

“Jefferson is in every view less dangerous than Burr”: Hamilton on the election of 1800

Introduction

The presidential election of 1800 had resulted in a tie between the two Democratic Republicans, Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr. The founders had not foreseen the rise of political parties and the effects that development would have on the operations of the Electoral College. As that body was created at the Constitution Convention of 1787, each elector had two votes to cast and had to cast his votes for different individuals. The candidate receiving the highest number would become president; the candidate with the second highest number would become vice president. (Only after the adoption of the Twelfth Amendment in 1804 did electors vote separately and specifically for president and vice president.)

The presidential election of 1800 provided Alexander Hamilton, former secretary of the treasury, with a dilemma: a tie between Thomas Jefferson, a man whose principles were in direct opposition to Hamilton's own, and Aaron Burr, a man Hamilton believed to have no principles at all. As the House of Representatives prepared to vote to break the deadlock, Hamilton conducted a furious letter-writing campaign to urge fellow Federalists to vote for Jefferson. In this letter to Harrison Gray Otis, a Massachusetts Congressman, Hamilton writes that “In a choice of Evils let them take the least – Jefferson is in every view less dangerous than Burr.”

Excerpt

M^f. Jefferson, though too revolutionary in his notions, is yet a lover of liberty and will be desirous of something like orderly Government – M^f. Burr loves nothing but himself – thinks of nothing but his own aggrandizement – and will be content with nothing short of permanent power [*struck: and*] in his own hands – No compact, that he should make with any [*struck: other*] passion in his [*struck: own*] breast except [*struck: his*] Ambition, could be relied upon by himself – How then should we be able to rely upon any agreement with him? M^f. Jefferson, I suspect will not dare much M^f. Burr will [*inserted in margin: dare every thing in the sanguine hope of effecting every thing –*]

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

1. Compile a list of specific objections Alexander Hamilton had to Aaron Burr.

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2. Why does Hamilton believe that Thomas Jefferson as president would be the lesser of two evils?
3. George Washington expressed his concern with “factions” that would obstruct the orderly operations of government. In what way does the letter from Hamilton to Harrison Gray Otis indicate the emergence of powerful partisan politics in the early Republic?
4. To what extent was the Twelfth Amendment a direct result of the election of 1800? Students will review Article II, Section 1 of the US Constitution and show the changes made through the Twelfth Amendment. Students will judge the extent to which this election was a crisis and whether or not the Twelfth Amendment was a worthwhile change. An application can be made to the crisis created by the election of 2000.
5. How revolutionary was the “Revolution of 1800” and the election of Thomas Jefferson? Students can compare Jefferson’s actual policies as president and the three essential points of Federalist policy as enumerated by Hamilton: neutrality, public credit, and the navy. Within this lesson the major conclusion would be that the most revolutionary aspect of Jefferson’s election was its acceptance by Hamilton and the Federalists.
6. Was the Hamilton-Burr duel inevitable? Using Hamilton’s description of Burr, and noting the language used in that portrayal, students will gain an understanding of the animosity that led to the fatal duel in 1804. Applications can be developed to negative political campaigning during recent elections.

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Image

New York Dec: 23. 1800
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 reflection, that if Jefferson and Burr come
 with equal votes to the House of Representatives,
 the former ought to be preferred by the House
 of Representatives. Mr. Jefferson
 is respectably known in Europe - Mr. Burr
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 for the President of the United States - Mr. Jefferson
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 opinions are entertained of Mr. Burr by his
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 A lady said to Edward Livingston ironically
 "I am told Mr. Burr will be President"

Alexander Hamilton to Harrison Gray Otis, December 23, 1800. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00496.028)

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Transcript

Alexander Hamilton to Harrison Gray Otis, December 23, 1800. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00496.028)

N York Dec^r. 23. 1800

Dr Sir,

I lose no time in replying to your letter of the 17- this day received.

My opinion is, after mature reflection, that if Jefferson and Burr come with equal votes to the House of Representatives, the former ought to be preferred by the [*struck*: House of Representatives] Federalists. M^r. Jefferson is respectably known in Europe – M^r. Burr little and that little not advantageously for [*struck*: the] [*inserted*: a] President of the U States – M^r. Jefferson is a man of easy fortune – M^r. Burr, as I believe, a bankrupt beyond redemption, unless by some coup at the expence of the public, and his habits of expence are such that Wealth he must have at any rate – M^r. Jefferson is a man of fair character for probity – Very different ideas are entertained of M^r. Burr by his enemies and what his friends think, you may collect from this anecdote – A lady said to Edward Livingston ironically "I am told M^r. Burr will be President [2] I should like it very well if I had not [*struck*: been told] [*inserted*: heard] that he is a man without property –"Let him alone for that replied Edward – If he is President for four years he will remove the objection" – M^r. Jefferson, though too revolutionary in his notions, is yet a lover of liberty and will be desirous of something like orderly Government – M^r. Burr loves nothing but himself – thinks of nothing but his own aggrandizement – and will be content with nothing short of permanent power [*struck*: and] in his own hands – No compact, that he should make with any [*struck*: other] passion in his [*struck*: own] breast except [*struck*: his] Ambition, could be relied upon by himself – How then should we be able to rely upon any agreement with him? M^r. Jefferson, I suspect will not dare much M^r. Burr will [*inserted in margin*: dare every thing in the sanguine hope of effecting every thing –]

If M^r. Jefferson is likely from predilection for France to draw the Country into War on her side – Mr. Burr will certainly endeavour to do it for the sake of creating the means of personal power and wealth.

[3] This portrait is the result of long and attentive observation on a [*strikeout*] man with whom I am personally well – and in respect to whose character I have had peculiar opportunities

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of forming a correct judgment.

By no means, my Dear Sir, let the Federalists be responsible for his Elevation – In a choice of Evils let them take the least – Jefferson is in every view less dangerous than Burr.

But we ought – still to seek some advantages from our situation. It may be adviseable to make it [~~strikeout~~] [*inserted: a*] ground of exploration with M^r. Jefferson or his confidential friends and the means of obtaining from him some assurances of his future conduct. The three essential points for us to secure is. 1 The continuance of the neutral plan bonafide towards the belligerent powers 2 The preservation of the present System of public credit - 3 The maintenance & gradual increase of our navy. Other matters may be left to take their chance.

While I have my pen in [4] hand, I will express some ideas to you about the Convention with France – I am far from approving several of its features but I am clear that it ought now to be ratified having been negotiated & that the not doing of it would ruin the Federal party, hazard our internal tranquillity, and leave the door open for a worse arrangement under the new Administration.

One question will be whether this Treaty is compatible with our [~~struck: Federal~~] engagements to Great Britain. I hold it to be the better opinion that it is. It seems to me that the annulling of our Treaties with France is a matter between her and us by which another power ought neither to gain nor lose – that in terminating these differences we might have gone back to the Status quo ante bellum & that no power not put in worse situation than before would have a right to complain.

Y^{rs}. with great [aft & resp]

A Hamilton

H.G Otis. Esq