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BROTHERHOOD OF THE REVOLUTION:

HOW AMERICA'S FOUNDERS FORGED A NEW NATION

COURSE GUIDE

Professor Joseph J. Ellis
MT. HOLYOKE COLLEGE

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Course Syllabus

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Photo courtesy of Joseph J. Ellis

About Your Professor

Joseph J. Ellis

Joseph J. Ellis, a professor of history at Mt. Holyoke College, is a nationally recognized scholar of American history from colonial times through the early decades of the American republic. Professor Ellis's distinguished publishing career includes *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation,* for which he was awarded the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for History; *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson,* which received the 1997 National Book Award; *His Excellency: George Washington*; *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams*; *After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture*; and *What Did the Declaration Declare?*

Declaration of Independence
by John Trumbull, 1795

Introduction

This is the story of the American Revolution, the men who made it and who then secured it. It is the story of an improbable victory by a provincial collection of loosely knit colonies over the dominant military and political power in the world. It is also the story of the creation of a nation founded on principles that no one at the time regarded as viable, and that over time have come to be recognized as the most successful recipe for political success in the modern world. The central theme of the story is that the creation of this nation of laws was only made possible by a small group of men known as the Brotherhood of the Revolution.

Lecture 1:
The Revolution and the Generation

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Joseph J. Ellis's *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation.*

The Most Consequential Event in American History

There is no dictionary definition of the American Revolution, but perhaps the best definition is offered by the distinguished historian Edmund Morgan, who said that the American Revolution was a change in human relations so profound and so traumatic that nobody at the time understood it, and that no one even now can understand it. This course attempts to prove Morgan wrong by offering a coherent narrative of events from roughly 1763 to about 1800.

The American Revolution is beyond much question the most consequential event in American history, in part because it comes at the beginning. Nothing that comes after, including the Civil War and the rise of the nation in the twentieth century to a world power, would have been possible if the American colonies had not achieved their independence and established a set of institutions that would eventually make the United States the oldest enduring republic in modern history.

It is also important to recognize that there may be no event in American history that looks more inevitable in retrospect but which at the time was in fact more improbable. The prospect of the thirteen colonies defeating the greatest military and naval power in the world was extremely remote, to say the least.

Who Is the Brotherhood?

The main figures to be discussed in this course are George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Abigail Adams, John Adams, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Paine, and Joseph Plumb Martin (an ordinary soldier in the Continental Army).

Achievements of the Revolutionary Generation and of the Revolution

The American Revolution was the first successful war for colonial independence. Second, it established the first enduring large-scale republic, and third, it invented a liberal recipe for its political and economic character (popular sovereignty and the idea that the energy of individual citizens needs to be released onto the world).

Two corollaries that make the American Revolution distinctive in a larger context are that, unlike subsequent revolutions in France, Russia, and China, there were no guillotines or firing squads. Unlike the major European revolutions, the American Revolution did not "devour its children."

Second, the American Revolution was a collective achievement rather than one led by a single individual, such as Napoleon.

What the Revolution Did Not Achieve

There are some notable things that the Revolution did not achieve. It didn't end patriarchy and establish a gender-free America. It didn't end racism, and it did not establish a society of social and economic equals. These criticisms are not really fair, however, because when making them we are applying our own twentieth-century, multicultural viewpoints to the past.

Two criticisms of the Revolution that are fair, however, are that the Revolution failed to end slavery and failed to provide a solution for the Native-American population.

How Did the Brotherhood Do It?

What factors could have produced the kind of leadership provided by the Brotherhood from such a small population? First, the Generation, being away from Europe, had a certain freedom of movement for conducting their affairs.

Second, the Revolution occurred at a moment in time when ideas for organizing government were available, ideas that wouldn't have been available one-hundred years before. Third, the Generation was post-aristocratic (there was not a titled aristocracy in North America), so persons could rise from low rank, and the Generation pre-democratic (the American "elite" did not have to campaign or run for office).

For the History Books

Many of the Brotherhood came to realize that they were present at the creation and that if the Revolution succeeded, mountain ranges and streets would be named after them. Many were agnostic, so the only path to immortality for them lay in the history books. Therefore, in some sense, we are the audience to which they were playing.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What was the Treaty of Paris of 1763?
2. What was the Revolutionary Generation, and what did it achieve?

Suggested Reading

Ellis, Joseph J. *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation.* New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Bailyn, Bernard. *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence.* New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 1992.

Raphael, Ray, and Howard Zinn. *People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shared the Fight for Independence.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002.

Rhodehamel, John H. *The American Revolution: Writings from the War of Independence.* New York: Library of Congress, 2001.

Wood, Gordon S. *American Revolution: A History.* New York: Random House, 2002.

Lecture 2:
Anglo-America in 1763 and Benjamin Franklin

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is H.W. Brand's *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin.*

Timeline of the Revolution

Where does the American Revolution begin? Seventeen sixty-three is a reasonable date, but there are other alternatives. Both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, in their old age, said they thought the American Revolution began when the first English colonists left England and settled in America. And when does it end? Some say it's not over yet, that the Revolution is a continuing process concerning human equality and rights.

First British Empire

In effect, there was a 150-year competition among Britain, France, and Spain (the Native-American population figured in this as well, especially the so-called Six Nations, or Iroquois Confederation) for control of the eastern third of the North American continent.

France and Spain viewed North America as a source of wealth that could be extracted and brought back to their countries, whereas England projected its people onto the continent. England's version of colonization was a process of peopling North America and cultivating the wealth there.

By the time of the 1750s, competition between France, Spain, and England had taken a violent form in the Seven Years War, or the French and Indian War. In 1763, the end of the war was announced in the Peace of Paris. Great Britain won the entire third of North America east of the Mississippi, and France was expelled as a major power on the North American continent.

This moment of triumph for Great Britain is also ironically the moment when trouble begins between the colonies and the mother country.

The Population

In retrospect, long-term causes can be seen to have been brewing beneath the surface. One was population. The population of the colonies in 1700 was about 250,000. By the middle of the century, it was 1.1 million. By the eve of the Revolution in 1775, it was 2.5 million. The total population was doubling every twenty to twenty-five years.

In 1700, there were twenty Englishmen to every colonist. In 1775, the ratio was three to one. And the economic growth was paralleling the population growth rate.

Land and labor were reversed from what they were in Europe. In England, land was scarce and labor plentiful. In North America, labor was scarce and land plentiful, thereby producing an opportunity for people to work and earn a higher standard of living.

There were four distinctive regions in the colonies: New England had about 360,000 people and was dominated by the city of Boston; the middle colonies of Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey had about 300,000 people; further south, the Chesapeake region had about 370,000 people, with 40 percent of this population African-American and enslaved; and the Carolinas had roughly 200,000 people, with a main crop of rice and an African-American population of 60 percent.

At this stage, there were distinctive regions with distinctive accents, and people did not think of themselves as Americans, but rather as New Englanders or Virginians, for instance.

These demographic forces were causing the British Empire in North America to become increasingly important. The first person to call attention to this increasing importance was Benjamin Franklin, who in 1751 wrote a pamphlet called *Observations on the Increase of Mankind*, in which he explained this demographic data.

Who Is Benjamin Franklin?

Among the Brotherhood, Benjamin Franklin was less a Founding Father than a Founding Grandfather. He was born in the first decade of the eighteenth century, and he died in 1790, so he had incredible longevity. He was also ubiquitous, seeming to appear wherever history was happening.

In 1776, he was at the signing of the Declaration of Independence. He was in Paris as a major negotiator ending the war at the Treaty of Paris in 1783. In 1787, he was at the Constitutional Convention as a delegate.

Benjamin Franklin was also the first discernible American great. He became well known in the 1750s for his discoveries on electricity. Franklin ranks among the leading scientists of the age. He was also a wit and a writer, and Franklin was a self-invented creature who would eventually be regarded as the prototypical American.

In the 1750s and 1760s, Franklin did not consider himself an American. He considered himself a Briton, and he took pride in that. Franklin thought there were democratic forces carrying the power and wealth of the Empire into North America. He thought that America might gradually evolve toward independence, but of course that gradual evolution did not occur.

George III

The reason why it became a revolution and not an evolution had much to do with King George III, who rose to the throne in 1760. He perceived the victory of Britain in North America in 1763 as the occasion for imperial reform.

Up until that time, the only legislation the British held over the colonies were the Navigation Acts, but even these were not taken very seriously or strictly enforced.

George III issued the Proclamation of 1763 to effectively close off migration west of the Allegheny Mountains. One rationale was to protect Native-American groups from having their land taken by settlers. An unstated but strong other reason was to keep the colonists on the coast so they could be controlled more easily.

To monitor this proclamation, ten thousand British troops were stationed on the borders of the Allegheny Mountains. Like the Navigation Acts, the proclamation could not be easily enforced, and the flood of colonists to the west continued.

But because the troops were stationed there at a cost, and because a debt had already been generated from fighting the Seven Years War, George III and his second minister George Greenville began to put together legislation to raise revenue by duty and taxation.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What was the result of the Seven Years War?
2. Why is Benjamin Franklin regarded as the prototypical American?

Suggested Reading

Brands, H.W. *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin.* New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Cohen, Bernard I. *Science and the Founding Fathers: Science in the Political Thought of Jefferson, Franklin, Adams, and Madison.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995.

Franklin, Benjamin. *Benjamin Franklin's* The Art of Virtue: *His Formula for Successful Living.* 3rd ed. Ed. George L. Rogers. Battle Creek, MI: Acorn Publishing, 1996.

Lecture 3:
The Constitutional Crisis, 1763–1774, and John Adams

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is David McCullough's *John Adams.*

Parliamentary Legislation

The first piece of Parliamentary legislation was the Sugar Act, passed in 1764. There was already a duty on molasses, and while the Sugar Act lowered that duty, it said that the duty would from that point on be strictly enforced.

The big piece of Parliamentary legislation happened the following year, in 1765: The Stamp Act placed a tax on all forms of paper: newspaper, playing cards, legal contracts. This was the first direct tax on the American colonies, and the act immediately generated a howl of indignation.

The Declaratory Act came the following year, in 1766. It repealed the Stamp Act, but declared that Parliament had the right to tax the colonies. The Townsend Act was passed in 1767. It was an indirect tax on imported goods: paper, lead, glass, and tea.

