



THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

CLASSROOM | *Primary Documents*

The Revolution of 1801

Thomas Jefferson's First Inaugural Address : March 4, 1801

On December 13, 2000 — thirty-six days after Americans cast their votes for president of the United States — George W. Bush claimed the White House in a speech from the chamber of the Texas House of Representatives. After a ruling by the Supreme Court effectively ended the election and after Democratic candidate Al Gore conceded one of the closest elections in American history, Bush reached back two centuries to find a precedent for such a contentious and prolonged presidential contest. After the Electoral College produced a tie between Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr in 1800, the election was thrown into the United States House of Representatives. After 36 ballots, president-elect Bush related, the tie was finally broken, and Thomas Jefferson became the nation's chief executive. But both Jefferson and Burr were Republicans. The more significant event was that a Republican won the office over the Federalist candidate, John Adams. In a letter written years later, Jefferson would define this first transfer of political power as the “revolution of 1800.” After the final ballots were counted, however, Jefferson's immediate tasks were to write and present his inaugural address. The address has been called one of the most important in U. S. history, and some of the phrases still ring through the ages.

Objectives

1. To study the significance of the election of 1800, the first transfer of political party power in American history.
2. To examine one of the most important inaugural addresses in presidential history and how it reflected turbulent times and a chief executive's vision for our nation.
3. To reflect on parallels between presidential elections in 1800 and in more recent times.





Thomas Jefferson. White House Collection

Background

Upon the ratification of the Constitution in 1788 came the election of the first president of the United States in the spring of the following year. There seemed little doubt that George Washington – commander in chief of the Continental Army, presiding officer at the Constitutional Convention, and America’s first true hero – would be chosen. Indeed the electoral votes were cast and the decision was unanimous. Washington was inaugurated at New York’s Federal Hall in April 1789.

Historians have well noted Washington’s attempts to remain above party politics and his frequent warnings that factions could only serve to fracture national unity. There were no formal, organized political parties during his administration but two competing political philosophies did arise during his two terms and became more overt during the administration of second president, John Adams. Washington retired after his second term. Washington’s vice president, Adams, defeated Thomas Jefferson in the election of 1796.

Washington and Adams shared the view that a strong federal government was America’s best hope. They and their followers became known as Federalists. The substantial tasks involved in shaping and strengthening a republic spread over vast geographical distances would, in their minds, require guidance that only centralized power could provide. Some historians also believe that Washington and the elite group of men who framed the Constitution feared that local governments were drawing from a well of citizens that did not have the capabilities to lead. These ill-educated men with their narrow parochial interests were not equipped or resolved to look beyond the needs of their sparsely settled regions. In short, they lacked a national vision.

Others disagreed, and they argued that political power, and so political destiny, should reside in the separate states. The best national government was small government: a reduced military force and limited taxes. Those hardworking farmers and merchants at the local level were the same rebels who resisted and defeated a monarchical form of government. They should be left alone to carve out their futures. Thomas Jefferson was the leader of those who favored a less obtrusive federal government and they took the name of Republican.



Jefferson made his views known discretely, first as Washington's secretary of state and then as vice president under Adams. Both the Federalists (*Gazette of the United States*) and Republicans (*National Gazette*) controlled their own newspapers and through anonymous articles published in them, opponents Alexander Hamilton and Jefferson could argue their causes. Because the Constitution did not anticipate political parties it was possible for the president and vice president to hold different political viewpoints and in 1796 that is, in fact, what happened. Adams received the most electoral votes and Jefferson came in second and so they won the top two positions in the executive branch. This led to incredible tensions over key policy issues, especially the Alien and Sedition Acts, championed by Adams. In brief, the Republicans and their press charged Adams and the Federalists with attempting to thwart them on a number of hot political issues during the United States' undeclared war with France. Many Republicans tended to be Francophiles and they worried that the Alien Act targeted immigrants who would likely be attracted to Republican ideals. The Sedition Act, the Republicans argued, was an attempt to stifle legitimate newspapers because they opposed Federalist policies: a free speech violation. As it became clear that Adams would lose the election of 1800, he added to the animosity between the president and the president-elect when he appointed a number of Federalist judges, including Chief Justice John Marshall, in the waning weeks of his administration. On March 4, 1801, the first inauguration day in the new capital city of Washington, Jefferson made his presidential pronouncement on the past difficulties and his vision for the future.

Activity 1

Make copies of a transcription of Jefferson's first inaugural address and distribute.

