

THE  
*Presidents*  
OF THE  
UNITED STATES  
OF AMERICA

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BY MICHAEL BESCHLOSS  
AND HUGH SIDNEY

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FOREWORD  
BY BARACK OBAMA



THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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### **Presidents of the United States of America 18th Edition**

Photographs of Presidential portraits by Steve Adams, Robert E. Allnutt, Joseph H. Bailey, Victor R. Boswell Jr., Gerald M. Hetherman, Erik Kvalsvik, George F. Mobley, Claude E. Petrone

White House staff members who assisted in preparing this book: Curator, William G. Allman, Assistant Curator, Lydia S. Tederick

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ISBN: 978-1-931917-04-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2008943809  
Printed in the U.S.A.

Editions one through nine were produced by the National Geographic Society as a public service

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## GEORGE WASHINGTON

On April 30, 1789, George Washington, standing on the balcony of Federal Hall on Wall Street in New York, took his oath of office as the first president of the United States. “As the first of every thing, *in our situation* will serve to establish a Precedent,” he wrote James Madison, “it is devoutly wished on my part, that these precedents may be fixed on true principles.”

Born in 1732 into a Virginia planter family, Washington learned the morals, manners, and body of knowledge requisite for an 18th-century Virginia gentleman. He pursued two intertwined interests: military arts and western expansion. At 16 he helped survey Shenandoah lands for Thomas, Lord Fairfax. Commissioned a lieutenant colonel in 1754, he fought the first skirmishes of what grew into the French and Indian War. The next year, as an aide to Gen. Edward Braddock, he escaped injury although four bullets ripped his coat and two horses were shot from under him.

From 1759 to the outbreak of the American Revolution, Washington managed his lands around Mount Vernon and served in the Virginia House of Burgesses. Married to a widow, Martha Dandridge Custis, he devoted himself to a busy and happy life. But like his fellow planters, Washington felt himself exploited by British merchants and hampered by British regulations. As the quarrel with the mother country grew acute, he moderately but firmly voiced his resistance to the restrictions.

When the Second Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia in May 1775, Washington, one of the Virginia delegates, was elected commander in chief of the Continental Army. On July 3, 1775, at Cambridge, Massachusetts, he took command of his ill-trained troops and embarked upon a war that was to last six grueling years.

He realized early that the best strategy was to harass the British. He reported to Congress,

“we should on all Occasions avoid a general Action, or put anything to the Risque, unless compelled by a necessity, into which we ought never to be drawn.” Ensuing battles saw him fall back slowly, then strike unexpectedly. Finally in 1781—with the aid of French allies—he forced the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown.

Washington longed to retire to his fields at Mount Vernon. But he soon realized that the nation under its Articles of Confederation was not functioning well, so he aligned himself with the movement leading to the Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia in 1787. When the new Constitution was ratified, the Electoral College unanimously elected Washington president.

He did not infringe upon the policy-making powers that he felt the Constitution gave Congress. But foreign policy became preponderantly a presidential concern. When the French Revolution led to a major war between France and England, Washington refused to accept entirely the recommendations of either his Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, who was pro-French, or his Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, who was pro-British. Rather, he insisted upon a neutral course until the United States could grow stronger.

To Washington’s disappointment, two parties were developing by the end of his first term. Wearied of politics, he retired to his “vine and fig tree” at the end of his second. In his Farewell Address, he urged his countrymen to forswear excessive party spirit and geographical distinctions. In foreign affairs, he warned against long-term alliances.

Washington enjoyed less than three years of retirement at Mount Vernon, for he died of a throat infection December 14, 1799. For months the American people mourned the leader who had helped them win their independence, then ensured that their fledgling new government would survive.



*George Washington (1732–1799) set patterns for all other presidents to follow.*

## JOHN ADAMS

**L**earned and thoughtful, John Adams was probably more remarkable as a political philosopher than a politician. “People and nations are forged in the fires of adversity,” he said, doubtless thinking of his own as well as the American experience.

Adams was born in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1735. A Harvard-educated lawyer, he early identified himself with the patriot cause; a delegate to the First and Second Continental Congresses, he led in the movement for independence.

During the Revolutionary War he served in France and Holland in diplomatic roles, and helped negotiate the treaty of peace. From 1785 to 1788 he was minister to the Court of St. James’s, returning to be elected vice president under George Washington.

Adams’s two terms as vice president were frustrating for a man of his vigor, intellect, and vanity. He complained to his wife, Abigail, “My country has in its wisdom contrived for me the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or his imagination conceived.”

When Adams became president, the war between the French and British was causing great difficulties for the United States on the high seas and intense partisanship among contending factions within the nation. His administration focused on France, where the Directory, the ruling group, had refused to receive the American envoy and had suspended commercial relations.