The Tea Act in 1770 took away all the other duties in the Townsend Act, but left a duty, as a matter of principle, on tea.

Finally, the Coercive Acts, passed in 1774, essentially imposed military or martial law onto the colony of Massachusetts.

A Single Source of Sovereignty

Benjamin Franklin wrote a pamphlet titled *Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One*, a satire showing that the British ministry's course of action was headed in the wrong direction.

It was clear by the legislation that Parliament believed it important that there be a single source of sovereignty and that that single source must be Parliament itself.

No Taxation Without Representation

What is the constitutional argument Americans made against the imperial agenda? In short, no taxation without representation. What that means is that according to the colonists, by British law no British citizen could be taxed without his consent, that taking property without consent was a violation of the Magna Carta.

In addition to the legal arguments, mobs, often called the Sons of Liberty, were forming in the streets. These mobs were reasonably well organized and tended not to seek violence against persons, but against property. So a mob might, for example, pull down a tax collector's house. A more famous example is that of the Boston Tea Party.

There were also boycotts in addition to mobs. Starting in 1767, the colonists decided to respond to Parliamentary policy by refusing to import taxed goods.

Pamphlets

It is remarkable that there was a consistency from colony to colony in colonial response to British policy, and this response was that the authority to tax lay in local assemblies.

The American response took several forms. The first was written: pamphlet literature distributed in taverns.

One aspect of pamphlet literature was a passionate and at times paranoid accusation that there was a plot to enslave the American people, and once the colonists admitted the process of taxation, they would become vulnerable to total enslavement. John Adams himself made such an argument.

John Adams

John Adams was born in Braintree, Massachusetts, in 1735. He died in 1826, and in his ninety-one years traveled as far as any member of the Revolutionary generation.

Adams went to Harvard, where class rank was based on social standing and family standing, and Adams was ranked in the bottom of the middle third of his class. Upon graduation, his father wanted him to become a minister, but Adams did not feel that call. Still, he wanted to bring that kind of religious zeal to whatever it was he did.

In the 1750s and 1760s, he began to practice law and married Abigail Smith. He started his family, having first a girl and then a boy, John Quincy, thus forming a family that is arguably the greatest family in terms of public service in all of American history.

A Great Cause

In this time, Adams was looking for a cause. In 1765, he published *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, in which he sees the Stamp Act as a "tyrannical engine designed to enslave all America."

Adams was active through the 1760s in Boston's Committees of Correspondence, and in 1774 he published one of the leading pamphlets, *Novanglus*, which declared that Parliament had no authority whatsoever (in regards to legislation as well as taxation) over the colonists.

The Boston Massacre occurred in 1770, during which five people were killed and eight wounded after a group of British troops was taunted by a mob. John Adams agreed to defend the British officers and got most of them off completely (a few were given small punishments). This was characteristically Adams in that he felt that control must be exerted to prevent mob rule.

Adams was a revolutionary who was a conservative. He wanted independence, but did not wish to unleash a democratic force that would sweep away the social order that already existed. By defending the British officers, he wanted to show Britain and the world that they would operate by the rule of law and that the British officers would get a fair trial.

The Confusion of History

At the Continental Congress in 1774 and 1775, Adams became one of the leading orators in favor of American independence. He was called the “Atlas” of American independence, and Thomas Jefferson later called him “our Colossus.” He was a major figure pushing the colonies toward independence at a time when the bulk of the delegates at the Continental Congress remained committed to some form of reconciliation.

Adams’s letters and diaries give a sense of how confused and inchoate events seemed at the time. What’s clear from the correspondence is the turmoil sweeping all people up in that moment of time. It was one of the reasons that Adams would later oppose a Jeffersonian interpretation of the Revolution as a clear moral conflict between the forces of light and darkness.

Adams helps us to recover the sense of the Revolution as a chaotic event, and he is an example of a person whose life was shaped by the American Revolution. He is also an important example of why the American Revolution did not follow the course of the French Revolution. He believed it was a political revolution, but he did not believe it was a fundamentally social revolution.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What was the consistent American response to British policy?
2. Why did John Adams defend the British soldiers after the Boston Massacre?

Suggested Reading

McCullough, David. *John Adams.* New York: Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Akers, Charles W. *Abigail Adams: An American Woman.* Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1999.

Diggins, John Patrick, Arthur M. Schlesinger, and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *John Adams: The American Presidents Series.* New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2003.

Lecture 4:
The Imperial Crisis, 1763–1775, and George Washington

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Joseph J. Ellis's *His Excellency: George Washington.*

First in War

George Washington is perhaps the most famous American of all. In one of his eulogies, Washington was called the "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

But in most history books Washington is more a person of granite and marble than he is a person of flesh and blood. He is perceived as silent, as aloof. He is in some sense so great that we don't have to talk about him or explain why he is so great. So in many ways, he is impenetrable.

Who Was Washington?

Where did he come from and how can we get to know him in a way that makes him a human being, instead of a granite icon? He was born in 1732 in Virginia along the banks of the Potomac not far from Mount Vernon. He was a fourth-generation American. He came from a family that was not impoverished, but neither was he in the top tier of the Virginia aristocracy.

From a very early age he had to see himself as a person who was going to have to earn his own way. Whereas John Adams went to Harvard and became a student, Washington went to war and became a soldier. War really was the source of his education as a young man.

Washington was sent on a mission to negotiate with the French just before the start of the French and Indian War. He was then made an officer in the Virginia militia, and his first action had him occupy a position called Fort Necessity, where he was immediately surrounded by the French and Indians and was humiliatingly defeated.

In 1775, he accompanied General Braddock on an expedition to the western part of Pennsylvania and what is now Pittsburgh. There, in the Battle of the Monongahela, Washington had three horses shot out from under him. He had five bullet holes through his coat, but he was not hit. The myth began to grow that he was a person who was protected by Providence.

A Man of Action

The best way to understand Washington is not as an intellectual, but as a man of action. In 1758, he left the army and married Martha Custis Dandidge, who was the richest widow in Virginia. He inherited her fortune and at roughly the same time his older half-brother died and he inherited the estate at Mount Vernon.

He began to develop his stature as a planter in the 1750s. Whereas John Adams came to view British power in terms of Parliament's unlawful authority, Washington's view of the empire wasn't driven by this sense of Parliament.

As a planter, Washington began to realize that the British commerce system was rigged to drive him toward bankruptcy, and most of the planters in Virginia at the time were having the same experience. The total debt of the Virginia planters in 1765 to Great Britain and Scottish debtors was in excess of two million pounds.

So for Adams, it was a political plot, but for Washington, it was the economically rigged system that in a sense made him a slave to British interests.

Nonimportation

Because of the French and Indian War, Washington was awarded for his service with a substantial plot of land in the Trans-Allegheny West, the so-called Ohio Country. He then purchased plots of land in southwestern Pennsylvania, southwestern Ohio, and northwestern West Virginia totaling about fifty-thousand acres.

In 1768, the British ministry announced that all American land claims in the region specified by the Proclamation of 1763 were void, so Washington was essentially being told that his fifty-thousand acres didn't belong to him. And he heard rumors that British investors intended to assume control of that land.

In the late 1760s and early 1770s, Washington was not one of the most prominent figures in Virginia in regard to opposing British policy, but he was interested in encouraging nonimportation. Washington didn't believe that eloquent arguments would win their case. He believed that they would win their case by exercising influence economically by convincing the British government that it was not in their best economic interests to impose taxes. By refusing to purchase goods from England, they could exert their influence on Parliament.

The Brink of War

In the first Continental Congress, Washington was selected as one of the members of the Virginia delegation, and he voted for an American-wide nonimportation of British goods. By 1775, however, Washington had become a much more significant figure on the Virginia scene. By that time it was becoming more and more likely that the constitutional conflict would become a military one, and Washington had a reputation as a prominent military leader. He was encouraged by many to assume a greater degree of leadership in opposition to British policy.

In the spring of 1775, skirmishes at Lexington and Concord effectively became the shot heard round the world, and the first shots in the war for independence. Washington attended the second Continental Congress right after Lexington and Concord, and he was the only person to attend the congress wearing a military uniform. There was speculation that Washington was effectively campaigning to become the head of the Continental Army.

After Lexington and Concord, the Continental Congress met to decide what to do in response to the British occupation of Boston. John Adams nominated Washington to be the head of the American forces gathered outside Boston.

But why nominate Washington? There were former British officers in the colonies with more military experience. The answer is perhaps that Washington was campaigning for the position, but the deeper answer is that Adams understood that the head of the American army needed to be a Virginian.

Washington moved from Philadelphia toward Boston, and at the time that he was on the move the Battle of Bunker Hill took place. About two thousand British soldiers charged the Americans and suffered about half that number in casualties.

Washington assumed command of the army outside Boston on July 3, 1775. The war had begun. Washington had been appointed commander of the army, but note that a formal declaration of independence was still a year away.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did Washington's view of British policy differ from Adams's view?
2. Why was Washington chosen as commander of the Continental Army?

Suggested Reading

Ellis, Joseph J. *His Excellency: George Washington.* New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2004.

Other Books of Interest

Washington, George. *George Washington: Writings.* Ed. John Rhodehamel. New York: Library of America, 1997.

Wiencek, Henry. *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

Lecture 5:
The Spirit of '76 and Thomas Jefferson

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Joseph J. Ellis's *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson.*

Common Sense

Thomas Paine, in January of 1776, published in Philadelphia a pamphlet called *Common Sense*. Paine was a relatively obscure figure, having arrived from England little more than a year earlier from a working-class background.

With *Common Sense*, Paine did what every American journalist since has wanted to do: He published a piece of journalism that fundamentally influenced the way that history happened. It can be argued that *Common Sense* is the single most significant and influential piece of journalism in all of American history.

The significance of *Common Sense* is explained by three considerations. First is its message. *Common Sense* is a direct frontal attack on both George III and the monarchy. To that point, the American resistance had not been directed at the king. It was thought that evil ministers of the king had led him down the wrong path. The illusion was sustained that George III and his ministers really didn't know what Parliament was doing. In *Common Sense*, the whole idea of monarchy and the idea of divine ordination was assaulted.

