

The Founding Fathers and the political parties: America's First Major Crisis

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INTRODUCTION



The end of the American Revolution in 1783 gave the colonies their independence from Britain and a peace treaty with generous territorial concessions. Now it remained to construct the United States on republican principles and democratic ideals as American political life thereafter was the political party and its place in the fabric of American politics. This paper is an attempt to survey the rise of the first party system and the contribution of the Founding Fathers to its formation. In other words, this paper will focus on the question of how did early American presidents from George Washington to Andrew Jackson justify their respective individual approaches to the issue of party politics.

The unusual legacy of British rule for Americans lay in the fact that unlike their British fellow subjects of the Mother country, they developed a feeling of patriotism towards their homeland: America. They also had more readiness towards egalitarian principles and institutions compared with other nations of the old world including Mother Country. In practice, there resulted constitutional and political achievements in a record time shortly after independence. Firstly, beginning in 1776 the former colonies -now state- adopted liberal new state constitutions that had no resemblance with the old royal colonial charters that had created them. Secondly, the Articles of

Confederation of 1781 like its revised version of the United State Constitution of 1787 emphasized the popular character of the projected American government. Thirdly, and as a consequence, there emerged a general predisposition among the States to adopt gradual manhood suffrage before the turn of the eighteenth century on a scale that had never existed in history.

Yet, the Federal Constitution that marked the birth of the New Republic did not discuss details pertaining to the structure of the Government or its operative institutions. Major questions like the president's cabinet or political parties were not considered in those

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early days of the Republic. They are not even mentioned in the Constitution. As a matter of fact, as a rule the framers of the Constitution were wary and apprehensive of 'parties' and 'faction' if not simply opposed to them in the first place. Thus, at best parties or political groupings were seen harmful and cynical alliances representing powerful groups, interests and families. At worst, such groupings heralded the disruption of a society⁽¹⁾. This primitive American concept of political partism must reflect the unhealthy reality that was prevalent in European societies of the day, notably Britain and France where the political groupings for the rival royal-bourgeois social elite and peasant-lower social classes fought continuous wars with many bloody episodes to monopolize authority.

Nevertheless, some founding Fathers were more realistic in believing the possibility of political partism arising in a future American. An early messiah of this prophecy was gouverneur Robert Morris of New York who foresaw the phenomenon when he stated in a speech at Philadelphia in 1787 saying:

"In all public bodies there are parties. The executive [president?] will necessarily be more connected with one more than with the other. There will be a personal interest therefore in one of the parties to oppose as well as in the other to support him"⁽²⁾.

More importantly, other Founding Fathers such as James Madison and Thomas Jefferson saw political partism as a necessity. The premise of

their belief was that American society was no different from other peoples of the world to undergo the experience, even though the United States was of a simpler and more republican nature. In recognizing American vulnerability to political factionalism, James Madison wrote in 1787 in his paper N° 10 of the Federalist papers "that a landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest... with many lesser interests grow up of necessity in civilized nations and divide them into different classes actuated by different sentiments and views"⁽³⁾. In other words, to Madison political parties were a necessary evil and almost an inevitable one. However, it is to be noted that the essay is pessimistic in its general portent regarding the profitability of political factionalism to the nation's unity.

for Thomas Jefferson, political parties were initially an abhorring perspective. In March 1789, he told Francis Hopkinson that he had never relished the idea of relating his views on religion, philosophy or politics to those of any party of man. As he put it: "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..."⁽⁴⁾. The irony was that Jefferson's anti-party credo would soon have the opposite effect of seeding an opposition faction in Congress that developed into an Anti-Federalist party to criticize the early American Governments of the 1790's.

The first two presidents of the United States were most dismayed for discovering the reality of partism un-

avoidable in their pioneer Administration. Their disbelief in and unpreparedness for political factionalism left them defencelessly unskilful in approach. So, they tried rather timidly to bypass the phenomenon. Hence while in office, president George Washington thought of his Administration more as a national product, but not a governing party. However, taking the rising Jeffersonian opposition seriously after 1794, he insisted on having only executive officers with "Federal" feelings in his second Administration⁽⁵⁾.

Washington's rather partisan reaction came in response to Jefferson's criticisms of his presidential style. In particular as Secretary of State. Jefferson opposed the Administration's economic programme as drawn by Alexander Hamilton, the Secretary of the Treasury, and its endorsement by president Washington. When John Adams succeeded Washington to the presidency in 1797, he found a strong Anti - Federalists opposition in the House of Representatives that set on his presidential style to the point of destroying his popularity in the presidential election of 1800⁽⁶⁾.

