiment, circa 1800?
- What did Americans hope and fear after the “Revolution of 1800”?

- Foreign entanglements and invasion
- Consequences of the passing of the Revolutionary generation
- Erosion of civic virtue
- Territorial expansion
- Slavery
- Weakening of national unity



- December 14, 1799: George Washington dies.
- 1800: Extended presidential election between John Adams (Federalist) and Thomas Jefferson (Republican)
- What were the key issues in the election of 1800?
- Why did all sides in that election seek to claim the mantle of George Washington?

## The Memory of George Washington

“Without pretensions to that high confidence you reposed in our first and greatest revolutionary character, whose preeminent services had entitled him to the first place in his country's love and destined for him the fairest page in the volume of faithful history, I ask so much confidence only as may give firmness and effect to the legal administration of your affairs.”

# Noah Webster (1802)

“And let us pay the tribute of respect to the memory of the illustrious hero who led our armies in the field of victory, and the statesman who first presided over our national councils. Let us review the history of his life, to know his worth and learn to value his example and his services. Let us, with a solemn pleasure, visit his tomb; there to drop a tear of affection, and heave a fervent sigh, over departed greatness. . . . There let us pluck a sprig of the willow and the laurel that shade the ashes of a WASHINGTON, and bear it on our bosoms, to remind us of his amiable virtues, his distinguished achievements, and our irreparable loss! Then let us resume our stations in life, and animated by his illustrious example, cheerfully attend to the duties assigned us, of improving the advantages, secured to us by the toils of the revolution, and the acquisition of independence.”

**Identification:** What do you see—in the image? (Don't draw on outside knowledge; just focus on what you notice in the image.)

Some things to pay attention to:

- Contents: individuals, objects, etc.
- Composition: perspective, light, color, form, motion, proportion

[For a good explanation, using Emanuel Leutze's Washington Crossing the Delaware—see [http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/gw/el\\_gw.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/gw/el_gw.htm)]

[And for another website with an interactive portrait—Gilbert Stuart's "Lansdowne" portrait of Washington—see <http://www.georgewashington.si.edu/portrait/index.html>]

**Analysis:** What do the things you've noticed suggest about what the artist/maker was trying to convey?

**Extrapolation:** How might you use other things you know (about the context, the artist, etc.) to analyze the image more fully or deeply? What might you wish to learn more about, in order to analyze the image more deeply?

# The Apotheosis of Washington



The Apotheosis of Washington  
19th Century

Artist unknown

George Washington is seen ascending into heaven upon his death.

# The Apotheosis of Washington



Apotheosis of Washington

John James Barralet

engraving and etching, 1800-1802  
Metropolitan Museum of Art

For brief documents (like Jefferson's First Inaugural Address):

- Give students time to read it whole
- Summarize it together, paragraph by paragraph
- Select a few sentences or paragraphs for closer analysis, tied to core questions (content and context)



## CONTENT

### What is the author saying?

- Themes/arguments and evidence to back them up?
- Structure?
- Language/figures of speech?
- Rhetorical strategies (appeals to emotion, reason, history, shared values, etc.)?

## CONTEXT

**In what circumstances was the author saying this?**

- Historical developments: political, social, cultural
- Biographical contexts: how does the author's own history matter?
- Textual contexts: who was the audience? Did anyone else have a hand in creating this document? Is the author responding to some other writer or document?

## PARAGRAPH BY PARAGRAPH

1. Humility, and the greatness of America: “A rising nation, spread over a wide and fruitful land, traversing all the seas with the rich productions of their industry, engaged in commerce with nations who feel power and forget right, advancing rapidly to destinies beyond the reach of mortal eye—when I contemplate these transcendent objects, and see the honor, the happiness, and the hopes of this beloved country committed to the issue and the auspices of this day, I shrink from the contemplation, and humble myself before the magnitude of the undertaking.”
2. The contest of 1800 is now over; it’s a time for unity: “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.”
3. What makes the U.S. different from other nations?
4. Jefferson’s political philosophy (14-point list): “the creed of our political faith, the text of civic instruction, the touchstone by which to try the services of those we trust”
5. I can’t possibly be George Washington (humility again)

## Close Analysis, Paragraph 3

Let us, then, with courage and confidence pursue our own Federal and Republican principles, our attachment to union and representative government. Kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe; too high-minded to endure the degradations of the others; possessing a chosen country, with room enough for our descendants to the thousandth and thousandth generation; entertaining a due sense of our equal right to the use of our own faculties, to the acquisitions of our own industry, to honor and confidence from our fellow-citizens, resulting not from birth, but from our actions and their sense of them; enlightened by a benign religion, professed, indeed, and practiced in various forms, yet all of them inculcating honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man; acknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here and his greater happiness hereafter -- with all these blessings, what more is necessary to make us a happy and a prosperous people? Still one thing more, fellow-citizens -- a wise and frugal Government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned. This is the sum of good government, and this is necessary to close the circle of our felicities.

