

Lewis E. Lehrman: **Presidential election of 1800: America's most vicious**

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Editor's note: In this presidential year, this is the first of four pieces by Greenwich's Lewis E. Lehrman that will look at notable presidential elections from our history.

“What an effort, my dear Sir, of bigotry in Politics & Religion have gone through!” wrote Thomas Jefferson after his inauguration as America’s third President in March 1801. Addressing a famed English scientist, Jefferson complained: “The barbarians really flattered themselves they should be able to bring back the times of Vandalism, when ignorance put everything into the hands of the powerful & priestcraft... We were to look backwards, not forwards for improvement.”

Writing about a week later, the reaction of the losing presidential candidate, John Adams, was scarcely less bitter: “A group of foreign liars, encouraged by a few ambitious native gentlemen, have discomfited the education, the talents, the virtues, and the property of the country.”

The presidential election of 1796 was the nation’s first contested election battle. General Washington was unopposed in the first two. The election of 1800 may have been the nation’s most vicious.

In 1797 when he became President, Adams had sought the help and support of Vice President Jefferson – especially in working through the nation’s difficult relationships with Europe. Although they had served together as American diplomats in Europe and had become good friends, Jefferson turned him down. Instead, Jefferson began a duplicitous campaign to replace Adams as chief executive. Adams was argumentative and temperamental. He managed to alienate a large segment of his own party – especially friends of former Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton.

Jefferson was cerebral and shadowy. He secretly put together a network of political friends that advanced his own interests against the sitting president. The political focal point was America’s relationship with France, a country which Jefferson’s supporters embraced and Adams’ supporters detested. In 1797 Adams dispatched a three-member peace commission to France – which French officials alternately snubbed, insulted and tried to bribe. Revelations of their experiences – dubbed “the XYZ Affair” – raised the popularity of Adams’ Federalists and shocked Jeffersonians.

The Federalists, however, then overreached – passing the Alien and Sedition Acts to repress possible French sedition within America. An American army was raised for use in a possible conflict. Adams, however, persisted in efforts to resolve the conflict. He would succeed, but too late for reelection. Jefferson became president in 1801.

Meanwhile in 1799, intense political warfare broke out in the United States. France was a major issue. So, ironically, was religion. Theologically, Adams and Jefferson were actually quite close. Both were deists. Jefferson, however, was associated with the anti-clerical attitudes of the radical, anti-religious, French Revolution and Thomas Paine. Adams, therefore became the candidate of traditional Christians like Yale's Timothy Dwight, who predicted that if Jefferson were elected: "The Bible would be cast into a bonfire, our holy worship changed in a dance of Jacobin phrensy, our wives and daughters dishonored, and our sons converted into the disciples of Voltaire and the dragoons of Marat."

Charges and countercharges were brought against both candidates. Historian David McCullough wrote that according to the politics of the day, "if Jefferson was a Jacobin, a shameless southern libertine, and a 'howling' atheist, Adams was a Tory, a vain Yankee scold, and, if truth be known, 'quite mad.'" The supposedly insane Adams had to defend himself against the charge that his running mate for vice president, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, had been tasked with finding English mistresses for both of them. The usually humorless Adams quipped: "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."

The actual election of 1800 was a patchwork because each state had its own rules and times for selecting its members of the Electoral College. Some were chosen in statewide direct elections, some in district elections, some by state legislatures. The pivotal election was held in New York where a classic tactical campaign was mapped out by Aaron Burr, who would soon become Jefferson's running mate. Because New York's electors would be chosen by the state legislature elected in April, Burr at the last minute stuffed the legislative ballot in New York City with the state's most prominent citizens. The Jefferson ticket crushed the Federalist one organized by Alexander Hamilton. For Federalists, the rest of the campaign was uphill.

Shortly after New York voted, President Adams dismissed two of Hamilton's close friends in his Cabinet. Furious, Hamilton plotted to replace Adams as the Federalist standard-bearer and elect Pinckney in his place. A private letter Hamilton wrote in October expressing his doubts about Adams became grist for the Jeffersonian press. The Federalists were in disarray.

When at last South Carolina's votes were cast in the state legislature in early December, Jefferson and Burr tied with the most Electoral College votes. As a result, the election was thrown into the U.S. House of Representatives where each state had one vote. Federalists, hating Jefferson, backed Burr. Hamilton, however, found Burr more reprehensible than Jefferson and labored mightily to block Burr's election. After 36 ballots, enough Federalist congressmen abstained from voting to elect Jefferson as president and Burr as vice president.

Almost two decades later, Jefferson wrote that "the revolution of 1800...was as real a revolution in the principles of our government as that of 1776 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."

Lewis E. Lehrman is co-founder of the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History and author of Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point (Stackpole Books, 2008).