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jefinau1.asp

Have students read background material on the election of 1800 and carefully examine the address. Discuss the following:

1. Jefferson is considered one of America's greatest writers. His inaugural address is filled with beautifully constructed thoughts, well expressed. Several phrases are still quoted today: "entangling alliances"; "every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle"; and "we are all Republicans, we are all Federalists." Consider the historical context of these phrases and discuss the meanings behind them.
2. Consider Jefferson's agenda. Find phrases and sections in which he discusses his views of the American republic and highlight them. For example, where does he discuss his tax policy, states rights, foreign policy, debt reduction? Create a list of policy topics accompanied by Jefferson's language, then use 21st-century "straight talk" to interpret the president's text. Go further and compare these policies to those of the Federalists.
3. Jefferson acknowledges the audience, Congress, in his inaugural speech. He also refers to George Washington ("our first and greatest revolutionary character"). Does he mention his predecessor, John Adams? Does he refer to Adams's policies? What do you make of this? How do modern presidents acknowledge their political opponents and their viewpoints?



Activity 2

Pretend you were on the losing end of the 1800 elections. Perhaps you are John Adams, a Federalist Congressman ousted by a Republican, or a Federalist Senator now in the minority. Compose a response to Jefferson's inaugural address from the Federalist standpoint. Students might even present it orally to their class, or have a "Crossfire" - type debate with a Republican colleague.

Enrichment and Extension

1. Presidential Transitions

Almost 20 years after the election of 1800, Jefferson evaluated the events of that first political party transition, and described it as a "revolution." He wrote to Spencer Roane on September 6, 1819: "[The election] was as real a revolution in the principles of our government as that of [17]76 was in its form; not effected indeed by the sword, as that, but by the rational and peaceable instrument of reform, the suffrage of the people. The nation declared its will by dismissing functionaries of one principle, and electing those of another, in the two branches, executive and legislative, submitted to their election." The election put Republicans in control of the White House and Congress.

Jefferson obviously considered the "revolution" a great success. Indeed from the time of Jefferson's election until his death in 1826 a Republican occupied the White House. But in his inaugural address you will find many passages exhorting Americans to unite for the good of the nation. Many presidents have found that their first official speech required such language. But there are abundant documents that show that Jefferson did not mean that Federalists and Republicans could find common ground, as much as he hoped to convince Federalists to change their thinking to mirror his. The year after his first inauguration, he wrote to a friend: "I shall . . . by the establishment of republican principles . . . sink federalism into an abyss from which there shall be no resurrection for it."

Select and research another presidential transition during times of dramatic change. What were the causes of the tensions or fears? Was the nation in real peril? How did the incoming president attempt to calm the nation in his inaugural address? Was he successful? For several examples on this site go to "Presidential Transitions: The Torch is Passed"

For inaugural addresses from Washington to the present go to:

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/inaug.asp

For documents and images related to all inaugurations go to the Web site of the Library of Congress and their exhibit, "I Do Solemnly Swear: Presidential Inaugurations"

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/pihtml/pihome.html>

2. You Say You Want a Revolution?

Revolution is a word tossed around in political circles with regularity today, but to the founding generation that took part in the first American Revolution, it was more likely to



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carry significant meaning. Historians also consider the first American Revolution to extend beyond the period between Bunker Hill and the peace treaty with Britain. The forging of the U.S. Constitution and the first government to serve under that charter in 1789 are considered to be culminations of a movement that began with the resistance to the Stamp Act in 1765.

When describing the election of 1800 as a second American “revolution,” students will need to provide some context of the first revolution. Jefferson saw the election of Republicans to be a call from the American people to return to the spirit of 1776, to the fight for individual rights, and to the struggle to recover “virtue” in government. The third president thought that the Federalists had moved closer to monarchical ways of thinking and acting, exactly opposite of the intentions of the rebels. In fact, one prominent biographer claims this was not a “revolution” but a “reformation” in that Jefferson and the Republicans were reaching back in time to revive original ideals.

This would be a good topic for a paper or a performance with the student(s) portraying Jefferson and/or an opponent and using excerpts from the inaugural address and the letter to Spencer Roane to prepare the script. For these and more examples of Jefferson’s political writings, go to the Library of Congress online exhibit at:

<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson>

Bibliography

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Ellis, Joseph J. *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993.

Petersen, Merrill D. *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.



National History Standards

This lesson meets the following National History Standards:

Draw upon visual sources (Historical Comprehension, Standard 2G); formulate historical questions (Historical Research Capabilities, Standard 4A); identify issues and problems in the past (Historical Thinking Standards, Historical Issues -- Analysis and Decision-Making, Standard 5A).

The institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how they were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. (United States History Standards, Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation, 1754-1820s, Standard 3).