Second was style. Preceding pamphlets had been written by people trained in the law writing in a style intended for people well read in constitutional theory. The language of *Common Sense* is, simply put, commonsensical, and does not require specialized knowledge. In Paine's view, the issue had less to do with the complex history of the British constitution as much as it did with the fact that "an island cannot rule a continent." According to the parent-child metaphor, in Paine's view, at some point the child must grow up. Paine saw the separation of the American colonies from Britain as inevitable.

Finally, *Common Sense* had exquisite timing. Until January of 1776, the moderates at the Continental Congress had clung to the illusion that George III would eventually come to his senses. But it was clear by this time that the king had declared economic war against the colonies and was preparing to send a huge force across the Atlantic to stamp out the rebellion.

Free and Independent States

In Philadelphia, John Adams was achieving fame as the leading figure in the Continental Congress, and he was pushing people to the position of achieving independence. Adams labeled May 15 as the day that led to independence, because on that day, Adams proposed that the respective colonies call themselves states and draft state constitutions to replace the old colonial constitutions. For Adams, the move to independence wasn't just the rejection of authority, but the imposition of a new authority under their own control.

The Virginia delegation caucused in late May. Richard Henry Lee, speaker for the Virginia delegation, proposed on June 7 that the united colonies by right ought to be "free and independent states."

A Committee of Five

The leadership of the Continental Congress at this time released those delegates who needed to get final approval from their constituents before voting on independence. While those delegates were away, the congress decided to appoint a committee of five to justify independence to the rest of the world.

The five members were John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, Roger Sherman, and Thomas Jefferson.

Franklin was generally regarded by most Americans as the most deft prose stylist and the most famous writer in all of America. But Franklin rejected the offer to draft the Declaration of Independence because he would not draft a document that would be edited by a committee (his health, notably his gout, may have also played a role). The honor instead went to Thomas Jefferson.

Thomas Jefferson

One of the main reasons John Adams selected Jefferson to draft the Declaration was because he needed a Virginian. To this point in the congress, Jefferson had said very little. His usefulness was not as a speaker or orator. His major skill was sitting by himself and crafting language.

Jefferson was born in April of 1743 in Albemarle County in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. His father died when he was a young man. He went to the College of William and Mary in 1760 and was extremely studious. He studied law for a period of five years and was elected to the House of Burgesses in 1769. From the beginning, he opposed all forms of British taxation and supported all efforts at nonimportation.

Jefferson married Martha Wayles Skelton, a widow, in 1772, and her dowry more than doubled his holdings in land and slaves. He then owned approximately ten thousand acres and two hundred slaves.

In 1774, his pamphlet *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* was published (without his knowledge). It received a great deal of attention throughout the colonies and rejected all Parliamentary authority over the colonies. Jefferson maintained that the set of policies British Parliament set upon them was not inadvertent or ill-advised but a "systematical plan for reducing us to slavery."

Garden of Eden

There is a distinctive dimension to Jefferson's mentality that isn't seen in any other member of the Revolutionary generation. In Jefferson's view, there was always a "once upon a time" place where purity existed before it was contaminated, where there were free people living together voluntarily without government to impose itself on them. Jefferson described the American colonies before 1763 as a kind of Garden of Eden. His idea then was liberation from corruptive authority.

On June 11 and 12 of 1776, Jefferson went to his apartment on the second floor of 7th and Market Street in New York and began to write what would subsequently become the magic words of American history.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is the significance of *Common Sense*?
2. What was distinctive about Jefferson's view of the Revolution?

Suggested Reading

Ellis, Joseph J. *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson.* New York: Random House, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Adams, James Truslow. *Jeffersonian Principles: Extracts from the Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. Rochester, NY: Simon Publications, 2001.

Malone, Dumas. *Jefferson and His Time.* Vols. 1–6. New York: Little, Brown & Company, 1972.

Paine, Thomas. *The Life and Major Writings of Thomas Paine.* Ed. Philip Sheldon Foner. Bridgewater, NJ: Replica Books, 2000.

Lecture 6:
What the Declaration Declared

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Pauline Maier's *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence.*

Drafting the Declaration

How did the Declaration of Independence get written? The committee of five appointed to write it met once in early June and talked about what they thought the document should look like, so there were some suggestions about its basic outline.

Jefferson probably wrote the first draft in two days, after which he showed the draft to Adams and Franklin. At that moment, one change was made: The original draft said "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable." Franklin changed it to "We hold these truths to be self-evident," because that change allowed it to have a more secular tone.

On June 28, the committee of five presented the Jefferson draft to the entire congress. On July 1 and 2, debate began in the Continental Congress on Richard Henry Lee's motion to commit to independence. The vote passed on July 2, and right away the Continental Congress began discussing the language of Jefferson's draft. They debated the draft on July 2, 3, and 4.

They ended up changing about one-quarter of the draft. At that time, and up until the 1790s, most people did not think of the Declaration of Independence as something Jefferson wrote. It was regarded as a document produced by the entire congress.

During the debate over the language of the document, Jefferson listened in silence, but inwardly he regarded every change as a defacement. Most scholars and historians, however, regard the changes for the most part as stylistic and substantive improvements.

The Signing

The Declaration of Independence was not signed on July 4. It was simply sent to the printer on that date. The actual document was not signed until early August (usually thought to be August 2 or 6), and there were people signing all the way into September and October.

The people signing the document recognized at the time that what they were doing was extremely fateful, that their own lives were at risk, and that they could very well be hunted down, tried for treason, and hung.

The Grievances

There are two sections in the Declaration of Independence that deserve attention. One is the grievances section, which is two-thirds of the text. This is the section of the Declaration that people today care the least about, but that the delegates at the Continental Congress cared the most about.

There are three reasons for this litany of indictments against George III. First, the colonies had experienced the preceding fifteen or sixteen years differently, so somebody needed to tell the story of imperial coercion from a point of view that bound all the colonies together.

Second, though Paine's *Common Sense* had depicted George III as the culprit, there had not been any action at that point by the congress to do the same thing.

Third, while the point of the Declaration of Independence was to justify independence, the justification, in keeping with other documents in English history accusing the ruling power of such crimes, had to take the form of an indictment, a string of abuses, before the independence of America could be legitimately proclaimed.

A Notable Deletion

There is one other important deletion from Jefferson's draft that deserves notice: There is a section that Jefferson wrote that blames the slave trade and slavery itself on George III. Some historians have suggested that Jefferson did this as part of a larger project to move America toward emancipation at the same time it was moving toward independence.

Most of the section, however, has to do with the slave trade and not slavery itself. In Virginia, almost all the planters opposed the slave trade because they already had enough slaves and would make a profit by selling their slaves to the Deep South. Eliminating the slave trade would increase the value of their own slave population, so it was an economic argument more than a moral one.

It's clear that the other members of the congress deleted the section because they didn't want slavery mentioned in a document that would be so public. Slavery is not mentioned in the Constitution either. There seems to have been a recognition by many members of the congress that slavery was incompatible with the values that the Revolution was proclaiming.

The Natural Rights Section

The most famous section, the "natural rights" section, contains what some regard as the most famous fifty-five words in American history:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

Abraham Lincoln, in the 1850s, said the following:

> All honor to Jefferson, to the man who had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document an abstract truth, and so to embalm it there, that today, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression.

What is this abstract truth? The Declaration is declaring the right of a people to overthrow tyrannical or despotic government. This fundamental principle is

not original to Jefferson. It has origins in English history and its most famous theoretical version is in John Locke, who wrote “life, liberty, and property,” whereas Jefferson wrote “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

The phrase “pursuit of happiness” came from George Mason, who was constructing the Virginia constitution while Jefferson was drafting the Declaration of Independence. Mason said, “life, liberty, property, and the right to pursue our happiness.” Jefferson was sent copies of what Mason was writing and versions of Mason’s text were also printed in the press.

This line of the Declaration might be a better place to look for where Jefferson might be making a statement about slavery. It’s subtle, but by dropping “property” (the major slaveholders’ defense was their right to property), slavery could have been on Jefferson’s mind. But Jefferson was also trying to say that the right to pursue happiness was a broader way to live our lives than merely the pursuit of material gain. This could be seen as an anti-capitalistic statement, and it’s a measure of Jefferson’s genius that the felicitous language he used is susceptible to the range of interpretations that it is.

Original Intention

The function of the document was to declare independence, but the meaning of the document would grow in subsequent years, and the section of the document that nobody cared about would expand in meaning and the document would become the statement of the values on which the United States came to be founded. Lincoln said the true original intentions of America are located in the Declaration of Independence, that it is the true moral and philosophical foundation on which the Constitution rests.

The rights put forth in the Declaration of Independence would expand over time to be the centerpiece of the liberal tradition in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American history.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What was Franklin's change to the Declaration of Independence?
2. What was the purpose of the grievances section of the Declaration of Independence?

Suggested Reading

Maier, Pauline. *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*. New York: Random House, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Brindell, Dennis, and Michael McCurdy. *The Signers: The Fifty-Six Stories Behind the Declaration of Independence*. New York: Walker & Co., 2002.

Fehrenbach, T.R. *Greatness to Spare: The Heroic Sacrifices of the Men Who Signed the Declaration of Independence.* Bridgewater, NJ: Replica Books, 2002.

Lecture 7:
The Long War, 1775–1783, and Joseph Plumb Martin

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Joseph Plumb Martin's *Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier: Some of the Adventures, Dangers, and Sufferings of Joseph Plumb Martin.*

Bunker Hill

Lexington and Concord were mere skirmishes, but the Battle of Bunker Hill was a major battle. The British advanced on Bunker Hill with 2,200 troops and lost approximately one thousand men in one day's battle. Back in England, many veteran British officers were aghast, because they believed the Redcoat army would be able to march invincibly through the American colonies.

The Americans drew the conclusion that the militia and an army of volunteer minutemen could compete against the professional army of Great Britain and defeat them, or at least not be defeated by them. But the subsequent events would demonstrate that the American militia as regular fighting forces could not compete with the British army.

In the summer of 1776, Washington went to New York, and the Howe brothers, Admiral Richard Howe and General William Howe, landed on Staten Island with a force of approximately thirty-two-thousand troops, the largest amphibious force ever to cross the Atlantic.

