


America Afire: Jefferson, Adams, and the Revolutionary Election of 1800

Bernard A. Weisberger

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"Bernard Weisberger has once again brought the past to life. If you want to experience the crossfire of intellectual and political ferment at the dawn of our Republic, open these pages and start ducking."

--Bill Moyers

America Afire is the powerful story of the election of 1800, arguably the most important election in America's history and certainly one of the most hotly disputed. American self-government was still an endangered experiment seventeen years after the War of Independence had been won. As 1800 dawned, the sacrifices and fraternity of "the spirit of '76" had vanished, replaced by bitter and angry rivalries. Former allies Adams and Jefferson, president and vice president, now Federalist versus Republican, squared off in a vicious contest to win the fourth presidential election under the Constitution.

The Constitution was still new and untried. The young republic lacked a cohesive national identity, the strength to confront aggressive foreign powers in a world racked by war and revolution, and a stable system for working out political differences electorally. Political parties were new, unforeseen, and unwelcome creations. Small wonder that no one was prepared for the partisan warfare that threatened to rage out of control. Or for the broken friendships, scandals, riots, slanders, beatings, and jailings -- elements of a crucial and perilous election that sparked a constitutional crisis and threats of civil war.

Ultimately, the surprise is not that problems arose, but that the United States emerged from them a stronger nation. For when Adams stepped down from the presidency peacefully in 1801, it was the first time in modern history that a leader had voluntarily turned over power to his political enemy. This was truly a revolution and a triumph for democracy "made in America."

Scrupulously researched and eminently readable, *America Afire* tells the tale of a watershed event in American history and lends a valuable new perspective on the early years of the United States, as well as the genesis and nature of our political system.

America Afire: Jefferson, Adams, and the Revolutionary Election of 1800 Details

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From Reader Review America Afire: Jefferson, Adams, and the Revolutionary Election of 1800 for online ebook

Brad Lucht says

Amazing story of the election of 1800, when President John Adams (Federalist) campaigned against his Vice President, Thomas Jefferson (Republican).

This book chronicles how the two party system in American politics came to be, and how the divisions of today seem tame compared to the bitter fight that took place just 24 years after our country gained its independence. Indeed, the election of 1800 was a fight for the very future of our country.

Eric_W says

The American news media really did us all a disservice in the 2000 election with its caterwauling about constitutional crises, and how the world would come to an end because they were not allowed to predict the outcome of the election before the polls closed and – heaven forbid – we might have to wait a few weeks to discover the outcome. A shame they never read any history.

Our past is riddled with contests much more contentious than those of recent vintage. Take 1800, for example. John Adams must have sulked all the way home in his carriage. He had decided not to show up for the inauguration of Thomas Jefferson as the new president in 1800. Jefferson had been his vice-president and close Revolutionary War friend, but the two had become enemies after trading acrimonious charges during a campaign that made today's mud slinging tame by comparison. In the previous election of 1796, Jefferson had come in second to Adams and was therefore de facto his second-in-command. The Twelfth Amendment made the change to the present system as a result of the 1800 election. We owe Adams a substantial debt of gratitude. His peaceful relinquishment of the reigns [pun intended] of government to his political enemy Jefferson was the first such example in modern history. The catastrophe of the French Revolution was fresh in everyone's mind, and the American Revolution was barely finished. Voter turnout in 1800 was miserable. One scholar has estimated that only 14% of eligible voters in Connecticut bothered to vote, a number that makes current participation look positively marvelous. The battle for the electoral votes was bitter, with state legislatures fighting. In Pennsylvania, for example, a Federalist Senate, elected for four years, had a bare majority, and they refused to recognize the clear sentiment for the Republicans in the state and they refused to approve the Republican slate of electors. Similarly, South Carolina politicians appealed for the allegiance of electors who were not obligated to vote for anyone. It was even possible that Charles Pinckney might corner enough votes — they despised Aaron Burr — to become president. After the dust had settled, there was a tie between Jefferson and Burr for electoral votes. The enmity between Jefferson and Adams had begun much earlier. The toppling of structures and institutions during the French Revolution disturbed Adams, a traditionalist, and he injudiciously published a series of letters in 1791 that made him appear to be supporting the monarchy and distinctions of rank. Jefferson republished Thomas Paine's (the radical democrat and agnostic) Rights of Man writing an approving introduction. This looked like a calculated slam against Adams (both Adams and Jefferson were in Washington's cabinet). "No one could more sincerely disavow partisan purposes than Jefferson, or be more persistent in apparently pursuing them." Throw in Hamilton and his agitation for a national bank, something that Jefferson and Madison both feared, and the factional lines began to form. It would have all fallen apart sooner except that Washington was persuaded to remain for a second term. Weisberger does a wonderful and fascinating job of setting the stage for these historic events. He describes how the roots of factions were already present in the differing commercial values of the northern, middle and southern states: New England seeking maritime trade; New York,