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## Close Analysis, Paragraph 4 Jefferson's Fourteen Points

About to enter, fellow-citizens, on the exercise of duties which comprehend everything dear and valuable to you, it is proper you should understand what I deem the essential principles of our Government, and consequently those which ought to shape its Administration. I will compress them within the narrowest compass they will bear, stating the general principle, but not all its limitations.

1. Equal and exact justice to all men, of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political;
2. peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none;
- 3. the support of the State governments in all their rights, as the most competent administrations for our domestic concerns and the surest bulwarks against antirepublican tendencies;**
- 4. the preservation of the General Government in its whole constitutional vigor, as the sheet anchor of our peace at home and safety abroad;**
5. a jealous care of the right of election by the people -- a mild and safe corrective of abuses which are lopped by the sword of revolution where peaceable remedies are unprovided;
6. absolute acquiescence in the decisions of the majority, the vital principle of republics, from which is no appeal but to force, the vital principle and immediate parent of despotism;
7. a well-disciplined militia, our best reliance in peace and for the first moments of war till regulars may relieve them;

## Close Analysis, Paragraph 4 (cont'd.) Jefferson's Fourteen Points

8. the supremacy of the civil over the military authority;
9. economy in the public expense, that labor may be lightly burthened;
- 10. the honest payment of our debts and sacred preservation of the public faith;**
- 11. encouragement of agriculture, and of commerce as its handmaid;**
12. the diffusion of information and arraignment of all abuses at the bar of the public reason;
13. freedom of religion; freedom of the press, and freedom of person under the protection of the habeas corpus,
14. and trial by juries impartially selected.

These principles form the bright constellation which has gone before us and guided our steps through an age of revolution and reformation. The wisdom of our sages and blood of our heroes have been devoted to their attainment. They should be the creed of our political faith, the text of civic instruction, the touchstone by which to try the services of those we trust; and should we wander from them in moments of error or of alarm, let us hasten to retrace our steps and to regain the road which alone leads to peace, liberty, and safety.

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For longer documents (like Noah Webster’s 1802 Independence Day address):

- Can students read it whole (in advance)—or is it too complex?
- Select a few paragraphs for closer analysis (again, content and context)

- Why was Webster delivering this address?
- What problems did he think the United States was facing—and what caused them?
- What did Webster think of Jefferson's description of America's virtues?
- What solutions or answers, if any, did Webster offer to the problems he diagnosed?
- What else do you notice in this document?

## Problem: Passing of the Revolutionary Generation

In the lapse of twenty six years, since the date of our sovereignty, a large proportion of the inhabitants of the United States have been changed. Most of the civil and military characters, conspicuous in the revolution, are now in their graves; and a new generation has arisen to guide the public councils, and to guard the blessings which their fathers have purchased. The experience of the same period of time, has drawn in question some opinions respecting the superior excellence of a republican government; and clouded the brilliant prospect which animated the hopes of the revolutionary patriots. Numerous unexpected difficulties in the management of this species of government, and multifarious disappointments, under the best administrations have arisen in thick succession, to confound the wisdom, and blast the hopes, of the most discerning friends of their country. To trace the causes of these disappointments, is to prevent a repetition of them, or prepare ourselves to meet them with advantage.

# Noah Webster, Oration on the Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, 1802

Problem: “Our revolutionary schemes were too visionary.”

Nations, like individuals, may be misled by an ardent enthusiasm, which allures them from the standard of practical wisdom, and commits them to the guidance of **visionary projectors**. By fondly cherishing the opinion that they enjoy some superior advantages of knowledge, or local situation, the rulers of a state may lose the benefit of history and observation, the surest guides in political affairs; and delude themselves with the belief, that they have wisdom to elude or power to surmount the obstacles which have baffled the exertions of their predecessors.

**Such are the mistakes of reformers; and such have been the illusions of the enthusiastic friends of the revolution.** Their imagination has been warmed with the belief, that the sequestered position of America, would exempt her citizens from the troubles which harrass Europe; that a general diffusion of knowledge, and superior attainments in policy, would enable them to form constitutions of government, less defective than any which have preceded them; and that their public virtue would secure a faithful, uncorrupt, and impartial administration. Whenever a doubt has been suggested, respecting the duration of a free republic, it has been repelled by one general answer, that the system of representation, supposed to be a modern improvement in free constitutions, is calculated effectually to obviate the evils which other states have experienced, from legislatures consisting of popular assemblies.