A Long and Bloody Conflict

The Revolution lasted for seven and a half years. Both sides, at the start, believed it would be a short war. It is in fact the second longest war in American history (only the Vietnam War is longer). Total American casualties in the Revolution numbered approximately twenty-five thousand deaths.

The American Revolution also occurred in the midst of a virulent smallpox epidemic that would itself kill over one hundred thousand people on the North American continent.

A Vital Decision

The biggest strategic decision Washington made may have been to inoculate the Continental Army (a decision he made early on) and insist that all subsequent troops be inoculated before serving. Without this, it's possible the army would have been decimated, if not annihilated, by disease.

The First Phase

The war can be divided into two phases: The first is 1776 to 1780, when the bulk of the battles were fought in the mid-Atlantic area in an arc running roughly from Philadelphia up through New Jersey, north of New York, past Albany, and down into the foothills of western Connecticut.

The first stage proved a debacle for the American army. Washington brought his army to New York and attempted to confront a superior force of British regulars with approximately fifteen thousand Continentals. He was defeated soundly on Long Island. He managed to evacuate some forces off Long Island and was then defeated again in Manhattan. Fort Washington was another debacle, and three thousand American troops were captured.

Washington then fled from White Plains across the Hudson and into New Jersey. It was at this moment in the war that Thomas Paine wrote a series called *The Crisis* ("These are the times that try men's souls . . .").

If General Howe had avidly pursued the Continental Army at that moment, there is almost no question that the war would have been over. Why didn't he? Because he had a mistress in New York? Because it was the habit of the army to retire when the weather turned cold? It is not entirely clear. But it was a great chance that the British let slip away.

Bold Moves

Washington, in December and January of 1776 and 1777, made two bold moves. They were mere skirmishes, but they had an incredible psychological effect. One was at Trenton, the inspiration for the famous portrait of Washington crossing the Delaware. Did he actually stand in the prow of the boat? Probably not. Was Washington himself directly involved in the military operation at night to attack the Hessian troops at Trenton? Yes, he was.

Right after Trenton was the Battle of Princeton, still a skirmish, but somewhat larger than Trenton. In this battle, the British were behind a ridge at the top of a hill. Two segments of the Continental Army had come together, one from Pennsylvania and one from Connecticut. They were paused at the base of the hill. Washington saw their hesitation and went in front of them on his white charger. He then proceeded to advance to one hundred meters.

The British fire began to strike people in the first and second rank, and cannon shot was sweeping out whole segments. Washington then moved to fifty meters, and the whole front line began to collapse. He prepared to order his men to fire and the British ordered a salvo. The whole front line went down, but Washington wasn't hurt. He said, "It's a foxhunt, boys. After them!" The troops responded and recorded a victory. A similar thing happened at Yorktown, where Washington stood untouched in heavy fire.

In the next two years, several engagements were fought, mostly in the area of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. These engagements included the Battles of Brandywine, Germantown, and Monmouth Courthouse. At each of these battles, two things became clear.

One, the American Continental Army was not capable of competing on an equal basis with the professional British force if the numbers were equal. Two, Washington had begun to understand that his strategy in New York to confront the British needed to be replaced with a new strategy. He came to adopt a Fabian strategy, named after the Roman general Fabius, who instead of attacking the Carthaginians, decided to attack and recede, never engaging in one decisive battle. In 1777, Washington was coming to realize that he didn't have to win the war. He just had to not lose it.

Saratoga

Many historians would say that the decisive battle of the war occurred in 1777 at Saratoga. Washington himself was not directly involved. The Continental Army was commanded by Horatio Gates. Saratoga is important for two reasons: It defeated the British effort to capture the eastern Hudson Corridor and seal off New England from the other colonies, and it brought the French into the war. And this French allegiance was critical to the war effort.

The Second Stage

The second stage of the war occurred in the South. This was the war in the Carolinas and Georgia. Washington sent his ablest general, Nathaniel Green, generally regarded as the most brilliant strategist and tactician on the American side during the war.

The Battles of Camden and Charleston were huge defeats, but Cowpens and Guilford Courthouse proved to be victories for the Americans. After Guilford Courthouse, British general Charles Cornwallis removed his forces from the Carolinas and moved them to Virginia. It is that decision that placed him on the Yorktown Peninsula in 1781, where the French fleet bottled him up from the coast, leading to the decisive battle of the war: Yorktown.

British Resolve and Difficulties

Why did the British fight so long? There are many parallels between the British in the Revolution and the United States in Vietnam. The British believed that if they allowed the colonists to leave the empire, it would set up a domino effect that would eventually destroy their empire in other parts of the world. They were also overconfident and had a somewhat arrogant sense of their own military power.

The British had a couple of major problems to overcome, however. One was distance. They had to move and equip a force from England all the way across the Atlantic. There was also another kind of space problem: the vastness of the theater. What did they need to conquer or destroy? Philadelphia? New York? Boston? Charleston? Savannah? In the end, they realized, too late, that the strategic center of the American military was the Continental Army itself.

The Continental Army

If the Continental Army's ability to sustain itself was the critical consideration, then Valley Forge was really the pivotal moment in the war. It was not a battle, but it was at Valley Forge where the army was on the verge of dissolution. The Continental Congress was failing to keep promises for food and pay. Individual states refused to meet their enlistment objectives. And most Americans at that time wanted the war to go away.

In the Continental Army, there was a core group of about five thousand volunteers who had served for the bulk of the war. The Continental Army was not representative of the American population. It was made up of indentured servants, landless sons, people without any prospects, recent Irish immigrants, and emancipated slaves. The Continental Army was 15 percent African American, and the units were integrated with no racial segregation.

Joseph Plumb Martin left the only comprehensive memoir by an American soldier serving in the Continental Army. It was titled *Private Yankee Doodle*. Martin was from Connecticut and was raised in western Massachusetts by his grandparents. He had no real prospects and no land coming to him. At fifteen, he heard about the Battle of Bunker Hill. He was caught up in the glory of war and signed up for the Continental Army. But why did he stay? His memoir describes starvation, scant clothing, and deaths of friends.

Martin served to the end of the war and then became a small farmer in Maine, where he wrote his memoir. Above all, he was a symbol of the commitment of impoverished, working-class Americans to the cause.

The Greatest Man in the World

At the end of the war, the army was stationed at Newburg, waiting for the treaty ending the war. A group of officers, probably plotting with others in Philadelphia, conspired to have the army march into Philadelphia and seize control, after which there would be a military dictatorship with Washington as its head, probably crowned the new American king.

But Washington refused this scenario, maintaining that they had been fighting on the principles of republicanism and would remain a republic. In that moment, he became the American Cincinnatus, the Roman general who retired to his plow to live at the end of the war. Washington surrendered his commission and headed to Mount Vernon, where he just made it in time for Christmas Eve of 1783.

Shortly thereafter, George III was told that Washington had rejected the offer to become king. George III said, “I’m not sure if it’s true, but if it is true, he will be the greatest man in the world.”

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What was Washington beginning to realize in 1777?
2. What difficulties did the British face in fighting the war?

Suggested Reading

Martin, Joseph Plumb. *Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier: Some of the Adventures, Dangers, and Sufferings of Joseph Plumb Martin.* New York: Signet Classics, 2001.

Other Books of Interest

Martin, Joseph Plumb. *Ordinary Courage: The Life of Joseph Plumb Martin.* Ed. James K. Martin. New York: Brandywine Press, 1993.

Lecture 8:
Confederation to Constitution and Alexander Hamilton

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton.*

The Articles of Confederation

The Continental Congress had been acting as a de facto national government since 1775, but in the Articles of Confederation, there was no real executive. The president was there mostly to "preside."

Under the Articles, real power lay with the states. It was one state, one vote, so Delaware had the same number of votes as a much larger state like Virginia. It was not truly a representative government, nor was it a national government in any meaningful sense of the term. It was a confederation of states in which sovereignty resided, in the end, with the states themselves.

The government created by the Articles pretty accurately reflected the political ideology of many Americans of the day, who didn't want a strong central government that might be as tyrannical or corrupt as the British government they had just overthrown.

The Confederation governed until 1789, during which time several systematic problems emerged. Perhaps the most important problem was debt: state debt, federal debt, and foreign debt, to the tune of approximately $150 million. The government's response was to print more money, so inflation was rampant and American credit poor.

There was also frontier violence, especially in Kentucky and Ohio, but the Articles did not allow for a standing army. There were also European predators lurking to the west, including both England and Spain. England continued to maintain one thousand troops in the western region, presuming the United States was about to fall apart into a collection of state or regional sovereignties.

Paradoxically, the very values on which the Revolution was based seemed to prohibit the creation of the kind of strong federal government needed to cope with the problems that the Revolution had created.

Did American independence imply American nationhood? Could power and liberty by readjusted? The Articles seemed to suggest that power had to be feared and only liberty embraced.

Hamilton and Madison Step Forward

Two men stepped forward to play a crucial role in moving the Articles of Confederation toward a more energetic form of national government. The first was Alexander Hamilton, born in the Caribbean and raised in St. Croix. He was a child prodigy. Compared to the other Founding Brothers, Hamilton probably came from the furthest back in the pack, and is a stellar example of

how American society was open to talent in a way that would have been unimaginable in England or Europe.

Hamilton was brought to the United States by a group of ministers who wanted him to attend Princeton, but he insisted on attending at his own pace (he wanted an accelerated program), and so was sent to King's College, now Columbia University.

The war broke out and he immediately signed on as an artillery officer, and Hamilton became an aide-de-camp to Washington. At Yorktown, in typical fashion, Hamilton persuaded Washington to let him lead a bayonet charge.

In 1781 and 1782, Hamilton wrote a series of six essays called *The Continentalist*, a blueprint for a fully empowered federal government. It was also a strong argument for fiscal responsibility as a central ingredient for American independence.

Hamilton played a leading role in convening a convention in Annapolis, Maryland, in 1786, where five states came together to discuss interstate commerce and whether there could be reform of the Articles. There he met James Madison for the first time.

Madison

James Madison was born in Orange County, Virginia, in 1751, and he went on to Princeton in 1769. Madison's public service began in the Virginia Council and he moved on to the Confederation Congress. Whereas Hamilton's main focus was economic, Madison's was political, as he saw local and state interests trumping larger national concerns.

