

The Early End of Consensus

Bitter partisanship began soon after George Washington left the scene

Review by Jill Ogline

Two hundred and four years before Democrats lambasted George Bush as a destroyer of liberties, Thomas Jefferson and his disciples (known, in one of the great ironies of American political history, as Republicans) leveled very similar charges at their own political nemesis, John Adams, skewering him for egotistical arrogance, monarchical ambitions, and strategic warmongering calculated to raise taxes, increase federal power, and justify egregious violations of civil liberties.

Like Bush, Adams was a wartime president, haunted by the spectre of the French Revolution and harassed by repeated crises in Franco-American relations. An undeclared state of war with the young nation's old revolutionary ally, known as the Quasi War, plagued Adams's four-year term in office, prompting the passage of some of the most vilified legislation in American history. The Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 legalized the deportation or disenfranchisement of foreign-born residents and criminalized "false, scandalous, and malicious writings against the Government of the United States." Unabashedly employed by Federalist officials to silence Republican newspapers critical of the administration in the name of national security, the Sedition Act generated an enormous political backlash against its architects.

The United States has experienced many contentious election cycles over the past two centuries: moments of reckoning that accelerated the nation's descent into Civil War, repudiated

A
MAGNIFICENT
CATASTROPHE
The Tumultuous
Election of 1800,
America's First
Presidential
Campaign
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the promise of Reconstruction, and beat back populism's challenge to the status quo. But Edward J. Larson's *A Magnificent Catastrophe* argues that the 1800 race for the presidency carved out the very channels through which all subsequent generations of Americans have expressed their political

differences. It legitimized partisanship, jettisoning George Washington's vision of consensus government by elites in favor of the rough-and-tumble world of party politics.

Today, we take it for granted that party provides the lens through which we look at politics. The very idea of consensus government seems fanciful, even absurd. After all, the founders themselves, although linked by bonds forged in the common fires of revolution, hardly shared a single vision for America. Diverse and conflicting attitudes toward slavery, federal/state jurisdiction, state churches, and economic expansion sharply divided the first generation of American political leaders. But prior to 1800, like-minded statesmen interacted through informal circles of association rather than through official party networks. Candidates for office did not take their qualifications and their criticisms to the stump; rather, they cultivated a detached posture of disinterested statesmanship. But the old model of discretion and consensus creaked under the weight of hardening divisions between those who defined the Revolution's legacy as one of "liberty and order" and those who viewed repeated talk of order and stability as a threat to the endurance of the "spirit of '76." When Washington issued his famous warning against "the baneful effects of the spirit of party" in his 1796 Farewell Address, he aimed his words not only at distant

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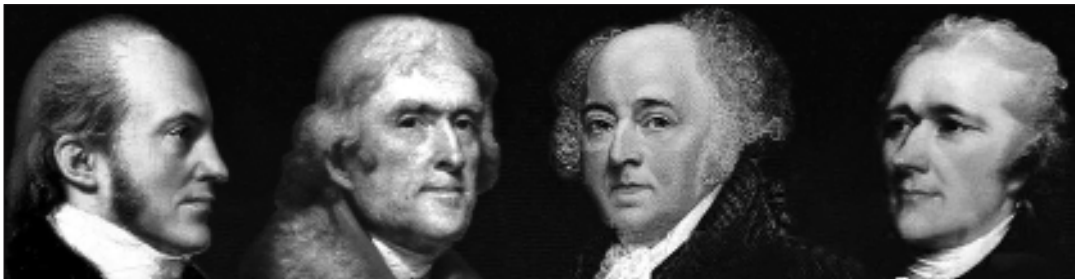
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posterity but also at the men he knew best.

Larson traces partisanship from its stealthy ascendance throughout Washington's second term to its triumphant emergence in 1800 in a heated four-man struggle for the presidency. As the nation's first contested election, the battle among Jefferson, Adams, Aaron Burr, and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney prefigured many aspects of electioneering that will be only too familiar to 21st-century Americans. Larson quickly disabuses his readers of any tendency to romanticize earlier generations of politicians as more high-minded than our own, spinning a tale replete with yellow journalism, intrigue, party machines, scandalmongering, betrayal, and personal attacks. With financial support from Jefferson, Republican newspaperman James Callender published a series of essays

invoked the mantle of national security to justify imprisoning dissident newspaper editors and threatening to deport boatloads of French émigrés. The backdrop of war lurked behind every discussion and decision. The institution of the Electoral College focused attention upon several battleground states while deflecting it from others, and Jefferson's High Federalist opponents turned to populist anti-intellectualism to argue that his devotion to philosophy and science should disqualify him from the presidency.

Adams was no George W. Bush, nor is John Kerry a modern-day incarnation of Jefferson, but the election of 1800 did create, in Larson's words, the "popular, two-party republic" that, for better or worse, chose partisanship over consensus. An unexpected tie between Jeffer-



Players in the presidential election of 1800: candidates Aaron Burr, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams, and Federalist leader Alexander Hamilton

assailing Adams as "a repulsive pedant," a "gross hypocrite," and a "hideous hermaphroditical character," allegations that promptly won him nine months' imprisonment under the Sedition Act. Federalist papers, for their part, repeatedly spoke of the "fangs of Jefferson," suggesting that an administration headed by the Virginian would be "profaned by the impious orgies of the Goddess of Reason, personated as in France by some common prostitute."

Though Larson draws no comparisons with the contemporary political scene, 21st-century Americans are perhaps better positioned to understand this pivotal election than any generation since that of the participants themselves. A sense of urgency, of American values at stake, enlivened debates over alleged misuse of the military, the proper place of religion in public life, and governmental measures that

son and Burr, his own ostensible running mate, threw the election into the House of Representatives, where Federalists attempted to leverage and extend their power through collaborating with Burr to frustrate the Republican electorate's clear intention to place Jefferson in the highest seat. Although enough of them eventually broke ranks to ensure the Virginian's election, by 1804 the newly ratified 12th Amendment prevented any more contests between allies by requiring electors to cast separate votes for presidential and vice presidential candidates. Bipartisan administrations disappeared from the political landscape.

A Magnificent Catastrophe offers a thoughtful and extended commentary on the gains and losses inherent in partisanship's triumph: vindictive struggles for power balanced by new avenues for voters to shape the policies and

priorities of their government. Party politics define the contemporary American political system. But the fact that the supposed dissolution of the middle ground horrifies our national commentators suggests that the con-

sensus model is not completely dead. Americans still long to share some patch of common ground with their political opponents. As the 2008 campaign cycle accelerates, we are still, in some senses, replaying the contest of 1800.