

# THE FIRST DEMOCRATS

*How the two-party system was born amid backroom deals, lying politicians, and a scandal-hungry press*

By JOSEPH J. ELLIS

As the party faithful gather in Los Angeles for their quadrennial festival, they are reenacting a ritual that goes back to Andrew Jackson and beyond. In 1828, Jackson became the first presidential candidate to run as the head of an organization that called itself the Democratic Party. When the Democrats wanted to renominate "Old Hickory" for a second term, they met in Baltimore for the first national convention of the Democratic Party.

But if you really want to recover the mother lode of inspiration for the Democratic Party, the seminal source for all the energy that will be expended this week amid the balloons, placards, speeches, and struttings, you have to go further back. You have to go back to the moment in 1797 when George Washington, that virtuoso of political exits, took his final leave from public office to retire beneath his "vine and fig tree" at Mount Vernon. You have to go back to Thomas Jefferson.

It was a smaller and tidier America, still living in the afterglow of the American Revolution. The total population of the emerging nation called the United States was about 5 million, far less than metropolitan Los Angeles today. Nothing remotely

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resembling the organized campaigns of modern American politics yet existed. There were no political primaries, no national conventions. The method of choosing electors to that odd inspiration called the Electoral College varied from state to state. And the very notion that a candidate should openly solicit votes constituted a confession of unworthiness for national office.

Memories of "the Spirit of '76" were still warm and the chief qualification for the presidency remained a matter of one's active role in the creation of American independence between 1776 and 1789. Only those leaders who had stepped forward at the national level to promote the great cause when its success was still perilous and problematic were eligible. Patriotism, not primaries, determined the viable candidates.

In 1796, the choice to succeed Washington had come down to John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. They were the odd couple of the American Revolution: Adams, the short, stout, candid-to-a-fault New Englander; Jefferson, the tall, slender, elegantly elusive Virginian. Adams, the highly combustible, ever combative, mile-a-minute talker whose favorite form of conversation was an argument; Jefferson, the forever cool and self-contained enigma who regarded an argument as dissonant noise that disrupted the natural harmonies he heard inside his own head. The list could go on— the Yankee and the cavalier, the orator and

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the writer, the bulldog and the greyhound. Abigail Adams called them "the oak and the willow" Choosing between them was like choosing between the words and the music of the American Revolution.

In the first contested presidential election in American history, Adams won a narrow electoral victory, 71 to 68. Before the passage of the 12th Amendment in 1804, the runner-up became vice president. As Jefferson assumed his understudy role, he grasped more firmly than anyone else what was to become the cardinal principle of modern American politics. And his insight is the reason that Jefferson deserves to be regarded as the Founding Father of both the two-party system and what would eventually call itself the Democratic Party.

While strolling around the grounds of Monticello with a French visitor, he explained his strategic sense of the new political realities: "In the present situation of the United States, divided as they are between two parties ... this exalted station [the presidency] is surrounded with dangerous rocks, and the most eminent abilities will not be sufficient to steer clear of them all." Because of his Olympian status, Washington had been able to levitate above the partisan factions. But no one else would ever be able to repeat that bipartisan performance. No subsequent president would credibly claim to be above the fray. Jefferson was the first American leader to realize that the president must forever after be the head of a political party.

Adams, despite his considerable savvy and hard-earned political wisdom, could never grasp the point. He saw himself as Washington's successor, a statesman who harbored the same kind of towering defiance toward what might be called "the immorality of partisanship." In the spring of 1797, just before taking office, he saw to it that word was leaked to Jefferson's friends and supporters that he wished to create a bipartisan administration in which Jefferson would enjoy considerable influence over foreign and domestic policy, in effect recreating the famous Adams-Jefferson partnership that had performed so brilliantly in the Continental Congress during the heady days of 1776. Jefferson mulled the offer, even drafted a gracious letter of acceptance, but before sending it consulted James Madison, his chief political adviser.