By the middle of the 1780s, disenchanted with the government under the Articles of Confederation, and seeing the best leaders serving in state governments, Madison began to form the idea of federalism: an attempt to devise a political system in which there is shared, or overlapping, sovereignty between the federal and the state governments.

The Constitutional Convention

Only a very few people actually thought that the Articles of Confederation needed to be changed. The truth is that the vast majority of Americans were wholly indifferent. From the viewpoint of many, the Revolution had not been about forming a new nation, but a movement by thirteen colonies who temporarily came together to defeat Britain, and who would then go back to being their own independent selves.

Hamilton and Madison represented a small branch who wanted a fundamental reform of the Articles of Confederation. The Constitutional Convention was very much an elitist movement. The trigger that gave the group credibility was the insurrection in western Massachusetts in 1786 that came to be called Shays' Rebellion after Daniel Shays, one of the leaders of the rebellion.

About twelve hundred local farmers rose up to oppose the taxation imposed by Boston and mortgage foreclosures in the wake of an economic crisis in New England. The number of rebels was exaggerated in the press, and the rebellion was put down by the Massachusetts militia. It is interesting that most of the rebels were themselves former militia.

No matter the scope of the rebellion, in the mind of people like Hamilton and Madison, the rebellion was a sign of imminent anarchy.

Fundamental Change

One of the crucial things that happened in 1786 was the agreement of George Washington to attend the Constitutional Convention. At this time, Madison started to coach Washington in political theory.

In May of 1787, fifty-five delegates gathered in Philadelphia. Those who didn't wish any fundamental change in the Articles simply boycotted the convention. The Virginians gathered early and Madison became their leader. He then put together a set of propositions that effectively set the agenda for the Constitutional Convention.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Where did the real power reside under the Articles of Confederation?
2. What was Madison's idea of federalism?

Suggested Reading

Chernow, Ron. *Alexander Hamilton.* New York: Penguin, 2005.

Other Books of Interest

Callahan, Kerry P., and Heather Moehn. *Articles of Confederation: A Primary Source.* New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2003.

Feinberg, Barbara Silberdick. *Articles of Confederation: The First Constitution of the United States*. Brookfield: Millbrook Press, 2002.

Lecture 9:
A More Perfect Union and James Madison

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Marvin Meyers's (ed.) *The Mind of the Founder: Sources of the Political Thought of James Madison.*

A Far-Reaching Debate

The debate in the Constitutional Convention that occurred in the summer of 1787 (and the subsequent multisided debate that occurred in the states who needed to ratify the results of the Convention in 1788) was the most intense, far-reaching, and consequential debate in all of American history.

The Constitution

The Constitution of the United States begins, "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union . . ."

What is a "more perfect" union? It is obvious that the "less perfect" union was implied to be that established under the Articles of Confederation. That government was weak and had a single-house legislature and a virtually powerless executive branch. It had no national judiciary, and sovereignty was presumed to lie with the states. The government was at most a compact of states.

The Articles were not equipped to provide any kind of coherent national policy and the fiscal policy of this confederation was in a shambles.

People today presume that a sovereign American nation was the direct, logical, inevitable consequence of the American Revolution. Quite the opposite, all the arguments used to discredit Parliament and the king's authority over the colonies could be used to stigmatize any and all concentrations of power at the national and federal level. The Constitution was then a new chapter calling for a fundamental rearrangement of the political structure.

We the People?

The framers of the Constitution were fifty-five white men, mostly propertied and prominent, hardly representative of the population as a whole. They met in Philadelphia behind closed doors, and it was a very secret operation. Most people around the country would not know what they talked about until they actually published the document in September of 1787.

Three Divisions

Most historians have concluded that there were three divisions within the delegates at the Constitutional Convention. The first was the difference between those who wished to moderately reform the Articles and those who wished to fundamentally change them.

The second division was between big states and small states. Big states like Virginia and Massachusetts and Pennsylvania wished to ensure that any new political arrangement allowed for their own relative primacy to continue. The small states like New Jersey and Delaware were concerned that any new arrangement provided them with some protection from being swallowed up by the interests of their larger neighbors.

Third, there was a division between commercial and agrarian interests. Commercial interests included the merchant class, banking class, and those who made their living by moving their money around in fluid forms of capital. Agrarian interests identified their source of wealth in terms of land. There is then a sectional division here. The commercial interests tended to be northern and the agrarian a southern interest group. And underlying the sectional division was the huge unspoken element: slavery.

The Virginia Plan

The Virginia Plan set the agenda for the convention. It was drafted primarily by James Madison and proposed the following: First, there would be a bicameral legislature in which representation in both houses would be proportional.

Second, there would be a strengthened executive, although Madison didn't talk much about this for fear the executive would appear to begin to look like a monarch. Third, there should be an independent federal judiciary, some kind of court system with jurisdiction that oversaw the different state jurisdictions.

Finally, there should be a federal veto over all state laws. This was the clearest statement of federal or national sovereignty.

The Great Compromise

The Great Compromise occurred in July of 1787. The delegates were caught up in a fundamental division over how to define representation, and the compromise called for representation by state in the Senate and for representation by population in the House. This compromise also became the basis for the electoral college.

The Executive

The debate over the executive was haunted throughout the convention by the fear of monarchy. They ended up talking more about how to elect a president, how long he could serve, and how to remove him than about what his powers were. They debated having one seven-year term and having multiple presidents in a type of committee that would change every six months. Eventually, they ended up with the concept of a four-year term that would be renewable.

The Judiciary

The debate over the judiciary was even murkier, because the creation of a national court system had a menacing look to many of the people in the states. Judicial review, the concept of the superiority of the Supreme Court in interpreting the Constitution, had not yet been considered. The one thing the Supreme Court could not be according to many observers at the time was, in effect, supreme.

Franklin Consents

At the end of the convention, Benjamin Franklin made the following statement, which is illustrative of how the delegates regarded their work:

> I confess that I do not entirely approve of this Constitution at present; but, sir, I am not sure I shall never approve of it, for, having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged, by better information or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that, the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment of others. . . .
>
> In these sentiments, sir, I agree to this Constitution with all its faults—if they are such—because I think a general government necessary for us . . .
>
> I doubt, too, whether any other convention we can obtain may be able to make a better Constitution; for, when you assemble a number of men, to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views. From such an assembly can a perfect production be expected?
>
> It therefore astonishes me, sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does; and I think it will astonish our enemies, who are waiting with confidence to hear that our counsels are confounded like those of the builders of Babel, and that our States are on the point of separation, only to meet hereafter for the purpose of cutting one another's throats. Thus I consent, sir, to this Constitution, because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best.

Ratification

The Constitution, having been drafted, needed to be ratified. The debate for its ratification occurred throughout the spring and summer of 1788 in twelve of the thirteen states (Rhode Island, having not attended the convention, also boycotted the ratification process).

The debate in the state conventions provided a sharper focus on what was at stake, because those who opposed any change in the Articles of Confederation, who had stayed away from the Constitutional Convention, turned out in the ratification conventions. Therefore, there was a sharp division.

Those who wanted ratification had a certain set of advantages in the debate. One is that they adopted the name Federalists, implying a sharing of power between the federal and state governments. The people opposing the Constitution were therefore called Anti-federalists, which was not a terribly pleasing term.

The sequence in which the votes in the states occurred also worked to the advantage of those seeking ratification. The biggest, most important, and difficult states for ratification, Virginia and New York, came late in the process. If nine states ratified, it would go into effect. By the time the debates began in Virginia and New York, they were already very close to nine states, and the pressure to go along began to mount.

There was also a kind of all-or-nothing syndrome. Either they accepted the Constitution and it went into effect or they rejected it and went back to the Articles of Confederation. A lot of people wanted something in between, but they didn't have that option, and they tended to go with the Constitution.

In many of the ratifying conventions, the people protesting this new kind of government were reassured that in the first congress there would be a bill of rights passed that would guarantee them rights that they were concerned about and which had not been explicitly protected in the Constitution.

Federalist Papers

One of the advantages the Federalists had was that Madison and Hamilton were on their side. Here they created a classic of political thought: The *Federalist Papers*. These provided a number of original ideas: One was that sovereignty could be shared. The assumption of the British Empire that there must be one source of central sovereignty, in the Parliament, was changed. Some things would belong to the states, some things to the federal government. Ultimate sovereignty was with the people.

Second, the Constitution established no form of religious establishment or requirement. It established the principle of separation of church and state and was the first national government in modern history to make clear and explicit that a religious establishment was not necessary.

Third, it established the principle of checks and balances. No branch of this government was completely sovereign. The Executive would need the Senate for foreign policy. The House could initiate money bills, but the president could veto them unless the House had a two-thirds majority. It also established overlapping jurisdictions, and there would be no single moment when the entire government would be up for reelection. There would be staggered elections to permit a continuity that didn't exist in previous governments.

One of the other big ideas was pluralism. Madison said that the larger the area of land, the more factions that would be included in the nation, and these factions would eventually cancel themselves out, or check and balance each other.

The Federalists prevailed in eleven states. About 160,000 voters participated in the ratification process, out of a total population of almost four million. It was a victory for those who believed American independence could only be secured by American nationhood. It was not, as many historians tried to make it, a victory of property over democracy, of the rich over the poor. It was not a class movement. It was a movement on the part of those who believed that the Revolution, in order to be secured, needed to assume a national shape.

A Promise and Prophecy

The genius of the Constitution as a document was not its clarity, but its ambiguity, its willingness to leave many issues unresolved. It became a living document, susceptible to almost endless interpretations. The Constitution established a new national edifice in which that highly diverse collective called the American people could begin to congeal into a citizenry truly worthy of the name. In the end, those opening words ("We the people of the

United States . . .") were really a promise, or a prophecy. The ratification of the Constitution improved the prospects for that promise, or prophecy, to come true.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What were the three divisions within the delegates at the Constitutional Convention?
2. How did the sequence of voting favor the side that wanted ratification?

Suggested Reading

Meyers, Marvin, ed. *The Mind of the Founder: Sources of the Political Thought of James Madison.* Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1990.

Other Books of Interest

Bowen, Catherine Drinker. *Miracle at Philadelphia: The Story of the Constitutional Convention, May to September 1787.* New York: Back Bay Books, 1986.

