

Opinion

Nation divided is an old American story

By Lewis E. Lehrman
Our Better Angels

Barack Obama is not the first president-elect to confront the demons of division. Thomas Jefferson confronted such a situation after the election of 1800 — perhaps the most bitter and unpredictable in American history. Jefferson and John Adams, who had bonded as fellow members of the Continental Congress and as American diplomats in Paris, had split during the administration of President George Washington.

During Adams' administration, issues of war and peace with France preoccupied the country. A three-man delegation sent by President Adams to France came back in failure. The ruling Federalists overreacted to the administration's opponents by passing the Alien and Sedition Acts. The anti-Federalists, led by Jefferson and James Madison, then overreacted by pushing state legislatures to pass the so-called Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, which asserted state authority to overrule the federal government. Though Adams averted war with France, the result by 1800 was intense domestic conflict.

America's recent presidential campaign was gentled by comparison. As McCain stat-

ed in his concession speech: "In a contest as long and difficult as this campaign has been, his success alone commands my respect for his ability and perseverance. But that he managed to do so by inspiring the hopes of so many millions of Americans who had once wrongly believed that they had little at stake or little influence in the election of an American president is something I deeply admire and commend him for achieving."

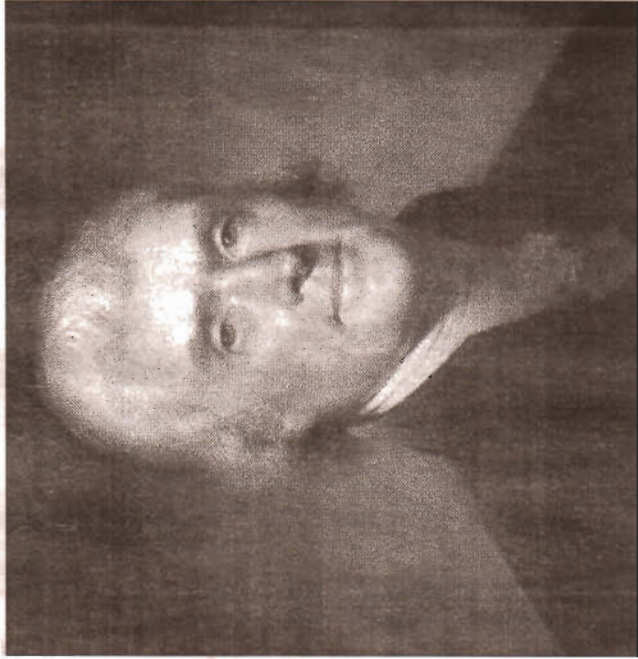
There was no such gentility in the aftermath of the 1800 election. Jefferson described the campaign in a letter to British scientist Joseph Priestley: "What an effort, my dear Sir, of bigotry in Politics & Religion have we gone through! The barbarians really flattered themselves they should be able to bring back the times of Vandalism, when ignorance put everything into the hands of power & priestcraft."

During the campaign, President Adams had been accused by Jefferson's backers of using the brother of his running mate to procure English mistresses for both men. Adams took the charge in relatively good humor, complaining of Charles C. Pinckney: "I do declare upon my honor, if this be true General Pinckney has kept them all for himself and cheated me out of my two."

by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all republicans; we are all federalists. 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."

Barack Obama often echoes America's founders. "Now even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters and negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes," Obama told the 2004 Democratic National Convention. "Well, I say to them tonight, there's not a liberal America and a conservative America; there's the United States of America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America." In contrast to Jefferson's muted tones, Obama's voice of unity boomed from America's television screens.

America had faced mortal conflict in 1861. As President-elect Abraham Lincoln contemplated how to deal with the secession of southern states, he labored over the final paragraph of his first inaugural: "We are not enemies, but friends. We



Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle, said Thomas Jefferson
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must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

In Ohio at the end of the 2008 campaign, Obama echoed Lincoln when he proclaimed that the election was about "a new politics — a politics that calls on our better angels instead of

encouraging our worst instincts; one that reminds us of the obligations we have to ourselves and one another." A few days later in Chicago, President-elect Obama delivered his victory speech, once again quoting his fellow Illinoian. "As Lincoln said to a nation far more divided than ours, we are not enemies but friends," said Obama. "Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection."

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