



The Revolution of 1800

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Framing Question

How did Thomas Jefferson use his first inaugural address to bridge the political divide generated by his election and redirect presidential policy?

Understanding

The presidential election of 1800 was an intense political contest. Pitting two clearly opposing parties against each other for the first time, the Federalists and the Democratic Republicans fought in what some historians have called the dirtiest campaign in US politics. Referred to by Thomas Jefferson in 1819 as “The Revolution of 1800,” the election results marked the first peaceful change of executive party in the US and confirmed the role of the electorate in choosing the American president.

Text

[Thomas Jefferson, first inaugural address, 1801](#) (excerpts)

Background

By the late 1790s, two clearly different political parties had developed in the United States. The Federalists envisioned an America grounded in the principles of commercial development, including an economic system based on the British model and a strong national government that could control the various states and their powerful ambitions. John Adams and Alexander Hamilton represented these ideas. In opposition stood the Democratic Republicans, who promoted an agrarian economy supported by manufactures, economic ties with several foreign countries, and strong state governments that would balance not only the federal government but each other. Thomas Jefferson came to represent the ideas of the Democratic Republicans. Hamilton saw Jefferson as a dangerous radical whose policies would bring about the secession of New England and the dissolution of the US; Jefferson saw Hamilton as a man whose strategies would make the US a satellite country of Britain and negate the hard-won victory of the American Revolution. Each man saw in the views of his opponent the downfall of America.



Partisan newspapers for both sides took up the cause with sharply critical and even slanderous articles about the opposition. Picnics, barbeques, and parades advertised the benefits of party ideals and the dangers of those opposed. In multiple state and local elections throughout the 1790s the Federalists and Democratic Republicans pitted themselves against each other with varying results, and by the end of the decade each side saw the other as a clear threat to the future of the US.

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

The 1800 presidential election was different from those that had come before. Both parties actively campaigned throughout 1800 at the state and local levels, pointing out the dangers in their opponents' views. In addition, several states (there were 16 states by 1800) had switched their presidential voting systems to ones of overall popular vote rather than voting by district, and in some cases this made a significant difference in the awarding of electoral votes. Through the Electoral College system the Founders had intended for state legislators to choose electors and therefore the president, but 1800 marked the first significant influence of popular vote totals in the presidential election.

The presidential election of 1800 saw for the first time clearly identified political opponents. On December 3, election day, electors chose between four major candidates: John Adams (Federalist and current president); Thomas Jefferson (Democratic Republican and current vice president); Aaron Burr (Democratic Republican and former US Senator from New York); and Charles Pinckney (Federalist and former US minister to France). The electoral ballots submitted by the states to Congress were, by law, not to be opened until February 11, 1801, but their contents leaked to the press. Although the public supported Jefferson to be president, Burr and Jefferson tied in the Electoral College vote. How could this happen?

In 1800, prior to the passage of the 12th amendment, each state elector cast two votes without specifying which was for president and which for vice president, and the votes were then tallied. Whoever received the most votes was declared president with the vice presidency going to the second highest candidate. Why did the Founders put this process into effect in the Constitution? They wanted the presidency to be a contest between individuals, not political factions or parties. If two candidates received a majority of votes but were tied, the decision was referred to the House of Representatives. Once in the House of Representatives, each state had one vote, and the candidate with the most votes was declared president.

Jefferson, as vice president and Speaker of the House, announced the totals of the first vote on February 11, 1801. Jefferson and Burr tied, and this result surprised no one. The House had agreed earlier to remain in session and to take up no other business until the election was decided, so the balloting continued. Fifteen ballots were taken on that first day, with Jefferson always one vote shy of victory.

Many waited with great apprehension to see if it would be possible to shift the political policies of the US government. The political parties of 1800 were not organized the way modern political parties are — they were more like modern political interest groups — and they were not an accepted part of a presidential election. In 1800 these political groups involved changing loyalties, back room deals, and political patronage.