Madison, James. *James Madison: Writings.* Ed. Jack N. Rakove. Washington, DC: Library of America, 1999.

Lecture 10:
The Ghost at the Banquet: Slavery

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is David Brion Davis's *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of the Revolution, 1770–1823.*

A Fundamental Contradiction

The most glaring of the unresolved issues in the Constitution, the so-called ghost at the banquet, was slavery. In 1789, there were approximately 700,000 black slaves out of a total population of about four million. Of those, approximately 90 percent lived south of the Potomac. Forty percent of Virginia's population was black, and 60 percent of South Carolina's population was black.

The existence of slavery was clearly understood by all the leading and most prominent members of the Revolutionary Generation as a fundamental contradiction of the principles of 1776. The generation saw it as an evil, but in the Southern mind, it was a necessary evil. And they all knew it was an issue on which they were morally and ethically vulnerable.

The words "slavery," "negro," and "African-American" are not mentioned in the Constitution. Instead, there are a series of circumlocutions: "that species of property," "such persons." This was a way of demonstrating that slavery was too important to avoid altogether, but too ominous to discuss explicitly and candidly. The document did implicitly endorse slavery in several respects, the two most prominent being the three-fifths clause, which effectively allowed slaves to be counted as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of voting, and the rule prohibiting any discussion of ending the slave trade until 1808.

Notice, though, that the Constitution nowhere explicitly sanctions or approves of slavery.

The Case for the Founders

How can the founders be fairly assessed on this issue? In effect, if their ability to make a fundamental commitment to end slavery is the logical implication of the Declaration of Independence, and Jefferson acknowledged that it was, and if therefore slavery was incompatible with the principles of the American Revolution, and all the leading figures agreed that it was, then slavery must be the acid test for judging the founders. And if it is, then they clearly failed.

But perhaps it shouldn't be the acid test, and even if it is, maybe they didn't fail it. Historian William Freeling and Abraham Lincoln both said this about the Founding Generation and slavery: They inherited an extraordinarily difficult and perhaps intractable problem. But during the time they were in power, they did as much as possible to limit, restrict, and put slavery on the road to extinction.

Achievements

According to Lincoln and Freeling, there were major achievements of the Revolutionary Generation in regard to slavery: First, they ended the slave trade; they delayed doing so until 1808, but once that moment arrived, they did so immediately.

They also prohibited slavery from expanding into incoming states north of the Ohio River, so that the westward movement of slavery, at least in the Northwest Territory, was blocked. Throughout the 1780s and 1790s, and on into the nineteenth century, every state north of the Potomac began to take action to end slavery.

The argument is that the Founding Generation did not end slavery, but they cut off the supply. They restricted its expansion and essentially isolated slavery in the Deep South.

The Case Against the Founders

The logic of the Declaration is unambiguous. It is a repudiation of slavery. The leading members of the Revolutionary Generation were fully conscious of this. The consequences of their failure to end slavery in the eighteenth century were catastrophic, breaking out by 1861 into the bloodiest war in American history.

There were 700,000 blacks in America in 1790, and four million in 1860, so that if slavery had been ended in the beginning, the experience of more than three million blacks would have been fundamentally different.

Jefferson described slavery as a “barbaric practice,” yet on his own plantation at Monticello he consistently had about two hundred slaves. He also indicated that he believed African-Americans were biologically inferior, and that any emancipation scheme that would ever be passed must have as one of its fundamental assumptions the removal of this African population to some other country.

George Washington on three occasions in the 1780s denounced slavery and in private correspondence endorsed gradual emancipation, but he took no action himself and owned more than three hundred slaves at Mount Vernon and his other plantations.

An Occasion for Debate

The Founders actually argued this out among themselves. The occasion was the presentation of two petitions to the First Congress of the United States in the spring of 1790. The two petitions argued for the immediate end of the slave trade, some commitment to slavery as incompatible with the values of the Revolution, and the implementation of some plan to put slavery on the road to extinction.

It became clear that South Carolina and Georgia wished to see the slave trade ensured, that they were dependent on the incoming labor force from Africa for the expansion of their plantations. They saw the slaves as property and they defended their right to own slaves on the basis of their right to property. They acknowledged that slavery was an evil, but maintained that it was a necessary evil that was implicitly guaranteed in the Constitution.

They also said the thought of ending slavery was ludicrous because the cost would be astronomical. They said that if the Northern states persisted in pushing those issues and throwing slavery on a national agenda that they would secede from the Union.

Finally, they said that the most horrific consequence of an emancipation policy wasn't just the liberation of the slaves but the eventual amalgamation of the entire population. They saw any racial mixing as a watering down of the Anglo-Saxon race—unattractive opinions, but ones that were definitively stated by the Deep South in the debate of 1790.

Northern Opinion

The Northern side said that the slave trade was generally regarded by most of the world as a criminal activity, and therefore it was incumbent upon the government to put an end to it immediately. They pointed out that the Constitution said nothing explicitly about slavery, that there were no formal, explicit guarantees in the Constitution.

They said gradual emancipation with compensation to slave owners was not as financially impossible as some of the Southerners suggested, because there was a source of revenue that would create a kind of endowment fund, and that was the sale of western land.

On one issue they agreed with the Southerners, though it is a dispiriting insight. Both the Northern whites and the Southern whites agreed that emancipation, if it were to occur, must be accompanied by expatriation; that is, the African-American population could not live alongside the Anglo-Saxon population, and it must be moved to another location.

Franklin Weighs In

On the Northern side, Benjamin Franklin, though on his last legs, provided the most elegant voice. He published a pamphlet, allegedly the pamphlet of a Muslim or Islamic prophet of the past, in fact written by Franklin himself, in which the Muslim argues that the Muslims should be able to enslave the Christians. The arguments in the pamphlet turn out to be the same arguments the white Southerners were making about enslaving the Africans. It was one of Franklin's most effective satires, and one that turned out to be his final public act.

Franklin's opponent in the debate was James Madison, who recognized that slavery was an explosive topic that must be removed from the political agenda of the new nation. In the end, Virginians had a vested interest in slavery, but they didn't want to talk openly about it, and the issue had the potential to destroy the Union.

Franklin wanted to put slavery on the national agenda before it was too late to take decisive action in accord with the principles of the Revolution. Madison wanted to take slavery off the national agenda because he believed that decisive action would result in the destruction of either the Virginia planter class or the nation itself.

Madison decided to seize the opportunity provided by the threat of secession to put Congress on record rejecting any constitutional rights by the federal

government to end slavery. What he got was a resolution out of Congress guaranteeing the continuation of the slave trade until 1808. Then it said that all matters related to slavery's continuance were state questions beyond the jurisdiction of the federal government. This decision by Congress had the effect of a landmark decision. It was presumed to be a law, or a constitutional principle, and effectively set up a gag rule. The Congress of the United States would not discuss slavery; it was a state matter.

Barriers

Why did prominent members of the Revolutionary Generation fail to take decisive action against slavery? In one sense, they did try. Benjamin Franklin certainly did. And some inroads were made against slavery.

It should be acknowledged that the Generation was up against three barriers: One was economic. The livelihood of Southern planters depended on this form of labor and the cost of compensating them for it would be huge. In the end, many Northerners believed that the replacement of slave labor with free labor would over time be more productive and cost efficient. The problem of compensation, while real, could have been solved by using the revenue from the sale of western lands. So the economic barrier was real, but not insurmountable.

The second barrier was the political one. When South Carolina and Georgia threatened to secede, they did so in the first year of the new nation's national existence. It was a fragile moment, that of a new nation going through its political infancy, so the threat was quite real. It is not clear whether the political issue was insurmountable, but in order to fulfill the ideals of the Revolution, it is possible the Republic could have been killed in the cradle.

Finally, there was a racial barrier, and one that was shared by whites on both sides of the Potomac. In the North, slavery could be ended without too much disturbance, because only 10 percent of the black population lived in these states. But the black population of the south (40 percent in Virginia and 60 percent in South Carolina) made the idea of an emancipated population impossible to understand, because nobody at that time had a vision of a biracial society as a goal or even a possibility.

Even Lincoln, seventy years later, acknowledged that black slaves, once freed, could not expect to become full citizens and probably would have to be deported.

Judged against racial values today, the Revolutionary Generation would without question fail the test. But judged against the values of the Revolutionary era, it is arguable whether or not they failed.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What was the three-fifths clause?
2. What source of revenue could have been used to compensate slave owners?

Suggested Reading

Davis, David Brion. *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of the Revolution, 1770–1823.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Other Books of Interest

Johnson, Charles, and Patricia Smith. *Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery.* New York: Harvest Books, 1999.

Lecture 11:
Crucial Decade: The Federalist Agenda

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Stanley M. Elkins and Eric L. McKitrick's *Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788–1800.*

The First President

The 1790s can be called the "Crucial Decade," though there are many such decades in American history that could claim that title. But this is the decade in which the Revolution was secured.

George Washington was voted the first president unanimously. New York was the first capital of the United States, and Washington moved there from Mount Vernon in 1789.

There were great disagreements about what powers the federal government had and profound disagreements about what the American Revolution had intended, but everybody agreed that George Washington personified the Revolution and that whatever cause he devoted himself to was legitimate.

In some sense, Washington's presidency was important not for what he did, but for what he symbolized. A lot of what Washington did his first four years was "preside." He went on tours, and wherever he went, he was a singular source of national unity.

The cabinet that Washington appointed was without much doubt the most intellectually accomplished cabinet in the history of the presidency. His vice president was John Adams. His secretary of the treasury was Alexander Hamilton, his secretary of state Thomas Jefferson. His most trusted confidant was James Madison. And Washington was sufficiently commanding a presence that this incredible assemblage of talent worked together harmoniously, at least for a while.

Domestic Policy

There were four main areas of domestic policy in the Washington administration: One was economic and took the form of Hamilton's financial plan. Hamilton wanted autonomy to carry out his plan, and Washington gave it to him. Hamilton put together a financial plan to rescue the American economy from its indebtedness.

Hamilton had discovered that the total debt of the United States was about $77 million. It was a tangled debt of different states, different interest rates, and different marketing assumptions; in effect, it was an accountant's worst nightmare.

