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TAH- Final Project

September 22, 2010

Book Review of *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800*

By John Ferling

The election of 1800 was a battle between two legendary men, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Both men were instrumental in the revolutionary era and the creation of our new government. They were good friends who became bitter rivals. In his book, *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800*, author John Ferling takes his readers through this incredible time period, culminating in brutal campaign of 1800 and the deadlocked Electoral College- a crisis which very nearly destroyed the young republic.

Adams vs. Jefferson is an easy-to read and thoroughly enjoyable text to read. Ferling stresses throughout the book that politics in 1800 was not all that different from politics today. He tells his readers in the preface, "What I hope comes through to readers of this book is my sense of the similarity between politics and politicians then and now (xviii)." Politicians then and now are driven by personal ambition. They represent interests groups, use smear tactics against their foes, search for scandalous activities, and manipulate the political system to their own personal and political advantage. The peculiarity of the Constitution in 1800 was what made the election such a tumultuous contest. Each party in 1800 nominated two candidates for president. The Constitution

stipulated that the person receiving the largest number of votes, if it was a majority, was to be president. The runner-up was to be the vice president. Thus, in 1800, the Federalist party nominated John Adams and C.C. Pinckney. The Republican nominated Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr.

What is remarkable about the book is the valuable insight that Ferling offers regarding the many personalities involved in the hotly-contested election. Sixty-five year-old John Adams, seeking reelection in 1800, was not ready to retire from public service. Adams felt defeat in this election would be “ignominious, a humiliating repudiation of his presidency and an end to a public career that had begun nearly thirty years before (2).” For Adams, losing this election meant that he would be sent home to die.

Thomas Jefferson, now 57 years old, was once a close friend of Adams. The bitter campaign period changed that friendship forever, as Jefferson, and his Democratic-Republican party, painted Adams and the Federalists as “Anglophiles who sought to preserve a society with limited opportunities for commoners (89).” Jefferson saw his party as the party of the common man—the party that supported humankind and believed in the rights and liberties afforded to all.

Not to be forgotten in the election were the other two notable candidates, C.C. Pinckney and Aaron Burr. Charles Cotesworth Pinckney was a former revolutionary general from South Carolina. A Federalist, many felt Pinckney was simply nominated to siphon away some of the second votes of Republican electors in the South. Jefferson, saw Pinckney’s nomination as a “case of hocus-pocus maneuvers (132)” by the Federalist party.

At the age of 44, Aaron Burr was the youngest of the candidates in 1800. He was, also, the most difficult candidate to understand. As Ferling tells us, “this was in part because Burr revealed so little of himself, but in large measure because most of the surviving assessments by his contemporaries were colored by his controversial behavior during and after this election (8).” Nominated by the Republicans in 1800, Burr was seen as the second choice of his party’s electors. Their first choice was, of course, Jefferson.

Many predicted early on in the campaign season that the election of 1800 would be unlike any other. Alexander Hamilton predicted that the United States was “on the eve of Revolution and a new order of things” and he forecast “a new and more dangerous *Era* has commenced (134).” Hamilton feared that under Jefferson or Adams a national “loss of reputation” would ensue. He believed that each would dismantle the army and possible the navy, as well. He felt that Jefferson would drastically change the Constitution and incorporate many radical ideas. Hamilton also knew his own political future lay in the balance with the election of 1800. He believed, and rightly so, that he would have “no influence in an administration headed by Adams, Jefferson or Burr (142).” In order to again be politically prominent, Hamilton needed Pinckney to triumph. He, thus, threw his political support behind the former revolutionary general from South Carolina.

Ferling explains that Hamilton began his “campaign strategy” by publishing the *Letter from Alexander Hamilton , Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams*. It was a “savage attack on Adams that for scurrility equaled the worst assaults by the most noxious Republican scribes (140).” In the *Letter*, Hamilton informed his readers that “there are great and intrinsic defects in his (Adams) characters which unfit him for

any high office (141).” Many saw this letter as a cagey, political move by Hamilton to ensure victory for Thomas Jefferson. This would force Hamilton’s Federalist party to regroup as an opposition party and reemerge stronger than ever in the election of 1804. Hamilton actually lent credence to this theory by exclaiming that he preferred Jefferson’s election to that of Adams. He stated, “If we must have an enemy at the head of the government, let it be one whom we can oppose and for whom we are not responsible, who will not involve our party in the disgrace of his foolish and bad measures (141).” Thus, early on, the stage was set for a fierce and brutal campaign.