Madison urged Jefferson not to send the letter. "Considering the probability that Mr. A's course of administration may force an opposition to it ... there may be real embarrassments from giving written possession to him, of the degree of compliment and confidence which your personal delicacy and friendship have sug-

gested." When Madison offered tactical advice of this sort, Jefferson almost always took it, even when it meant opposing the very administration he was officially serving as vice president.

**The un-Republicans.** This rather awkward posture was accompanied by several equally awkward historical facts that seem almost designed to confuse modern day students of American politics.

First, neither Jefferson nor his supporters called themselves "Democrats," since that word still carried the odor of an

itself by the name of its modern-day opponents, whose earliest origins date back to the 1850s and whose founding father was Abraham Lincoln.

Second, the translation problem applies to ideas as well as to names. The core conviction of the political party that Jefferson founded was that the federal government must be regarded as an alien force, an Evil Empire if you will, that had assumed powers over the domestic policy of the nation that were incompatible with the original goals of the American Revolution. In



Despite his early partnership with Jefferson, by 1800 John Adams, here with his wife, Abigail Adams, had become Jefferson's bitterest rival.

epithet, suggesting a person who panders to popular opinion rather than oversees the abiding public interest. The hallowed term of the day ~ "Republican," which was the label Jefferson adopted and the press used to describe the Jeffersonian camp. Anyone trying to trace the lineage of political parties in the United States must confront the messy fact that the nomenclature does not align itself with our modern political vocabulary. Indeed, some party designations, like the Federalists of the 1790s and the Whigs of the 1840s, have disappeared from our political lexicon altogether. Perhaps the most confusing coincidence of all is that the earliest version of the Democratic Party called

terms of its antigovernment ethos, Jefferson's political platform more closely resembles the agenda of 20th-century Republicans like Ronald Reagan than Democrats like Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Indeed, Roosevelt's New Deal was the epitome of everything that Jefferson opposed, even though Roosevelt did more than anyone else to claim Jefferson as the Founding Father of the Democratic Party. No merely logical rendering can capture clearly the historical convolutions from then to now, because of the flip-flop that has occurred in the meaning of liberalism and conservatism.

Finally, neither Jefferson nor his supporters ever acknowledged, even to them-

selves, that they were founding a political party, whatever the name. The very idea of a legitimate or loyal opposition did not yet exist in the political culture of the infant nation, and the evolution of political parties was proceeding in an environment that continued to regard the word *party* much like the word *democrat*, as an epithet. In effect, the leadership of the revolutionary generation lacked a vocabulary to describe the politics they were inventing. Jefferson, in fact, was on record as perhaps the staunchest opponent of the kind of partisan behavior associated with party politics: "I never submitted the whole system of my opinions to the creed of any party of men whatever," he insisted. "Such an addiction is the last degradation of a free and moral agent. If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all. It required herculean powers of denial for Jefferson to launch America's first political party while claiming to loathe the partisan mentality it required, but he was psychologically up to the task. After all, while Madison was orchestrating his chief's campaign for the presidency in 1796, Jefferson rather disingenuously claimed to be wholly oblivious to the wheelings and dealings, fully occupied with harvesting his vetch crop and making manure, completely unaware that he was even a candidate for public office.

**Machine boss.** What we might call Jefferson's interior agility also served him well in his behind-the-scenes campaign to undermine the Adams presidency from within. Adams refused to regard himself as the party leader of the Federalists, ignored the partisan advice of his supporters, and effectively made his beloved Abigail into his one-woman cabinet. Aimed against the Adams team, which was completely dependent on personal trust, was the budding machinery of a political organization under the command of Madison (called "the General" by the Federalists) and Jefferson (called "the Generalissimo"). Party politics in America began as a dirty and duplicitous business, which even included leaks from Jefferson to friends of the French government suggesting that they should ignore all diplomatic initiatives from the Adams administration, behavior that would be found treasonable in our own time.