In reality the early crisis of the New Republic between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists through their respective leaders; namely Hamilton and Jefferson grew over serious matters, all of which having constitutional underpinnings. As John D. Lees explains: "In the period 1787 - 1792, the major conflict was over the scope of the power of the national government. It crystallized around the misunderstandings of the Federalists or Hamiltonians and the

Anti - Federalists or Jeffersonians"⁽⁷⁾. The contrast between Hamilton and Jefferson can be described as follows. Hamilton had an expansionist view of the role of the Federal government. In his view, the government could take any decision as long as it was not expressly forbidden in the Constitution. So, while Hamilton and his fellow Federalists strengthened the central government especially through national economic institutions, Jefferson warned of the excesses that might result from such uncontrolled expansion of federal government powers⁽⁸⁾.

Under Jefferson, a movement of discontent took shape in congress and in the Administration during the first two presidential mandates of Washington 1789 - 1797. It ended in the rise of an opposition party labelled variably as the National Republican party, the Democratic Republican party or simply the Republican party⁽⁹⁾ at the turn of the eighteenth century. But, it was after 1800 that Jeffersonianism solidified into a political party. The unifying ideas of this party were a combination of principles aiming to restrict abusive interpretation of the United States constitution and defend states' rights and individuals' rights at large. This body of values became known as Jeffersonian democracy⁽¹⁰⁾.

As it happens, Jefferson's disagreement with Washington developed in the early 1790's over the interpretation of Executive constitutional powers especially with regard to domestic and foreign policy. Jefferson found Hamilton most disagreeable for his "Trot" orien-



tation and great influence on Washington. In brief, the two contenders clashed over the hamiltonian economic programme. The immediate issues were the United States Bank and the assumption of the national debt by the government⁽¹¹⁾. Later on and through John Adams's Administration, Jefferson's disagreement concerned foreign policy notably regarding the French revolution and relations with Great Britain⁽¹²⁾. Jefferson thought that Hamilton was imitating the British Constitution and system of government. Thus, he defended a restrictive interpretation of the Constitution to check the Federalists' broad interpretation of it. This, he took as his personal mission to save the nation from the prospect of monarchical rule. Jefferson believed in an agrarian Republic based on a democratic majority while Hamilton favoured a leading mercantile-industrial élite to promote central government and social order⁽¹³⁾.

Clearly, the rift among the Founding Fathers and the incipient rise of political factionalism can be precisely backdated to the first American presidential Administration of General Washington not before. Whereas Jefferson suspected Washington of naive Hamiltonianism, the president was determined not to accept any factional tendency within his administration. In 1792, Jefferson warned Washington that Hamilton's scheme was to transform him from chief of the magistracy to head of a party; namely the Federalist party. However, sensing that an opposition group was well in place especially after Jefferson's resignation from his Administration in

Decembre 1794, Washington came bluntly in the open to repudiate the opposition. Explaining his rejection of a third presidential mandate due in 1797, he said: "I should not draw a single vote from the Anti-Federal side, and of course I should stand upon no stronger than any other federal well supported"⁽¹⁴⁾.

Under president John Adams (1797-1800), Jefferson's opposition as Vice-president went further. His influence within the House of Representatives gave a tightly organized Republican nucleus. Bitter feelings between the Federalists and the National Republicans during the period arose of disagreement over the conservative policies of John Adams with respect to relations with France and the Alien Enemy and Sedition Acts in particular. In short, the Federalist Administration sought a neutral position towards the French Revolution and the Anglo-French war in the 1790's in the hope to control the spread of Old World's revolutionary ideas to America. However, the Jeffersonian Republicans believed that American democratic principles called for sympathy if not support for the French Revolution and the Jacobean Republic. Similarly, the Sedition Acts of 1798 were meant to check and deport unwanted immigrants from America when Jeffersonian magnanimity saw the United States as the refuge of political exiles and the world's model of democratic toleration⁽¹⁵⁾.

The difference between the Federalist and Anti-Federalist views on both issues was again reducible to their misunderstandings on constitutional

matters. John Adams tried to impose a strong presidential style in domestic and foreign policy to match his predecessor's reputation. But Congress, particularly the Jeffersonian elements, saw in it executive infringement on privileges of the legislature and the states' rights doctrine⁽¹⁶⁾. They simply feared a tyrannical executive. As John Adams let the Hamiltonian stamp feature prominently in his cabinet and programme, congressional dislike for his high-handed presidential style increased accordingly. In other words, whereas the Federalist party of John Adams «so to speak» identified with a hegemonic executive, the Anti-Federalist Republicans identified with a formula of legislature-executive equilibrium, if not some form of congressionally popular presidency; or congressional government in Woodrow Wilson's words.

