



THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

CLASSROOM | 9-12 Lessons :

THE INAUGURATION OF THOMAS JEFFERSON : FIRST POLITICAL PARTY TRANSITION

It was about noon, on Saturday November 1, 1800, when the second president of the United States, John Adams, arrived in Washington City and went immediately to the “President’s House.” This residence was the outgrowth of George Washington’s dream for a capital city, though it would not be completed during his presidency. Pierre Charles L’Enfant had designed the city, but Washington himself sited the location of the White House. When John Adams moved in that November day, the house, designed by the Dublin builder James Hoban, was as yet unfinished. Only half of its thirty-six rooms had been plastered, just one of the three planned staircases was completed, and the watchman was keeping all of the fireplaces burning to dry the plaster. Still, the president’s baggage was unloaded, his office prepared. He received “gentlemen” all of that late afternoon, took his dinner early, and with one lit candle made his way up the only finished staircase in the house to his bedroom. The next day he penned these words: “I pray Heaven to bestow the best of blessings on this house, and on all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof.”¹

“Wise and honest men” were sorely needed, because this was one of the most difficult times in the life of the young republic. Just a few months after Adams moved into the White House, Thomas Jefferson would become the third president of the United States. This inauguration on March 4, 1801, ended twelve years of Federalist rule, and some feared that the legitimate empowerment of this rival political party, the Jeffersonian Republicans, would tear the country apart, perhaps bring it to another revolution.





The White House as it may have looked when Adams moved in. Painting by Tom Freeman, WHHA



John Adam's benediction was carved into the State Dining Room mantel. The White House

Beginnings

There was no mention of political parties in the Constitution; indeed, the Founding Fathers feared such “factions,” noting examples from European history where the presence of such devious elements had resulted in the downfall of governments. By unanimous vote of the Electoral College in both 1789 and 1792, George Washington had been elected the first president of the United States. Both a listener and a leader, Washington managed to hold the country in relative harmony, warning his fellow-citizens, “You cannot shield yourselves too much against the jealousies . . . which spring from [faction].”² Yet disagreements between Washington’s secretary of treasury, Alexander Hamilton, and his secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson, led to the formation of two distinctly political camps, exactly what Washington had cautioned against. Supporters of Jefferson’s viewpoints formed political groups. Especially opposed to the financial policies related to taxation and banking proposed by Hamilton and adopted by Washington, they called themselves “Republicans,” leaving to the administration’s supporters the name of “Federalists.”

Foreign Influences

One great dispute between the Federalists and the Republicans centered on events in Europe. In 1789 the French had risen up against the monarchy and three years later declared themselves a republic. As the revolution grew more radical in the 1790s, with its attacks on organized religion and eventually the execution of the king and queen, the aristocratic Federalists watched in horror. The Republicans, though, applauded the democratic, anti-aristocratic spirit of the French Revolution. Some even imitated the French Jacobins, cutting their hair short and addressing each other as “citizen” and “citizeness.” When France went to war with Britain in 1793, not surprisingly, the Jeffersonian Republicans favored the French cause, and the Federalists, the British. Though George Washington declared the United States would remain neutral, soon American foreign affairs became a violent partisan issue.



A Foreshadowing Election

While the Republicans were not as organized as a modern political party, they nearly won the presidency for Jefferson in 1796. Adams defeated Jefferson 71 electoral votes to 68. The writers of the Constitution, having not considered the emergence of political parties, had declared that the candidate with the second largest electoral vote would be vice president. This meant that Jefferson, as the runner-up, would be in the administration of a Federalist president, although he was the leader of the opposition party! With Jefferson in the second position of power, and the tempering influence of George Washington gone, the prickly, intellectual John Adams was in for a rough political ride. The political environment was kept constantly charged as each side courted the support of newspapers, which vied with one another in viciously attacking both the leaders and the policies of the opposition. As war between France and Britain entered a more active phase in 1798, both Federalists and Republicans hurled charges of disloyalty to American interests at each other. Though the charges continued unabated on both sides, the fact was that, by 1798, the United States had all but abandoned its neutrality in this European war by aligning itself more and more with Britain. Moreover, beginning that year, the nation found itself engaged in a two-year undeclared naval war with France.

Controlling the Opposition

The Federalists, who controlled the Congress, used this undeclared war as a pretext for passing some of the most repressive pieces of legislation in American history: the Alien and Sedition Acts. The Federalists claimed that the laws were meant to protect the United States against alien agitators, “foreign firebrands” of “unstable political persuasion” who were pouring into the country in the wake of European wars and revolution. Many Americans felt that the chief goal was to weaken the Republicans who usually attracted these immigrants into their party ranks. Though the Alien Acts were never enforced, some believed they frightened out of the country certain foreigners, especially Frenchmen, and discouraged many others from coming to the country. The Sedition Act, though, seemed a direct slap at two priceless freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution by the Bill of Rights: freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Even Alexander Hamilton disapproved of the law. It provided fines and imprisonment for any person who uttered or wrote “false, scandalous, and malicious” statements against Congress or the president. The outright political purpose of the act was admitted in the date it was to expire: March 1801, when the next president would take power.³ Though Adams was reasonably cautious in implementing these laws, they had a significant repressive effect, enough to justify the fears of the Republicans that they were tyrannical in intent.⁴ Many outspoken Jeffersonian editors were indicted under the Sedition Act, though only ten were actually convicted.