Jefferson was seen by his opponents as trying to topple the federal government.

New Hampshire	6	6		
Massachusetts	16	16		
Rhode Island	4	3	1	
Connecticut	9	9		
Delaware	4	4		
New York	12	12		
New Jersey		7	7	
Pennsylvania	8	8	7	7
Virginia		3	3	
Maryland	5	5	5	5
North Carolina	21	21		
South Carolina	4	4		
Georgia	3	3	4	4
South Carolina	3	3		
Georgia	4	4		
TOTAL	73	73	65	64

Tally of electoral votes for the 1800 Presidential election, February 11, 1801.

Since both Jefferson and Burr were Democratic Republicans, the Federalists had clearly lost the presidential election, but they felt they could, through political dealing and negotiations, decide which man would be president. Once the voting began with no clear sign of a winner, political threats seemed more serious than ever. There was talk of military action to prevent the Federalists from blocking Jefferson from taking office; talk of holding another national election in hopes of different results; talk of an assassination plot against Jefferson; talk of the secession of Virginia if Jefferson was not allowed to take office; personal threats against Federalist electors; and talk of a deal between the Federalists and Jefferson to give him the election if he would agree to continue Federalist policies. Finally, on February 17, Delaware and South Carolina abstained from voting, allowing Jefferson a clear majority. Jefferson was declared the winner on the 36th ballot.

On March 4, 1801, Thomas Jefferson walked from his boarding house to the Senate Chamber. John Adams had already left Washington, and as was the custom at the time, Jefferson gave his inaugural address before taking the oath as president. Uncomfortable speaking in public, he addressed an audience of approximately 1000 people for fewer than 30 minutes. The speech was printed in the newspapers the next day and was well received by members of both parties.

The new nation was only 11 years old and had never had a president under the Constitution who was not a supporter of the Federalist ideas. As you work with this document, think of how Jefferson uses language in an attempt to ease the wounds of this bitter election, focusing on similarities rather than differences. Pay attention to his use of the terms “republican” (a believer in a government of the people) and “federalist” (a believer in a union of states under a central government) as separate from the names of political parties. Through his beliefs about government and his views for the future of America, note how Jefferson seeks to redirect the political culture of the country, moving from government by an elite group based mainly in New England to government by the people with a broader geographical base. As he closes his speech, look for ways Jefferson seeks to connect to America’s founding principles.

Text Analysis

Excerpt 1

In this excerpt Jefferson connects with his audience and recognizes the other members of government present. Pay attention to the tone Jefferson works to establish in this introduction.

Activity: Vocabulary

Learn definitions by exploring how words are used in context.



...(1) Called upon to undertake the duties of the first Executive office of our country, I avail myself of the presence of that portion of my fellow citizens which is here assembled to express my grateful thanks for the favor with which they have been pleased to look towards me, to declare a sincere consciousness that the task is above my talents, and that I approach it with those anxious and awful presentiments which the greatness of the charge, and the weakness of my powers so justly inspire.... (2) Utterly indeed should I despair, did not the presence of many, whom I here see, remind me, that, in the other high authorities provided by our constitution, I shall find resources of wisdom, of virtue, and of zeal, on which to rely under all difficulties. (3) To you, then, gentlemen, who are charged with the sovereign functions of legislation, and to those associated with you, I look with encouragement for that guidance and support which may enable us to steer with safety the vessel in which we are all embarked, amidst the conflicting elements of a troubled world.

1. In the first sentence, Jefferson expresses three thoughts about his election to the presidency. What are they?

2. Is Jefferson planning to govern alone? How do you know?

3. In sentence three, to what branch of government is Jefferson reaching out in order to work with them?

4. Based on sentences one through three, what tone is Jefferson establishing with this introduction? How does he establish that tone?

Excerpt 2

In this excerpt Jefferson reaches out to the Federalist Party members in order to bridge the distance between his party, the Democratic Republicans, and the Federalists. How does Jefferson try to deemphasize the differences between the parties?