Both parties engaged in what we now call negative campaign tactics by assaulting their adversary’s programs and leadership rather than emphasizing their own platform. The Federalists “left no stone unturned in their attempts to link the Republicans with the bloody excesses of the French Revolution (151).” They insisted the object of the Republicans was to finish off Great Britain and attempted to convince voters that the United States government under Republican leadership would be “too weak to adequately wage war(151)” and thus, leave our nation open to the possibility of attack by foreign rivals.

The Republicans, on the other hand, portrayed the Federalists as “caring only for merchants and financiers (148).” They, said their rivals, were a party “obsessed with financial gain” who hoped to destroy free press through the Sedition Act, increase the public debt and taxes and favored an established church (148). The Republicans also defended Jefferson as a friend of farmers and commerce and frequently reminded voters that he had authored the Declaration of Independence, “the most sublime production of

genius which either the ancient or modern world has exhibited (149).” The Republicans painted themselves as the party which would preserve our independence.

The election of 1800 unfolded in several stages. Electoral contests were scattered throughout the year with the state legislatures wielding enormous power. In eleven of the sixteen states, the state legislatures chose the presidential electors. Thus, the fact the Federalists lost control of the state legislature in New York to their Republican counterparts’ in 1798 made that one of the key states in determining the outcome of the election. The other five states (North Carolina, Kentucky, Maryland, Rhode Island and Virginia) chose their electors by popular vote.

The other pivotal state in the election of 1800 was South Carolina. It was the also the state the sealed the fate of John Adams. Most predicted that the South Carolina legislature would give eight votes to Jefferson and Adams would receive nothing. Most felt that the other eight electoral votes would go to Pinckney, since South Carolina was his home state. However, amazingly, Pinckney did not receive a single electoral vote. All eight votes went to Aaron Burr. The final tally has Jefferson and Burr each receiving 73 electoral votes. Adams finished with 65 and Pinckney with 64. Therefore, the election of 1800, became the first real challenge to the Constitution’s electoral process.

As stipulated by the Constitution, in the event of a tie, the House of Representatives would choose the President, with each state having only one vote. The Republicans, however, lacked the votes in the House to elect either Jefferson or Burr. The Federalists would hold the hammer. Since the union consisted of sixteen states in 1800, nine states would be needed to elect the President.

After thirty-three ballots were cast in the House, neither candidate could gain victory. As Ferling explains, “the first break in the electoral deadlock occurred when Delaware’s congressman, James Bayard, blinked (189).” Since Jefferson was only one vote short of election, Bayard felt that if he could make a deal with Jefferson and that “should he abstain from voting, which with only fifteen states balloting, would reduce the magic number for victory to eight, the number that the vice president had garnered all along (190).” Jefferson, for this to happen, accept the Federalists terms by supporting Hamilton’s public credit program and maintain the naval system. Whether Jefferson ever verbally agreed to a deal with Bayard is still debated.

The House of Representatives cast two more ballots (34 and 35) with still no change in the outcome. The 36th ballot cast in the House dramatically changed to outcome of the election of 1800. Delaware (because of Bayard’s deal), as promised, abstained from voting. In addition, “none of the Federalists from Maryland, Vermont and South Carolina cast votes. This altering voting pattern put Maryland and Vermont in Jefferson’s voting column (193).” The final tally showed Jefferson receiving 10 states, Burr receiving 4 states and 2 states abstained from voting (DE and SC). After an exhausting and tumultuous campaign and a deadlocked Electoral College, the election of 1800 was finally over. Thomas Jefferson was our third president.

John Ferling’s book is a valuable insight into the pivotal election of 1800. It brings to life the enormous personalities of the candidates and the highly contested political contest. His book shows why this was such a milestone moment in our history

and how strongly the issues and passions of politics and politicians still resonate with us today.

As teachers, we are always looking for new and creative approaches to enhance our student's learning. *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* is a book which would highly useful in the classroom. Students could read the whole book or selected chapters on the campaign of 1800 and the battle in the electoral college. They could use the book as an insight into the personalities of Jefferson, Adams, Pinckney and Burr in order to stage a mock debate among the four presidential candidates. They could write an essay/article for a *Federalist* or *Republican* newspaper supporting a candidate or attacking an opponent. They could also compare/contrast the election of 1800 to the modern election of 2000. The book offers endless opportunities to bring the election of 1800 to life in the classroom and a way to awaken a passion for politics and voting in our students.