Hamilton proposed that the massive debts be thrown into a single pile and that the nation assume the state debts and create a national bank. In his Hamilton Plan, he in essence created a national economy.

When the bank came up for vote before Congress, Washington asked Hamilton whether it was constitutional. Hamilton made the implied powers

argument based on the Necessary and Proper Clause. Washington agreed with him and approved the entire plan, including the bank. This act created fiscal responsibility and consolidated all state debt. From an economic point of view, it was a brilliant success, as the economy took off and in the banking capitals of the world the credit rankings of the United States went to a new high.

Then there was what was called the Residency Question. The Constitution specified that the Congress should establish a capital somewhere, but it did not say where. About sixteen locations were argued, but none won out. Then, at a dinner-table bargain between Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison in June of 1790, they put together a compromise in which in return for Southern votes to support Hamilton's financial plan, Hamilton agreed to deliver Northern votes that would ensure a Potomac location for the national capital.

Once Congress passed legislation identifying the location, the management of the construction and all architecture went to the president. Washington liked the location because it brought the North and South together. The Virginians, notably Madison and Jefferson, liked it because they thought the location would ensure that the national capital would always come under the orbit of Virginia.

The Whiskey Rebellion, which occurred in 1794, was a protest against excise taxes on liquor. Farmers in western Pennsylvania saw the tax as something illegal and unconstitutional. They thought that the government was doing the same thing to them as that which they had accused Parliament of doing in the 1760s. As George Washington attempted to point out, the difference was that Congress did represent them. But the rebels replied that while Congress voted for it, their delegates did not. So the issue was that of local versus national interest.

Six thousand men gathered in Braddock's Field outside of Pittsburg and challenged the army of the United States to come after them. Washington organized a thirteen-thousand man force and led it out himself, the only time in United States history that a sitting president had led troops into the field. The rebels dissipated and Washington pardoned all the arrested leaders in return for sworn statements of allegiance to the government of the United States.

Washington spent as much time on the issue of Native Americans in his first term as with any other issue. The Treaty of Paris established an area from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi as American territory. Within that territory west of the Alleghenies there were approximately twenty to twenty-five Indian tribes, and a total population between seventy-five and one hundred thousand. The question was what the attitude of the federal government should be toward the population of Indians, and to what extent it was possible to imagine the white settlers, moving west in great hordes, being able to live in peace with the original occupants of the land.

Washington attempted to negotiate treaties with the tribes as sovereign nations; that is, he treated the tribes as foreign entities with all the rights of sovereign nations. Washington's intent was to establish enclaves of tribal land guaranteed by the federal government that would then be bypassed by

the white settlements, creating a series of internal homelands east of the Mississippi that would eventually be assimilated over the next century—an attitude very different than that toward the African-American population.

Because Washington thought this such an important issue, and because he thought the foreign policy of the nation needed to be focused on North America, he regarded the diplomatic relations with the tribal leaders as more important than relations with European countries.

The problem with Washington's vision was that it required an acceptance of the principle of federal jurisdiction, and the states refused to allow that. The vision also fell victim to the relentless hunger for land and pressure from the exploding white population.

The eventual conclusion that the Indians would be removed from lands east of the Mississippi was becoming clear, but it is important to note that this was not what Washington intended, and that he lacked the constitutional and military power to prevent whites from intruding on Indian land.

Foreign Policy

The crucial event of the 1790s was the French Revolution. There is a school of thought that the French Revolution was the European projection of the spirit of 1776. In large part because of the French alliance that had brought the French into the Revolutionary War, there was enormous support for the French. But by the early 1790s, public opinion had begun to change.

Washington began to recognize that he had to rethink the treaty with the French and steer clear of the catastrophe that the French revolution seemed headed toward. In 1793, he proposed a policy of neutrality.

The Neutrality Proclamation of 1793 essentially repudiated the alliance with France of 1778 and set down the principle that would be declared in Washington's farewell address, that the United States wished to have no diplomatic connections with any of the European powers.

The big fight in Washington's second term over foreign policy had to do with something called the Jay Treaty. John Jay, the chief justice, was sent by the president to attempt to negotiate a treaty with the English. The subsequent treaty acknowledged British naval commercial superiority. Therefore, critics of the treaty, who were legion, said that it was an acceptance of a new neo-colony status under a form of British hegemony.

In a sense, the treaty said that the United States bet on the cause of England rather than the cause of France. And as part of the treaty, the British also agreed to evacuate their remaining troops from the American frontier.

The treaty was unpopular. Only Washington's prestige got it through, and it proved a shrewd bargain, gaining the protection of the British fleet and avoiding war for at least another generation. But at the time, Washington was severely criticized.

Washington's farewell address, drafted in 1796 mostly by Hamilton (though the ideas were all Washington's), reasserted Washington's foreign policy vision, which was a vision that looked west. It was the classic statement of American isolation, saying that the United States wished to avoid any perma-

nent alliances with Europe. Beneath the isolation was Washington's conviction that United States policy should not pursue ideals, but interests (which put him at odds with Jefferson, who believed America's interests *were* its ideals). So for Washington, whatever was thought about the ideals of the French Revolution, America's interests in trade were best taken care of by aligning commercially with England.

Federalist Achievements

What were the achievements of the Federalists during Washington's administration? First, they secured the Revolution. They made the Constitution a living document and Washington established executive precedents in a variety of areas.

Second, they demonstrated that a republic was viable over a land mass as large as the United States. Third, the Federalists demonstrated that liberty and power were not mutually exclusive.

Finally, they established a government of laws and not of men. Washington exited in 1796 and set the two-term principle, and more importantly, the principle that the office would always outlive the man.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What were the four main areas of domestic policy in the Washington Administration?
2. What was Washington's plan for Native Americans?

Suggested Reading

Elkins, Stanley M., and Eric L. McKitrick. *Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788–1800.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Other Books of Interest

Hamilton, Alexander, James Madison, and John Jay. *The Federalist*. Ed. Robert Scigliano. New York: Modern Library, 2000.

Lecture 12:
Crucial Decade: Party Politics

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Lance Banning's *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology.*

An Opposition Party

Some members of the Brotherhood regarded the achievements of the Federalists as betrayals of the Revolution. An emerging political opposition, led first by Madison and soon after by Jefferson, began to call itself the Republican Party. This marked the beginning of the two-party system.

The first opposition party created by Madison and Jefferson in 1791 and 1792 called themselves Republicans, but this is not the same Republican Party in existence today. The modern Republican Party derives its origins from Abraham Lincoln and the party created in the 1850s just before the Civil War. The first Republican Party, over time, is actually the modern Democratic Party.

At the time, neither the Republicans nor the Federalists were willing to call themselves a party. Being part of a party was akin to placing selfish motivations over public service, and full-blown parties did not emerge until the 1830s and 1840s.

In the long run, though, political parties are one of the main achievements of the Revolutionary Generation. The two-party system is the central pillar of modern politics. It institutionalizes argument and creates the possibility of legitimate opposition that would not only be tolerated, but encouraged. Parties direct debate into two camps and allow a permanent dialogue.

Republican Viewpoint

Hamilton's financial plan achieved a great deal, but from the point of view of Jefferson and Madison, it signaled the moment that agrarian interests were replaced by commercial interests, represented by the national bank.

Underlying the fear of northern commercial interests was something unspoken: a fear that if the principle were admitted that the federal government had power to shape domestic policy, it would be virtually inevitable that slavery would be on the road to extinction.

The Residency Question was a victory for Republicans, because they thought it would ensure Virginian interests. It also ensured that the political capital was separated geographically from the financial capital.

The Whiskey Rebellion was seen by Republicans as an excessive use of military force to put down a popular rebellion. Jefferson saw it as something that did not need to be suppressed and he saw it as a harbinger of martial law.

The Neutrality Proclamation and the Jay Treaty were perceived by the Republicans as a betrayal of France, a trusted ally, and a betrayal of the ideals of the French Revolution.

The Republicans believed that the government created by the Federalists was the second coming of British tyranny, that such concentrated power violated the principles of the American Revolution. The Republicans espoused the compact theory, that the states should reserve the bulk of the power.

The George Washington Problem

As the Republican Party began to congeal, they had what could be called the George Washington problem. They wanted to challenge the Federalists, but George Washington was the Federalist head, and he was untouchable. Jefferson was also the secretary of state in the Washington cabinet, so he was attempting to undermine the policies of the very administration he was serving.

Jefferson's solution to the Washington problem was to begin to develop the conviction that Washington was aging and in effect senile. Jefferson began a whispering campaign against Washington in 1792, suggesting that Hamilton was really the one pulling the strings of power.

Hamilton and Jefferson

Over succeeding generations, the split between Hamilton and Jefferson has echoed through the ages as the primal version of agrarian versus commercial interests, and the original argument about the relative power of the federal government and the states.

Jefferson embodied the spirit of '76 and Hamilton the spirit of '87, one saying that full American nationhood was not compatible with the spirit of the Revolution and the other saying that it was indeed the culmination of the principles embodied by the Revolution.

The election of 1796 was the first contested election in American history. In 1796, the Federalists faced the "shadow of Washington" problem: No one could replace him, yet someone had to succeed him.

Viable candidates had to have luminous Revolutionary credentials, and the two whose Revolutionary credentials seemed most impressive emerged as the two candidates: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

The election of 1796 was close, 72 to 69, with Jefferson carrying most of the South and Adams most of the North. Adams won, and Jefferson became vice president by virtue of finishing second in the voting.

A Doomed Administration?

Adams understood the "shadow of Washington" problem and recognized that the divisions between Federalists and Republicans needed to be bridged. He wanted to establish a bipartisan administration, so the first thing he tried was approaching Jefferson and asking whether he would be willing to become a full-blooded member of the cabinet and in effect a kind of co-president with special powers over foreign policy. Madison advised Jefferson that their function was to be the opposition party and that his duty was to criticize the administration from within. Jefferson refused the offer.

Adams faced an enormous set of challenges. The consensus formed under Washington in his first term had broken down. Partisan, ideological camps

had formed and party warfare was commonplace. There was an undeclared war with France in the Caribbean. Adams's vice president was a member of the opposition party, and he inherited a cabinet more loyal to Hamilton than to himself.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did the Republicans view the government created by the Federalists?
2. What was the George Washington problem?