In 1798, Jefferson secretly arranged to retain the services of James Callender, a

talented but notorious scandalmonger who had recently become famous for his expose of Alexander Hamilton's adulterous affair with the beautiful Maria Reynolds. Callender produced "The Prospect Before Us," a pamphlet that described Adams as a mentally unstable monarchist who, if re-elected, intended to declare himself king and his son, John Quincy, his royal successor. When confronted with the charge that he had paid Callender to write these diatribes, Jefferson issued blanket denials, then seemed



Aaron Burr managed to bribe and lobby enough powerful figures to win New York's support.

genuinely surprised when the incriminating letters that documented his complicity were published. All of which suggests that, for Jefferson, the deepest secrets were not the ones he kept from his enemies but the ones he kept from himself. (Callender subsequently displayed a flair for equal-opportunity scandal mongering. In 1802, enraged that Jefferson had not paid him sufficiently for his hatchet job on Adams, he broke the story of Jefferson's rumored liaison with the slave Sally Hemings. Jefferson denied that charge, as well, and was so adept at covering his tracks that it required nearly 200 years and the availability of improved DNA

matching techniques to establish his paternity beyond a reasonable doubt.)

As these delectable morsels of scandal suggest, the birth of party politics coincided with the stunning significance of what we now call the media in influencing national elections. This was a truly novel development that followed logically from the core conviction of the American experiment with republican government. To wit, if all political leaders and their respective policies derived their authority from public opinion, then the chief conduit between the government and the

electorate possessed unprecedented influence in mediating between candidates and their constituencies. Moreover, the increasingly powerful and plentiful newspapers—about 200 dailies or weeklies existed in 1800—had yet to develop established rules of conduct or standards for distinguishing rumors from reliable reporting. It was a recipe for making innuendo the main course in all campaigns, an early if rudimentary preview of our attack-ad politics.

Both Adams and Jefferson later claimed that they could have compiled massive, multivolume scrapbooks filled with libelous attacks on their character. In addition to being accused of emotional instability—Alexander Hamilton weighed in on this score with a 54-page diagnosis of Adams's volcanic eruptions—Adams was supposedly maneuvering to have his eldest daughter married into the family of George III in order to establish a royal bloodline. He also had purportedly arranged to smuggle a small bordello of London prostitutes across the Atlantic to satisfy his instincts for debauchery within the presidential mansion.

Jefferson, for his part, was described as a demonstrable coward who had avoided military service in the Revolutionary War and had fled rather precipitously while governor of Virginia at the approach of British troops. Though the Sally Hemings story did not break until after the election, the New England press accused him of monumental hypocrisy for wrapping himself in lyrical language about human freedom in the Declaration of Independence while owning 200 slaves. Selections from his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, the only book Jefferson ever published, were quoted back at him, especially his remarks on the inherent biological inferiority of blacks. But

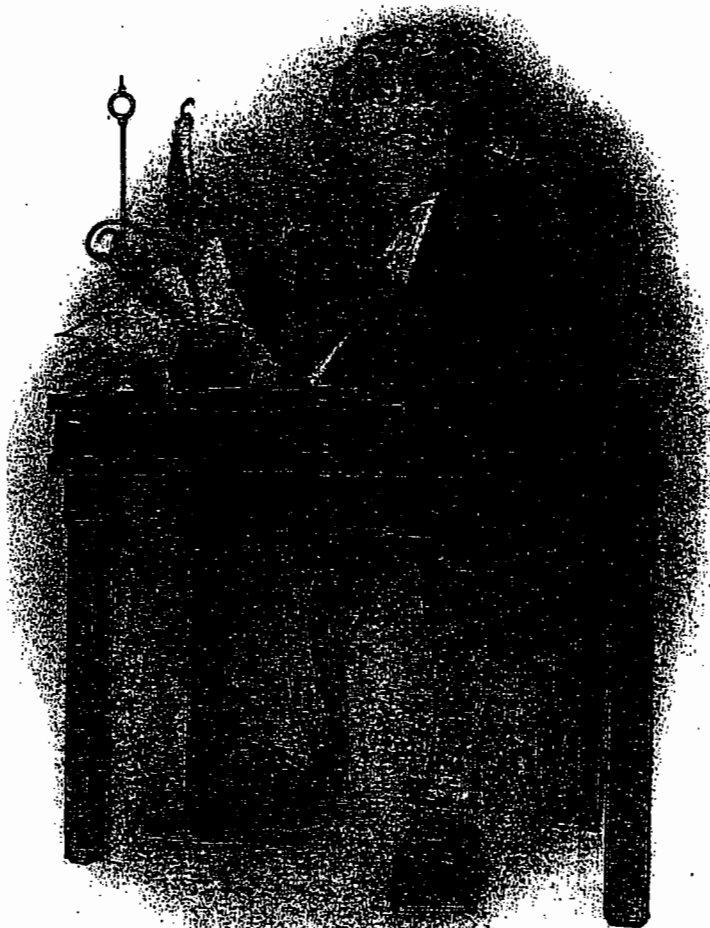
the chief criticism came from the New England clergy, which claimed that Jefferson denied the divinity of Jesus and was most probably an outright atheist. At the Yale commencement of 1801, the school's president, Timothy Dwight, invited all graduates to take an oath that they would never vote for Jefferson in their lifetimes.

