

The Age of Jefferson and Madison

by Peter S. Onuf



A broadside calling on Americans to vote against the "Embargo-Government" of Jefferson and Madison, ca. 1808. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

Thomas Jefferson and James Madison both played important roles in the era of the American Revolution. Jefferson was the lead author of the Declaration of Independence that launched the American experiment in republican government; Madison was the prime mover at the convention that convened in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 to draft a federal Constitution to create a “more perfect union,” and subsequently took the lead in pushing the Bill of Rights through the new Congress in its first session in August and September 1789. Though the two Virginians were good friends and frequent collaborators throughout these years, their alliance became still closer in the next decade. As Secretary of State Jefferson became increasingly alienated from Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, the dominant figure in President George Washington’s Cabinet, Madison mobilized opposition to administration measures in Congress. Their combined efforts gave rise to the emerging Jeffersonian- or Democratic-Republican “party,” a coalition of politicians and voters determined to gain control of the federal government and return it to the first principles Jefferson had set forth in the Declaration. The Republicans’ electoral “Revolution of 1800” launched a new era in the history of the young republic with Jefferson, Madison, and their fellow Virginian James Monroe controlling the presidency for almost a quarter of a century.

WRITING THE CONSTITUTION

With the Peace of Paris of 1783, the independence of the United States of America was recognized by Great Britain and the other “powers of the earth.” But it was not clear what those powers were recognizing, for Congress under the Articles of Confederation had limited powers and little capacity to govern. Skeptical observers at home and abroad predicted that the tenuous union of state-republics that had sustained the ultimately victorious war effort would not be able to survive the peace. Intercolonial cooperation had been a by-product of patriot mobilization in the various colonies during the protracted imperial crisis, and wartime union had only very recently been formalized when Maryland acceded to the Confederation in 1781. Success in the war had depended on temporarily suppressing dangerous

conflicts within the patriot coalition, but enforced familiarity—and the perception of unequal sacrifice—bred reciprocal suspicion if not outright contempt.

If the experience of a protracted war taught patriots to fear faction, it also sowed the seeds of factionalism, within and among the states, and thus shaped the subsequent course of American history. One leading source of conflict was the degree of authority that would be given to a central government. Revolutionary Americans were naturally reluctant to grant broad powers to a strong central government of their own: after all, the patriots had mobilized against the encroachments of a “despotic” British imperial government. Yet the vindication of their rights depended on a continental government that was strong enough to withstand any threats to American independence. This was the dilemma that constitutional reformers faced in the “critical period” after 1783.

Few Americans doubted the need for union. Without comprehensive constitutional reform at all levels of government, the disunited states would be ripe for mob rule, counter-revolution, and foreign intervention. The antithesis of union was factionalism, the all-too-evident impulse of Americans to turn against each other and pursue their interests at each other’s expense. The solution, yet again, was a broad, continent-wide mobilization. In hard bargaining over contentious issues such as representation, commercial policy, and slavery, the reformers who gathered at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 clarified the limits of union, defining the sacrifices of interest and principle they and their constituents would accept.

The new government would be “partly national, and partly federal,” according to James Madison, its lead architect. The reformers’ success hinged on their ability to convince Americans that the new regime’s national powers were essential to preserving the states and their union. Madison joined forces with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay to draft *The Federalist* essays in New York City newspapers in order to sway voters in that critical state: the ratifying convention in New York narrowly endorsed the Constitution by a 30-27 vote. Antifederalists had many good reasons to be skeptical about the new charter. As the ratification process continued, from state to state and across time, Antifederalists focused increasingly on the need for a Bill of Rights that would guarantee that Federalists would live up to their campaign promises, providing Americans with defensive bulwarks against future encroachments on their liberties by the new central government. Observing developments at home from his diplomatic post in Paris, Jefferson joined the Antifederalist chorus in urging Madison to push for a bill of rights in the first Congress.

The ratification debate provided a template for divergent interpretations of the new federal Constitution that provoked and justified emerging party divisions in the 1790s. The unanimous election of Revolutionary hero and Commander in Chief George Washington as the first president under the new regime promised an end to partisan squabbling, yet harmony in the new administration proved short-lived. In a Cabinet debate over chartering the First National Bank, Hamilton convinced Washington that a loosely interpreted Constitution sanctioned the exercise of powers not explicitly delegated to the new government: the “necessary and proper” clause gave the executive a constructive license to create an “energetic” administration that the framers had not intended—or, prudently, had not acknowledged in the ratification debates. Echoing Antifederalist concerns about consolidation, however, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, his congressional ally, interpreted loose construction as a slippery slope leading to “aristocracy,” “monarchy,” and a central government with the unchecked, despotic powers the British Empire sought to exercise over its American subjects.