Pennsylvania and New Jersey having rich farms and produce to sell; and the South, living on a pile of credit from tobacco and cotton agents in England and terribly afraid of any tampering with slavery or speculation that might ruin their decadent way of life. A “barely united” States that had hardly any infrastructure. Travel was horribly uncomfortable, postal service slow and expensive (the recipient would pay the bill, and letter writers filled both sides of the page and then turned the paper at right angles and wrote across what they had already written to save paper and weight).

By Washington's second term, the country had become bitterly divided between the Federalists, led by Hamilton, who supported Great Britain, and the Jeffersonians who applauded the revolution in France before heads began to roll. When France declared war on Briton and Spain, the young United States found itself squeezed between two enemy powers and diplomacy became a tight-rope walk. It's a wonder how any business could be conducted as it took so long for instructions to travel across the Atlantic. The competing philosophies played themselves out in the election of 1800 with Jefferson continuing an anti-British stance and Adams following Hamilton's lead. Many of the issues of 1800 have yet to be resolved even after the very real threat of literal partisan warfare and suppression of civil rights peaked during the Civil War. Even so, without the peaceful transition of Adams giving up the presidency to Jefferson, the history of the United States might well have been very different.

Phillip says

This is a great book for anyone interested in this period of history. I've read a dozen books about the post-Revolution to early Constitution period, and this is one of the best. At first I thought this was a short book, but it hits every topic: Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, Federalist/Republican, Britain/France, Burr, and the rest. I wanted to re-read this again more slowly because it really gives a lot of information about the issues during the Constitutional Convention. Great book!

Ron Rordam says

While there is a great deal of background leading up to the election of 1800, I thought it was necessary for a full understanding of the times. The main take away, the more things change, the more they remain the same. The Hamilton-Jefferson feud really was not different than current political rants.

The only real complaint. It is the "College of William and Mary" NOT William and Mary College.

John says

history

Jeremy says

Amazing book on an extraordinary time in America. Brought to life a lot of interesting characters of the Revolution and made sense out of a convoluted time in our history. Easy and fun to read book.

Tom Meyer says

I started this book thinking that I was merely doing my due diligence and that I probably already knew most of the stuff in it. Was I ever wrong. By treating the Election as his subject, Weisberger is able explore subjects that most biographies of the period miss, especially a number of minor characters, like the Pinckney brothers, who are mentioned in other works but never get their due.

Good reading and highly enlightening.

Laura says

Very interesting saga of the beginnings of the electoral process. Our founding fathers were not the saints we were taught to revere them as, and some were downright anti-democracy.

Todd Van Meter says

"America Afire" is about the contested U.S. Presidential election of 1800, its effects upon our country and political system, and the ability of our nation to weather a constitutional crisis and challenges similar to those we have experienced in recent presidential elections. I've always had an interest in Thomas Jefferson, the staid Virginia gentleman (sometimes), as well as Aaron Burr, the dashing war hero and politically expedient scoundrel. You get both in this well written and enjoyable book, as well as Alexander Hamilton, George Washington, John Adams, and many more of our founding fathers.

Drew says

America Afire: Jefferson, Adams, and the Revolutionary Election of 1800 by Bernard A. Weisberger (2000)

William Monaco says

I think this book had a lot of promise, but in the end it turned out to try to cover too much history. I thought it was a book about the election of 1800, but this wasn't really discussed until 2/3 of the way into the book. I did enjoy the politics and backroom deals, especially when Jefferson and Burr tied in electoral votes. But there was too much minutia leading up to the description of the election. Overall an okay book, but I wouldn't recommend it.