Adams sent three commissioners to France, but in the spring of 1798 word arrived that the French Foreign Minister Talleyrand and the Directory had refused to negotiate with them unless they would first pay a substantial bribe. Adams reported the insult to Congress, and the Senate printed the correspondence, in which the Frenchmen were referred to only as “X, Y, and Z.”

The nation broke out into what Jefferson called “the X.Y.Z. fever,” increased in intensity

by Adams’s exhortations. The populace cheered itself hoarse wherever the president appeared. Never had the Federalists been so popular.

Congress appropriated money to complete three new frigates and to build additional ships, and authorized the raising of a provisional army. It also passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, intended to frighten foreign agents out of the country and to stifle the attacks of Republican editors.

President Adams did not call for a declaration of war, but hostilities began at sea. At first, American shipping was almost defenseless against French privateers, but by 1800 armed merchantmen and U.S. warships were clearing the sea lanes. Despite several brilliant naval victories, the war hysteria subsided. Word came to Adams that France had no stomach for war and would receive an envoy with respect. Long negotiations ended the quasi-war.

Sending a peace mission to France brought the full fury of some of the most doctrinaire Federalists against Adams. In the campaign of 1800 the Republicans were united and effective, the Federalists badly divided. Nevertheless, Adams polled only a few less electoral votes than Jefferson, who became president.

On November 1, 1800, just before the election, Adams arrived in the new capital city to take up residence in the White House. On his second evening in its damp, unfinished rooms, he wrote his wife, “Before I end my Letter, I pray Heaven to bestow the best of Blessings on this House and all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise Men ever rule under this roof.”

Adams retired to his farm in Massachusetts, where he penned his famous letters to his old foe Thomas Jefferson. Here on July 4, 1826, he whispered his last words: “Thomas Jefferson survives.” But Jefferson had actually died at Monticello a few hours earlier.



*John Adams (1735–1826), a shaper of the Revolution, saved his nation from war with France.*

## THOMAS JEFFERSON

**I**n the thick of party conflict in 1800, Thomas Jefferson wrote in a private letter, “I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.”

This powerful advocate of liberty was born in 1743 in Albemarle County, Virginia, inheriting from his father, a planter and surveyor, some 5,000 acres of land, and from his mother, a Randolph, high social standing. He studied at the College of William and Mary, then read law. In 1772 he married Martha Wayles Skelton, a widow, and took her to live in his partly constructed mountain-top home, Monticello.

Freckled and sandy-haired, rather tall and awkward, Jefferson was eloquent as a correspondent, but he was no public speaker. In the Virginia House of Burgesses and the Continental Congress, he contributed his pen rather than his voice to the patriot cause. As the “silent member” of the Congress, Jefferson, at 33, drafted the Declaration of Independence. In later years he labored to make its words a reality in Virginia. Most notably, he wrote a bill establishing religious freedom, enacted in 1786.

Jefferson succeeded Benjamin Franklin as minister to France in 1785. His sympathy for the French Revolution led him into conflict with Alexander Hamilton when Jefferson was secretary of state in President Washington’s cabinet. He resigned in 1793.

Sharp political conflict developed, and two separate parties, the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans, began to form. Jefferson gradually assumed leadership of the Republicans, who sympathized with the revolutionary cause in France. Attacking Federalist policies, he opposed a strong centralized government and championed the rights of states.

As a reluctant candidate for president in 1796, Jefferson came within three votes of election. Through a flaw in the Constitution, he became vice president, although an opponent of President Adams. In 1800 the defect caused a more serious problem. Republican electors, attempting to name both a president and a vice president from their own party, cast a tie vote between Jefferson and Aaron Burr. The House of Representatives settled the tie. Hamilton, disliking both Jefferson and Burr, nevertheless urged Jefferson’s election.

When Jefferson assumed the presidency, the crises in France had passed. He slashed army and navy expenditures, cut the budget, eliminated the tax on whiskey so unpopular in the West, yet reduced the national debt by a third. He also sent a naval squadron to fight the Barbary pirates, who were harassing American commerce in the Mediterranean. Further, although the Constitution made no provision for the acquisition of new land, Jefferson suppressed his qualms over constitutionality when he had the opportunity to acquire the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon in 1803.

During Jefferson’s second term, he was increasingly preoccupied with keeping the nation from involvement in the Napoleonic wars, though both England and France interfered with the neutral rights of American merchantmen. Jefferson’s attempted solution, an embargo upon American shipping, worked badly and was unpopular.

Jefferson retired to Monticello to ponder such projects as his grand designs for the University of Virginia. A French nobleman observed that he had placed his house and his mind “on an elevated situation, from which he might contemplate the universe.” He died on July 4, 1826.

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*Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) gained the immense Louisiana Territory for the infant Republic.*