PARTY POLITICS

The supercharged language of the emerging Jeffersonian-Republican opposition seems hysterically exaggerated to modern commentators. But fidelity to the “Spirit of 1776” and to the Constitution, strictly construed, constituted an ideological litmus test that enabled Jeffersonians to seize the rhetorical high

ground, articulate concerns about the long-term implications of administration policy, and unmask its proponents' supposedly secret intentions. The very fact that the new system seemed to be flourishing facilitated the emergence of a "loyal" opposition that promised to rescue the regime from the administration's dangerous designs through the electoral process. Republicans deployed hyperbolic language to arouse the electorate from its somnolence.

Concerns about the future were amply justified by the rapid progress of regime change at the state and federal levels. Republicanism itself was an "experiment," most Americans agreed, and many questioned the very possibility of constitutional government on a continental scale. After all, the British Constitution that Hamilton so admired had failed to sustain the British Empire in America, and it was not far fetched for Republicans to warn that an American central government that too closely followed its British predecessor would fail as well. The outbreak of the French Revolution, which Jefferson, Madison, and their Republican allies saw as the logical continuation of the American Revolution, deepened party polarization. The British-led "conspiracy of kings" amplified oppositionist anxieties, particularly when the administration's Jay Treaty (narrowly ratified in 1795) apparently aligned the United States with that anti-republican conspiracy. With the onset of an undeclared "Quasi-War" with France (1798–1800), party polarization deepened as the Federalist administration led by President John Adams enacted controversial measures to suppress Republican newspapers and expel aliens. Most ominously, escalating conflict between Federalists and Republicans revealed a deepening sectional rift, with northerners tilted toward the administration and southerners rallying behind the opposition. Alienated oppositionists were beginning to broach the possibility of disunion.

The looming threat of disunion in the broader context of the geopolitical instability unleashed by the French Revolutionary wars set the stage for the Republican administrations of Jefferson (1801–1809) and Madison (1809–1817). Jefferson later called his ascension to power the "Revolution of 1800," evoking memories of 1776 and the patriots' triumph over King George III's despotic regime. Yet again, Jefferson claimed, Americans had decisively chosen republicanism over monarchy. They also reaffirmed their fundamental commitment to union and an end to divisive party conflict: as Jefferson asserted in his Inaugural Address, "we are all republicans, we are all federalists." But Jefferson was a poor prophet. Just as, despite vociferous anti-partisan protestations, he had become the first great American party leader in opposing Federalist administrations in the 1790s, so too as president he proved the first great party-builder.

Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) promised his fellow Americans peace, prosperity, and lower taxes. Best known as author of the Declaration of Independence, the new president drew on extensive experience in state and national government, including service as member of the Houses of Burgesses and Delegates in Virginia (1769–1779), governor of the Commonwealth (1779–1781), member of the Continental and Confederation Congresses (1775–1776, 1783–1784), US minister to France (1785–1789), Secretary of State in the Washington administrations (1789–1793), and Vice President under Adams (1797–1801). Jefferson hoped that his "wise and frugal Government" would heal the party divisions that had nearly destroyed the union in the late 1790s. Eliminating the direct taxes imposed by the Federalists during the Quasi-War but leaving Hamilton's financial system with its heavy reliance on import duties intact, Jefferson paid down the national debt, from \$83 million at his inauguration to \$57 million in 1809.

Despite quarrels over the power of the federal judiciary, with Federalist John Marshall seeking to enhance the Supreme Court's independent authority, and over the tenure of Federalist officeholders, the new Republican regime enjoyed remarkable success. Jefferson may have eschewed the heavy-handed tactics of his Federalist predecessors, but he proved to be an astute party-builder. Mobilizing support for the administration in new western states by the canny distribution of patronage and government contracts, Republicans also effectively competed for power in New England, the Federalist heartland. Under the Federalists, the bonds of union had become increasingly brittle; now, as its expansion accelerated and as the new nation's territorial limits extended far to the west with the Louisiana

Purchase (1803), the union seemed stronger and “more perfect” than ever. Napoleon’s failure to suppress the Haitian Revolution and implement his “western design” for an American empire and an intermission in the great European war removed external threats, initiating an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity. Jefferson’s landslide victory in the 1804 election confirmed this epochal shift in American politics: the demise of the Federalists as a national party seemed imminent.