(4) During the contest of opinion through which we have past, the animation of discussions and of exertions has sometimes worn an aspect which might impose on strangers unused to think freely, and to speak and to write what they think; but this being now decided by the voice of the nation, announced according to the rules of the constitution all will of course arrange themselves under the will of the law, and unite in common efforts for the common good. (5) All too will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will, to be rightful, must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal laws must protect, and to violate would be oppression.... (6) And let us reflect that having banished from our land that religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered, we have yet gained little if we countenance a political intolerance, as despotic, as wicked, and capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions.... (7) every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. (8) We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. (9) We are all republicans: we are all federalists. (10) 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.... (11) I believe this, on the contrary, the strongest government on earth. (12) I believe it the only one, where every man, at the call of the law, would fly to the standard of the law, and would meet invasions of the public order as his own personal concern. (13) — Sometimes it is said that man cannot be trusted with the government of himself. (14) Can he then be trusted with the government of others? (15) Or have we found angels, in the form of kings, to govern him? (16) Let history answer this question.

5. In sentence four Jefferson refers to the recent election. How does he characterize the election of 1800?

6. Who are the “strangers” he refers to?

7. In sentence four, what does Jefferson say that the nation must now do after this intense election? Why?

8. In sentence five Jefferson refers to the rights of the majority as well as those of the minority. How does he compare the two?

9. Why does Jefferson make this statement about majority and minority?

10. In sentence six Jefferson pleads against “political intolerance.” To what does he compare this political intolerance? What is the effect of this comparison?

11. In sentence seven Jefferson uses juxtaposition — placing two ideas close together, usually for comparison — to emphasize the idea of political tolerance. Identify the two ideas and explain the effect of this comparison.

12. In sentence eight Jefferson uses antithesis, setting two ideas in direct contrast. How does this support sentence seven, encouraging the idea of political tolerance?

13. In sentence nine what is the significance of the fact that “republicans” and “federalists” are not capitalized?

14. Sentence nine is perhaps the best known quotation from this speech. By saying, “We are all republicans: we are all federalists,” how does Jefferson emphasize the idea of political tolerance? How does this sentence contrast with sentences seven and eight?

Excerpt 3

Jefferson defines the roles of good government.

(17) Let us then, with courage and confidence, pursue our own federal and republican principles; our attachment to union and representative government. (18) 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 practised 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? (19) 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. (20) This is the sum of good government; and this is necessary to close the circle of our felicities.

15. In sentence 17, Jefferson works to get all members of his audience committed to support of the government. How does he seek to accomplish this?

16. In sentence 18 Jefferson enumerates the blessings of America. What are some of the things he lists?

17. When in sentence 18 Jefferson enumerates the blessings of America, he ends the sentence with a rhetorical question — “with all these blessings, what more is necessary to make us a happy and a prosperous people?” What is the purpose of this long sentence and question?

18. In sentence 19 Jefferson outlines responsibilities of the government. What are they?

Excerpt 4

Jefferson clarifies his view of government, explaining his victory in this election as an extension of the American Revolutionary principles.

(21) About to enter, fellow citizens, on the exercise of duties which comprehend every thing 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. (22) I will compress them within the narrowest compass they will bear, stating the general principle, but not all its limitations.— Equal and exact justice to all men, of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political:— peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none:— the support of the state governments in all their rights, as the most competent administrations for our domestic concerns, and the surest bulwarks against anti-republican tendencies:— the preservation of the General government in its whole constitutional vigor, as the sheet anchor of our peace at home, and safety abroad:— 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:— 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 the despotism:— a well disciplined

militia, our best reliance in peace, and for the first moments of war, till regulars may relieve them:— the supremacy of the civil over the military authority:— economy in the public expence, that labor may be lightly burthened:— the honest payment of our debts and sacred preservation of the public faith:— encouragement of agriculture, and of commerce as its handmaid:— the diffusion of information, and arraignment of all abuses at the bar of the public reason:— freedom of religion; freedom of the press; and freedom of person, under the protection of the Habeas Corpus:— and trial by juries impartially selected. (23) These principles form the bright constellation, which has gone before us and guided our steps through an age of revolution and reformation. (24) 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.