Protest

The Republicans were alarmed. It seemed that the Federalists were prepared to abandon the principles of the Enlightenment and the Constitution. In late 1798 the Kentucky and Virginia state legislatures adopted resolutions (written by Jefferson and James Madison, respectively) calling the Alien and Sedition Acts unconstitutional and declaring that the states had the power to declare any such “illegal” federal law unconstitutional. The Kentucky Resolutions went further, arguing that unconstitutional acts passed by the national government [in this case violating First Amendment freedoms of speech and press] may be declared “null and void” by state governments. These resolutions began a state-rights debate that would continue through the Civil War.



Though this nullification idea did not win widespread support, it elevated the dispute to the level of a national crisis. Some historians believe that even by modern standards, the United States, by the late 1790s, was as deeply and bitterly politicized as it would ever be in its history. State legislatures at times resembled battlegrounds, and some sessions ended in fistfights and brawls. The writers of American History provide a vivid example: “In one celebrated incident in the chamber of the House of Representatives, Matthew Lyon, a Republican from Vermont, responded to an insult from Roger Griswold, a Federalist from Massachusetts, by spitting in Griswold’s eye. Griswold then attacked Lyon with his cane, Lyon fought back with a pair of tongs, and soon the two men were engaged in a wrestling match on the floor.” This same Congressman Lyon was later sentenced to four months in jail for writing of President Adams’s unbounded thirst for “ridiculous pomp, foolish adulation, and selfish avarice.”⁵ Such ferocity alarmed Americans and made them wonder if the nation was on the verge of chaos. This and many other incidents strengthened the resolve of the Republicans to organize, especially at the local level, to win the election of 1800.



John Adams. Portrait by John Trumbull, The White House



Thomas Jefferson. Portrait by Rembrandt Peale, The White House

The “Revolutionary” Election

The campaign that year was probably the ugliest in American history. Adams was campaigning for re-election as a Federalist with Charles C. Pinckney. Jefferson represented the Republicans, with Aaron Burr as his running mate. Adams and Jefferson themselves were fairly restrained in their accusations, but their supporters were rabid. Each side argued that their opponents threatened the very existence of the republic. The Federalists called Jefferson a dangerous radical, and his followers “mad men” who, if they came to power, would bring a “reign of terror” comparable to that of the French Revolution at its bloodiest. Republicans saw Adams as a tyrant conspiring to restore the monarchy and make himself king; his party members, they accused, were “plotting to subvert human liberty and impose slavery on the people.”⁶



Then, as if the tense political atmosphere wasn't concern enough, the election revealed a constitutional problem in the electoral process. Again, with "political tickets" not anticipated by the Founders, Jefferson and his running mate, Aaron Burr, both Republicans, received the exact same number of electoral votes. According to the Constitution, such ties had to be broken in the House of Representatives. It took one week and thirty-six separate ballots to determine the outcome. Finally, in February 1801, word came that Thomas Jefferson would be the next president of the United States. The tensions surrounding the election had run so high that John Adams discussed with his wife resigning from the presidency a few days early "to make sure his presence did not inflame the jubilant Republicans at Jefferson's inauguration." She had discouraged him. President Adams and Jefferson had met in Washington from time to time. One day, after the election, they had a rather uncomfortable encounter—some say it took place in the White House. "You have put me out!" Adams is said to have snapped. "You have put me out!" Although taken aback, Jefferson calmly reminded him of the character of the system he—not Jefferson—had helped invent. The interview ended on friendly terms."⁷

The Departure

Though deeply troubled, Adams and the Federalists accepted their loss of control of both Congress and the executive department. Yet in his last days in office, Adams would use his time to further the Federalist cause. He made appointments, as Jefferson once said, "from among my most ardent political enemies." Judgeships, justices of the peace, custom officers—the appointment papers flowed in a steady stream from the White House to the State Department. These appointments would be known as the "Midnight Judges."⁸ One of Adams's most important acts was to appoint John Marshall, a Federalist, as chief justice of the United States Supreme Court. Finally, on March 4, 1801, in the early morning hours of Jefferson's Inauguration Day, Adams's coach drew up to the door of the White House, with several wagons of packed furnishings behind. Even before sunrise, Adams was headed northward, back to Massachusetts, leaving the inaugural ceremonies and the White House to Jefferson.

A Beginning

Now the Republicans were in power. What actions would they take against their political enemies? Jefferson gave a conciliatory response in his inaugural address, saying, "We are all republicans, we are all federalists." He didn't remove Federalists from office either, though he did require their loyalty. The historian Edwin Fenton notes, "After the bitterness of the 1790's, a calmer spirit prevailed in the nation. A challenge had been met; the leadership of the nation had changed peacefully. Political opposition within a constitutional framework would be tolerated and eventually praised rather than driven underground and punished."⁹ As Margaret Bayard Smith, a Republican woman who attended Jefferson's inauguration, mused, "The changes of administration which in every government and in every age have generally been epochs of confusion, villainy, and bloodshed, in this our happy country take place without any species of distraction, or disorder."¹⁰