## **Problem: International Entanglements and Possible Invasion**

But does the wide ocean that rolls between the two continents, detach our citizens from a deep interest in the affairs of Europe? Will our commerce, a productive source of our wealth, permit a separation of interests? And will not our prejudices and our wants, in spite of reason and patriotism, continue, for a long period, to link us to the policy, the opinions, and the interest of European nations?

But if we had the power to insulate our country, our interest, and our hearts, can we assure ourselves that our citizens supereminent wisdom, to frame systems of government, which shall be proof against the insidious advances of corruption, and the bold assaults of faction? What has prevented the enlightened sages of antiquity, from viewing man in all his attitudes; and learning all the possible modes, by which the human passions operate on society and government? After the experience of four or five thousand years, and numberless forms of government, how should it happen to be reserved for the Americans to discover the great secret, which has eluded all former inquiry, of infusing into a political constitution, the quality of imperishable durability? Is not the pretension to such superior light and wisdom in our citizens, rather an evidence of pride, self-sufficiency, and want of wisdom? **If Moses, with an uncommon portion of talents, seconded by divine aid, could not secure his institutions from neglect and corruption, what right have we to expect, that the labors of our lawgivers will be more successful?**

## Problem: Faction

It is said, however, that we have constitutions of government, or fundamental compacts, which proscribe abuses of power, by defining the exact limits of right and duty, and controlling both rulers and people. **But how long will a constitutional barrier resist the assaults of faction?** From the nature of things, the words of a fundamental code must be general, to comprehend cases which cannot possibly be specified; and of course, liable to be extended, or frittered away by construction. The danger from this quarter is imminent, and hardly admitting of a remedy, when popular jealousy is excited against the constitution, and the rights or the prejudices of the people are to be favored, by enlarging or abridging its powers. When a magistrate becomes more popular than the constitution, he may "draw sin as it were with a cart-rope" in the work of extending his power over the instrument which was intended to restrain usurpation. Whatever vanity and self-confidence may suggest, in favor of the restraints of a paper compact, all history and uniform experience evince, that against men who command the current of popular confidence, the best constitution has not the strength of a cobweb. **The undisguised encroachments of power give the alarm and excite resistance . . . but the approaches of despotism, under cover of popular favor, are insidious and often deceive the most discerning friends of a free government.**

## Problem: Weakening of Christianity

If there is a possibility of founding a perfectly free government, and giving it permanent duration, it must be raised upon the pure maxims, and supported by the undecaying practice, of that religion, which breathes "peace on earth, and good will to men." That religion is perfectly republican . . . it is calculated to humble the pride and allay the discontents of men . . . it restrains the magistrate from oppression, and the subject from revolt . . . it secures a perfect equality of rights, by enjoining a discharge of all social duties, and a strict subordination to law. The universal prevalence of that religion, in its true spirit, would banish tyranny from the earth. Yet this religion has been perverted, and in many countries, made the basis of a system of ecclesiastical domination, which has enslaved the minds of men, as political power had before enslaved their bodies. **To correct these evils, a set of fanatical reformers, called philosophers, charging that oppression to the religion itself, which sprung only from its abuses, have boldly denied the sacred origin of Christianity, and attempted to extirpate its doctrines and institutions. Strange, indeed, that the zealous advocates of a republican government, should wage an inveterate war against the only system of religious principles, compatible with rational freedom, and calculated to maintain a republican constitution!**

## **Problem: A Naïve Faith in Freedom and Equality**

**How then, can men, exposed to each others power, and wanting each others aid, be free and independent?** If one member of a society is free and independent, all the members must be equally so. In such a community, no restraint could exist, for this would destroy freedom and independence. But in such a state of things, the will of each individual would be his only rule of action, and his will would be supported by his strength. Force then would be the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, and the wills of the weaker must bend to the power of the stronger. A society, therefore, existing in a state of nature, if such a state can be supposed in which there should be no law but individual wills, must necessarily be in perpetual anarchy or despotism. But no such state of society can exist.

. . .

**Equally fallacious is the doctrine of equality, of which much is said, and little understood.** . . . [I]f by equality, writers understand an equal right to distinction, and influence; or if they understand an equal share of talents and bodily powers; in these senses, all men are not equal. . . . There are, and there must be, distinctions among men . . . they are established by nature, as well as by social relations. Age, talents, virtue, public services, the possession of office and certain natural relations, carry with them just claims to distinction, to influence and authority.