There were no polls back then, but most political pundits predicted a race to the wire. New England's bloc of electoral votes were conceded to Adams. Most of the votes south of the Potomac were conceded to Jefferson. That left the Middle Atlantic region, with the largest number of swing votes in New York and Pennsylvania. Jefferson's operatives in Pennsylvania reported that their superior organization, especially in the ethnic enclaves around Philadelphia, promised to turn out a comfortable majority.

**Buying votes.** Meanwhile, in New York, Jefferson was taking no chances. The previous spring he had met with Aaron Burr, generally regarded as the most artful political operative in the entire country, a man whose only political principle was allegiance to his own ambition. In return for a place on the ticket with Jefferson, Burr was charged with delivering New York. He successfully lobbied and bribed enough powerful figures in New York City to produce a Jefferson sweep in the state. New York's 12 electoral votes put Jefferson over the top nationally by a margin of 73 to 65. The triumph included Republican control of the Congress, thereby achieving Jefferson's ultimate goal, as he put it, "to sink federalism into an abyss from which there shall be no resurrection of it."

One unforeseen problem delayed the final victory. When all the electoral votes were counted, Jefferson and Burr were tied. Although everyone knew that Jefferson headed the ticket and deserved the presidency, Burr refused to step aside. (Gracious acts of virtue were not parts of Burr's political repertoire.) The issue was thrown into the House of Representatives, which fell into a marathon of secret deals and backroom bartering. In the end, Jefferson triumphed on the 36th ballot. For his recalcitrance, Jefferson cast Burr into the political version of everlasting darkness.

On Inauguration Day, March 4, 1801, Jefferson walked from his boardinghouse down a stump-filled Pennsylvania Avenue toward the Capitol, which was still under construction. The roof was half-finished and the columns designed to support the front facade were lying flat on the lawn. Adams had taken the 4 o'clock stage out of town that morning.



During a presidential campaign marked by virulent attack politics, **Alexander Hamilton** writes a lengthy diagnosis of Adams's short temper.

The scene, which subsequent chronicles would describe in the "Mr. Jefferson Comes to Washington" mode, should more accurately be viewed as a metaphor for the transition from the old politics to the new. What died was the presumption that there was an overriding national interest that could be divorced from partisanship, that the chief duty of an aspiring president was to remain blissfully oblivious to the partisan pleadings of particular constituencies. What was born was the initial version of the modern Democratic Party and, more significantly, the party system itself.

Of course, few if any of the Democrat-

ic delegates gathered in Los Angeles would recognize themselves as the political descendants of Thomas Jefferson. He has become a mythical icon, a granite face on Mount Rushmore, a bronze statue on the Tidal Basin. In truth, Jefferson was a precociously modern politician who understood, earlier and more deeply than anyone else in the founding generation, the emerging ground rules for success in American politics. For better and for worse, he grasped the dynamics of party organization and discipline necessary to reach a mass electorate. In the history of American politics, he was the first natural.