Yet the favorable circumstances that marked the onset of Republican rule disintegrated in Jefferson’s second term. With the collapse of the Peace of Amiens (1802), British and French depredations on American shipping threatened to suck the United States back into the vortex of war. Republicans’ electoral successes subverted party discipline and resulted in factional cleavages, with orthodox “Old Republicans” and exponents of more activist “National Republicans” struggling over the Jeffersonian succession and legacy. Meanwhile, Federalists enjoyed a new lease on life with the ignominious failure of Jefferson’s commercial diplomacy to vindicate American rights against the warring European powers. Unable to disentangle itself from the affairs of the Old World, the United States stood on the brink of war with *both* Britain and France. And predictably the union itself again seemed at risk, with disaffection mounting in New England as Yankee “smugglers” mobilized against Jefferson’s ill-fated embargo on American shipping (1807–1809).

James Madison (1751–1836) inherited an insoluble security dilemma from his mentor and predecessor Jefferson. Working closely with Jefferson throughout his political career, Madison served as a member of the Virginia Council of State (1778–1779), Continental and Confederation Congressman (1780–1783), Virginia legislator (1784–1786; 1798–1800), US Congressman (1789–1797) and Jefferson’s Secretary of State (1801–1809); Madison had also helped draft Virginia’s first constitution in 1776 and, most famously, had taken the lead at the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 and in the great debate over the Constitution’s ratification in New York—where he collaborated with Hamilton on *The Federalist Papers*—and in his home state of Virginia. As leader of the emerging Republican opposition in Congress, Madison joined Jefferson in resisting Federalist encroachments on state rights and civil liberties. When he succeeded Jefferson as president, Madison struggled as Jefferson had to strike a workable balance between energetic government and his party’s libertarian rhetoric. “Old Republican” critics questioned his fealty to limited-government orthodoxy, particularly when Madison supported re-charter of the Bank of the United States (1816) and other preparedness measures that “National Republicans” saw as essential to national security.

In retrospect, the War of 1812—known at the time as “Mr. Madison’s War”—seems pointless. By finally choosing to fight Britain, administration critics charged, the United States effectively threw its weight behind Napoleon’s quest to dominate Europe and the world. Nor did the war produce any obvious benefits. Canada did not fall, as administration supporters confidently predicted, and American forces proved ill-equipped to resist British assaults—including the humiliating sack of Washington, DC, in August 1814. But the new nation’s very survival was triumph enough for most Americans, particularly in the wake of Andrew Jackson’s great victory at the Battle of New Orleans (fought *after* the Treaty of Ghent, ending the war, was successfully negotiated). The United States had vindicated its independence: notwithstanding its many blunders, the administration had stayed the course, perpetuating Republican rule; the union had not collapsed, despite widespread disaffection in New England culminating in the Hartford Convention (December 1814–January 1815). And though Americans could not be sure that war would not break out again, the European peace marked the end of more than a half century of constitutional crisis, military conflict, and regime change.

The end of the war led to the “Era of Good Feelings,” a brief moment when Americans could look forward to peace and prosperity under James Monroe, the third and final president in the “Virginia Dynasty.” But diminishing external threats did not guarantee peace at home. The fundamental conflicts of interest that the framers had sought to contain and transcend at Philadelphia—most conspicuously over the future of slavery—returned with a vengeance in the Missouri Controversy (1819–21). The idea

republican government would be best secured in an expanding union proved increasingly problematic as sectional divisions deepened and the nation's future seemed to pivot on the future of new western territories and states. Yet even as Americans in the antebellum decades blundered toward disunion and war, they continued to celebrate the legacies of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. Madison's federal Constitution had created a national state that would prove strong enough to survive a cataclysmic Civil War; as party leader and national builder, Jefferson gave voice to the fundamental values and aspirations that have defined Americans as a democratic people.

Peter S. Onuf, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Professor of History at the University of Virginia, has written extensively on sectionalism, federalism, and political economy, with a particular emphasis on the political thought of Thomas Jefferson. Most recently, with his brother, political theorist Nicholas G. Onuf, he collaborated on *Nations, Markets, and War: Modern History and the American Civil War* (2006), a history of international law and order in the Atlantic states' system during the Age of Revolutions and the early nineteenth century. Professor Onuf is currently collaborating with Annette Gordon-Reed on an intellectual biography of Jefferson.