## The Solutions: Memory and Virtue

**Let the youth of our country, who were not spectators of the distresses of the war; but who have entered upon the stage of life in time to see the silver locks of the revolutionary patriots . . .** let these ponder the history and listen to the tale of their fathers' sufferings, and their country's danger. Let them read the animated and energetic addresses of the first American Congress, whose firmness and eloquence would have honored a Roman Senate . . . Let them early imbibe the manly and dignified sentiments of that illustrious council which pointed out the road to independence . . . Let them catch a portion of the patriotic flame . . . and by learning to revere the sentiments, may they be led to follow the example, of those venerable sages . . . Let them review, in imagination, the heroic achievements of the American troops . . . Let them transport their imaginations to the hills of Bennington, the fields of Saratoga, the almost inaccessible cliffs of Stony Point, and the plains of Yorktown where the armies of America closed their triumphs; there let them admire the heroism of the citizen soldier, and catch the spirit of victory. Then let them cast their eyes upon a shattered army, retreating before a triumphant foe . . . See the magnanimous WASHINGTON, almost deserted and driven to despair, rallying a small band of half-clothed, dispirited troops, whose naked feet, lacerated with the frost bound clods, stained the road with blood, as they marched to the victories of Trenton and Princeton! . . . Let them consider that upon them has devolved the task of defending and improving the rich inheritance, purchased by their fathers. Nor let them view this inheritance of National Freedom and Independence, as a fortune that is to be squandered away, in ease and riot, but as an estate to be preserved only by industry, toil and vigilance. . . .

# Song, For the Anniversary of American Independence, 1819

## SONG,

FOR THE ANNIVERSARY OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE, 1819.

TUNE—"Ye Mariners of England."

1. ALL hail, blest independence!  
We greet thy natal day;  
Discordant passions all be gone,  
And gentle peace bear sway.  
May social love and harmony  
And festive joy abound,  
While each voice  
Shall rejoice  
To raise the cheerful sound,  
And grateful hearts harmonious join  
To raise the cheerful sound.
2. Then come, all true Columbians;  
Come, hail th' auspicious morn;  
This day our fathers dared be free,  
This day our realm was born.  
Soon our immortal WASHINGTON  
The glorious prize obtain'd,  
Then rejoice,  
Every voice,  
For our Freedom, which he gain'd,  
For the glorious Liberty he bought,  
And the Freedom which he gain'd.
3. Long may our honored Patriots  
Enjoy most happy days; [hands,  
For blessings, which came thro' their  
They well deserve our praise.  
We but for them had been debas'd,  
But we're from bondage freed;  
Now we're free,  
Let us be  
A people blest indeed,  
A happy nation which the Lord  
Shall own, and blest indeed.
4. Still be all hearts rejoicing  
In righteousness and peace,  
Till moon and stars shall fade away,  
And earth and time shall cease,  
And day's bright orb refuse to pour  
His radiance through the sky;  
Then may we  
Rise and see  
The happier worlds on high,  
And join in never ending songs  
In happier worlds on high.

E. W. ALLEN, Printer, Newburyport.

- A very famous letter, in which Jefferson calls US slavery
- a “wolf by the ears” (what does he mean?)
- Specific context? (Missouri Compromise debate, 1819-1820)
- Larger context? (the paradox of slavery)
- What (or whom) does he perceive as the problem?
- What (if anything) does he perceive as a solution?

## Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes

Monticello Apr. 22. 20.

. . . but this momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. it is hushed indeed for the moment. but this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence. a geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper. I can say with conscious truth that there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would, to relieve us from this heavy reproach, in any practicable way. the cession of that kind of property, for so it is misnamed, is a bagatelle which would not cost me in a second thought, if, in that way, a general emancipation and expatriation could be effected: and, gradually, and with due sacrifices, I think it might be.

## Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes (cont'd)

but, as it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other. of one thing I am certain, that as the passage of slaves from one state to another would not make a slave of a single human being who would not be so without it, so their diffusion over a greater surface would make them individually happier and proportionally facilitate the accomplishment of their emancipation, by dividing the burthen on a greater number of co-adjutors. an abstinence too from this act of power would remove the jealousy excited by the undertaking of Congress, to regulate the condition of the different descriptions of men composing a state. this certainly is the exclusive right of every state, which nothing in the constitution has taken from them and given to the general government. could congress, for example say that the Non-freemen of Connecticut, shall be freemen, or that they shall not emigrate into any other state?

## Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes (cont'd)

I regret that I am now to die in the belief that the useless sacrifice of themselves, by the generation of '76. to acquire self government and happiness to their country, is to be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons, and that my only consolation is to be that I live not to weep over it. if they would but dispassionately weigh the blessings they will throw away against an abstract principle more likely to be effected by union than by scission, they would pause before they would perpetrate this act of suicide on themselves and of treason against the hopes of the world.

What has become of the optimism of Jefferson's 1801 inaugural address?

## Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes (cont'd)

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**Final slide.**

**Thank you**