In that context, it is safe to state that the meaning of political party in American politics came first with the access of Thomas Jefferson to the presidency in 1800. It was imbedded in the factional struggle over conceptual interpretations of the Constitution and not individual or personal interest. Pointing to that referential frame of concepts, Thomas Jefferson told his rival candidate for the presidency: «Mr. Adams, this is not personal contest between you and me. Two systems of principles divide our fellow citizens into two parties». Furthermore, confirming his anti-monarchical view of the executive office, Jefferson strengthened the legislative branch of the Government by enhancing its role almost to match it with the

executive. Chief Justice John Marshall described him saying:

“Mr Jefferson appears to be a man who will embody himself with the House of Representatives. By weakening the office of the president, he will increase his personal power. He will diminish his responsibility, sap the fundamental principles of the government and become the leader of that party which is to be the majority of the legislature”.

So, Jefferson «the president» would level up with the Congress for executive efficiency.

One major consequence of Jefferson's presidential style was that until the mid-1820's, presidents rose to the white House in low profile until the Jacksonian era reinvigorated the lustre of the executive office anew. As a matter of fact, a glance at the presidential voting record shows that between 1809 and 1824, the president-elect had little challenge to face. The reason being probably that firstly most of the rival candidates came from the same political party - ie, Jeffersonians - and secondly the really - threatening contenders of the Federalist camp were no more.

It fell to Andrew Jackson to portray the ideal democratic popular president. Not only his doctrinal affiliations went back to Jefferson's National Republican party but also his political programme embodied much of Jefferson's ideals. Indeed, like Jefferson he was a committed state's righter and a believer in egalitarian democracy. In a statement in July 1832, Jackson said:



ENDNOTES

- (1) - See for example Washington's and Hamilton's views in Heale, Michael J. *The Making of American politics: 1750 - 1850*, 2nd edn. (1977, rpt, London: longman Group Limited, 1979), pp. 87 - 88. And Mutch Robert E «the Role of political parties» Topic, No. 201 [USIS, Was, D.C, 1993] P.15.
- (2) - Farrand, Max ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, 4 Vols. 2nd edn, (1937, rpt, New Haven, Yale U.P. 1966) H.P. 104. See also Harnsberger, Caroline T. ed. *Treasury of presidential quotation*, (Chicago; III: Follet publishing Company, 1964) p. 200
- (3) - Rossiter, Clinton introd, *The Federalist papers*, (New York: The New American Library Inc, 1961) pp 79 - 84. (Mentor Books).
- (4) - Harnsberger, p.220. See also: Agar, Herbert *The price of Union*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1966), p.80.
- (5) - Esmond Wright, *Washington and the American Revolution* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1973), pp-174 - 182
- (6) - Ibid, 186 - 87.
- (7) - Lees, John D. *The Political System of the United States*, 3rd edn. (1969: London, rpt., Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 74.
- (8) - See details in Schlesinger, Arthur M. Jr., *The Imperial presidency*, (London; André Deutsch Ltd, 1973), pp 17 - 20
- (9) - For background history on American Parties in the Jacksonian Era see: Heale, pp. 197 - 202.
- (10) - Grimes, Alan L. *American Political thought*, 2nd edn. (1955, rpt, New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1960) p. 150
- (11) - Thistlethwaite, Frank *The Great Experiment: An Introduction to the History of the American people*, 6th edn. (1955, rpt, Cambridge (U.K), Cambridge U.P., 1977), p. 58. And Nye, Russel B. and Morburgo, John, E, *The Birth of the U.S.A*, vol. 1 of *A History of the United States*. 2 vols, 2nd edn. (1955, rpt, Middlesex. Penguin Books Ltd, 1961) pp. 258 - 60.
- (12) - Thistlethwaite, p. 67 and Heale, 80 - 83.
- (13) - Schlesinger, pp. 17 - 20.
- (14) - Cunliffe, Marcus George *Washington: Man and Monument*, (New York: Mentor Books Ltd, 1960) p. 151.
- (15) - Lees, p. 60.
- (16) - See details in Heale, pp. 81 - 83.