Activity: Jefferson's Presidency

Examine the ideas that Jefferson puts forth to define his administration.



19. In this excerpt Jefferson proceeds to outline his understanding of the principles of government. In sentence 22, he lists them. Why does Jefferson provide such a detailed list?

20. In sentence 22, Jefferson speaks of “entangling alliances with none.” This phrasing was attributed to Washington’s farewell address, and even though the two men shared the same sentiment, Jefferson actually made the statement. Why did Jefferson refer back to this idea of Washington’s?

21. In sentence 23, to what previous event does Jefferson link the listed elements from sentence 22?

22. According to Jefferson, adherence to the principles listed in sentence 22 will lead to what three results?

Excerpt 5

In closing his speech, Jefferson ties his presidency to the legacy of George Washington and the Revolution and focuses on his job ahead.

(25) I have learnt to expect that it will rarely fall to the lot of imperfect man to retire from this station with the reputation, and the favor, which bring him into it. (26) Without pretensions to that high confidence you reposed in our first and greatest revolutionary character, whose pre-eminent 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. (27) I shall often go wrong through defect of judgment. (28) When right, I shall often be thought wrong by those whose positions will not command a view of the whole ground. (29) I ask your indulgence for my own errors, which will never be intentional; and your support against the errors of others, who may condemn what they would not if seen in all its parts.

(30) Relying then on the patronage of your good will, I advance with obedience to the work, ready to retire from it whenever you become sensible how much better choices it is in your power to make. (31) And may that infinite power, which rules the destinies of the universe, lead our councils to what is best, and give them a favorable issue for your peace and prosperity.

Activity: Review

Review the points Jefferson makes in his inaugural address.



23. In sentence 25, what does Jefferson say are his expectations of being president?

24. In sentence 26, Jefferson alludes (refers to something without actually naming it) to a previous president. Who is it?

25. Look at sentences 25 and 26 together. When Jefferson refers to a loss of reputation as president, to which former president does he refer?

26. Why does Jefferson allude to this man in sentence 26?

27. In sentences 27, 28, and 29, Jefferson anticipates errors that he may make as president. How does he explain his potential errors?

28. In sentence 30, Jefferson moves to close his speech. What is he going to do next?

29. What is Jefferson asking for in sentence 31?

Glossary

avail: use to advantage

awful: filled with reverence

presentiments: former opinion

zeal: eagerness

sovereign: supreme

banished: driven away

despotic: unlimited in power

havoc: widespread destruction

degradations: reduction in value

acquisitions: gains

benign: gracious

inculcating: frequently teaching

dispensations: distributions

frugal: thrifty

felicities: blessings

bulwarks: defenses

lopped: cut off

acquiescence: quiet assent

economy: careful spending

handmaid: assistant

diffusion: spreading out

arraignment: accusing

impartially: without preference

creed: system of beliefs

pretensions: false claims

patronage: special support

Text

- Thomas Jefferson, "III. First Inaugural Address, 4 March 1801," Founders Online, National Archives (<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-33-02-0116-0004> [last update: 2014-09-30]). Source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 33, 17 February–30 April 1801, ed. Barbara B. Oberg. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 148–152.

Images

- John Marshall, "Th Jefferson," ink drawing, early 19th century. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004662010/>
- "MAD TOM IN A RAGE. Federalist cartoon depicting Jefferson as a brandy-soaked anarchist tearing down the pillars of government." Illustration, 1801. <https://history.mcc.edu/wordpress/history/2014/03/26/mad-tom/>
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