Suggested Reading

Banning, Lance. *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology.* New ed. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980.

Other Books of Interest

Bell, Rudolf M. *Party and Faction in American Politics: The House of Representatives, 1789–1801.* Vol. 32. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1974.

Brown, Stuart Gerry. *The First Republicans: Political Philosophy and Public Policy in the Party of Jefferson and Madison*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1977.

Lecture 13:
The Restoration of 1800

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is John Ferling's *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800.*

The XYZ Affair

The quasi war with France dominated the foreign policy of the John Adams administration. The war was never declared, but it was much on the public mind. In retaliation over the Jay Treaty, which the French saw as a betrayal of their alliance with the United States, the French dispatched pirates into the Caribbean to plunder American shipping.

At the time, the French government was called the Directory, which was characterized by multiple factions moving behind the scenes. It was difficult to negotiate with the French, because at various times different players claimed to be in power.

Adams sent a special commission to negotiate with the French for some kind of end to the hostilities. When the commissioners arrived, they were told they had to pay a large bribe to get into court to talk to the diplomats. This was called the XYZ Affair. The commissioners, of course, refused to pay the bribe.

On the Federalist side, there were calls to raise a standing army to protect against a possible French invasion of the United States. The fear was somewhat exaggerated, but there was a requisition from Congress for the creation of a fifteen-thousand-man army.

Hamilton asserted a leading role in commanding the as-yet fictional force, at the time only real on paper. Adams concluded that Hamilton intended to use the army for political advantage, so was opposed to the army and only favored raising more ships for the navy to protect the coastline.

Partisan Politics

Jefferson was issuing orders to minions in the Republican Party, urging them to oppose the administration he served and telling the ambassador in France, James Monroe, to ignore the Adams administration.

The partisan press played a critical role here. In many ways, the press at this time was similar to tabloid journalism today. And the press had a new role, because in a republican government, the vehicles that shaped public opinion were extremely important.

Jefferson was attacked in the press as an atheist and as someone who was opposed to federal power because it would deprive him of his slaves at Monticello. Adams was attacked as a monarch who had relentless ambition and who would make his son, John Quincy Adams, his successor. These accusations were not true, but it can be seen that both sides were fighting through the press with vicious attacks against their opponents.

The Alien and Sedition Acts

In this supercharged atmosphere, Adams made the second major mistake of his presidency. The first mistake was to retain the cabinet of Washington's second term, because this cabinet was loyal to Hamilton. The second mistake was to sign legislation passed by the Federalist Congress: the Alien and Sedition Acts.

These acts were four different pieces of legislation directed at two different goals. The first goal was to restrict immigration from certain countries and to deport aliens who encouraged opposition to the American government. The second goal was directed at newspapers, making it a crime to utter false or malicious accusations against the government of the United States.

In one sense, the Sedition Act was actually a liberal improvement, because it allowed truth to be a defense in any trial for sedition, which wasn't previously the case.

In retrospect, with today's understanding of the Cold War and recent threats to national security posed by terrorism, it is possible to see how the Alien and Sedition Acts could have come about, even if the threat posed by the French was inflated.

The argument that Jefferson and Madison made against the Alien and Sedition Acts in their Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions was not what might be expected today. Jefferson's argument was an argument for states' rights, not freedom of the press. It was an argument that the acts were impositions on the authority of the states.

The Election of 1800

The election of 1800 was one of the dirtiest in American history, and it was the first election determined by the three-fifths clause, which increased the voting power of the Southern states just enough to allow Jefferson to best Adams by seventy-three to sixty-five votes.

The election was highly contested and it is pretty clear that Aaron Burr, running with Jefferson, essentially bought the New York delegation for the Jefferson side. Burr was then tied with Jefferson at seventy-three, so the House of Representatives had to decide the election. After thirty-six ballots, Jefferson was elected. One might have thought that Burr would have stepped aside, because it was clear he was not intended to be at the top of the ticket, but that was not Burr's style.

Adams did not attend the inauguration. One of his last acts was the "Act of the Midnight Judges." He appointed several federal judges, one of whom was the chief justice of the Supreme Court, John Marshall.

Revolution or Restoration?

Jefferson called the election of 1800 a revolution. But the American Revolution was not about the creation of a democracy, but of a republic, and Jefferson himself did not embrace the word democracy. The Federalists, therefore, could not betray democracy, because it was not there to betray.

The issue was nationhood and federal power. Jefferson and the Republicans saw their victory as a recovery of the spirit of '76, which denied the federal

government the power to make laws for the land. The Republicans thought the Constitution, as interpreted by the Federalists, had gone too far toward consolidation, toward union. In the dialogue between power and liberty, the Republicans thought power needed to be reigned in by liberty.

Finally, the enduring significance of the election of 1800 was the elemental fact that power had been transitioned peacefully. The dialogue between liberty and power had completed a full cycle. Instead of calling the election of 1800 the second American Revolution, it would be more correct to see it as a culmination of the original Revolution, with these two impulses, and as the moment when the American dialogue was finally established and institutionalized for the duration.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What were the two major mistakes of the Adams presidency?
2. Why did Jefferson call the election of 1800 a revolution?

Suggested Reading

Ferling, John. *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Other Books of Interest

Wills, Gary. *"Negro President": Jefferson and the Slave Power*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003.

Lecture 14:
The American Dialogue: Adams and Jefferson

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Merrill D. Peterson's *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue.*

The Big Bang

Benjamin Rush argued that the American Revolution was a never-ending process. This is the Big Bang theory of the American Revolution as an explosion in the eighteenth century that continued to expand in meaning, but this course needs to end, so one end point might be the end of the Revolutionary Generation itself.

Franklin, who died in 1790, was the first to leave. Washington died in 1799 of a throat infection. Hamilton died in 1804 in a duel with Aaron Burr. Thomas Paine died in 1809, Abigail Adams in 1818. Madison died in 1838, and it is thought that Joseph Plumb Martin died in 1840.

The two men who were not mentioned, Adams and Jefferson, died on the same day, July 4, 1826—the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the Declaration of Independence.

Achievements of the Generation

How did the Brotherhood do it? The achievement was a collective enterprise that succeeded because of the diversity of personalities and ideologies present in the mix. Here genuine intellectual and temperamental diversity worked in ways that interacted in juxtapositions that created a dynamic form of balance and equilibrium.

It was not because of their perfection or infallibility, but because of their mutual imperfections and fallibilities, as well as their eccentricities. There were checks and balances not just in the Constitution, but checks and balances in terms of the personalities and leadership qualities of the persons involved in the Revolutionary Generation.

The Brotherhood all knew one another personally. Politics, even at the highest level, remained a face-to-face affair. The Adams-Jefferson rivalry and friendship is the outstanding example here, though there were several crucial moments when critical compromises were brokered because personal trust made it possible.

The American Republic became a nation of laws, but during the initial phase, it had to be a nation of men who knew each other well and at some level were capable of mutual trust.

The Brotherhood managed to take the most threatening and divisive issue of all off the political agenda: slavery, an issue over which the Revolutionary Generation decided self-consciously that the risks of addressing outweighed the prospects of success. Whether or not it would have been possible to put slavery on the road to extinction without destroying the nation is to this day an open question.

Finally, all the members of the Revolution at some point developed a keen sense of their historical significance. They knew they were making history, and in their actions and writings, were in some sense posing for posterity.

A Famous Correspondence

The correspondence of Adams and Jefferson may be the best place to end this course. In their retirement years, these two men managed to reclaim their friendship and engage in a correspondence in which they attempted to argue out the meaning of the Revolution that each had fought and wrought.

The correspondence began in 1812 and lasted almost to their end in 1826. Most historians regard it as the most significant private correspondence between public figures in all of American history and a fitting capstone to the achievements of the Revolutionary Generation.

Both men were clearly posing for posterity. In the end, though, there was a seriousness to their correspondence beyond the lyrical style and posturing. Adams put it interestingly and poignantly when he wrote, “You and I ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other.”

The men seemed to be asking themselves a number of questions: What had we aimed at in 1776? Had the constitutional settlement in 1787 and the Federalist agenda of the 1790s betrayed our intentions or fulfilled them? Was the French Revolution a European version of our revolution or a fraudulent version? How did we create political parties, which we both despise? Can we talk about slavery? Is it likely to destroy the union? Will what we have created endure? And both men gave different answers to these questions.

The Jeffersonian version was that 1776 was an opening shot in a global struggle from all forms of tyranny. Self-government meant individual sovereignty.

The Adams version was that the American Revolution was a great improvisation that could not be easily transported to other parts of the world. It was a collective achievement and it would be hard to keep it together. It was not a victory of liberty over power, but a felicitous blending of liberty and power.

Both impulses were correct. The Revolution required both Jefferson and Adams, and their different temperaments and ideologies fit together. During their last years, they seemed to recognize that only together did they represent the Revolution and, in some sense, only together did they complete each other.

To an extent, the Adams and Jefferson letters represent the Brotherhood of the Revolution more effectively than anything else. The unresolved ongoing argument that is the secret of the Revolution’s success does not demand final answers. It only demands seminal questions forever debated, and the American Revolution, like history itself, becomes an argument without end.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did the Brotherhood achieve all they did?
2. How did Adams's and Jefferson's views on the Revolution differ?

Suggested Reading

Peterson, Merrill D. *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Other Books of Interest

Cappon, Lester J. *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams.* Wilmington, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

You'll get the most out of this course if you have the following book:

Ellis, Joseph J. *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation.* New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2000.

Suggested Readings:

Banning, Lance. *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology.* New ed. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980.

Brands, H.W. *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin.* New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2002.

Chernow, Ron. *Alexander Hamilton.* New York: Penguin, 2005.

Davis, David Brion. *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of the Revolution, 1770–1823.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Elkins, Stanley M., and Eric L. McKitrick. *Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788–1800.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Ellis, Joseph J. *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson.* New York: Random House, 1998.

———. *His Excellency: George Washington.* New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2004.

Ferling, John. *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Maier, Pauline. *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*. New York: Random House, 1998.

Martin, Joseph Plumb. *Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier: Some of the Adventures, Dangers, and Sufferings of Joseph Plumb Martin.* New York: Signet Classics, 2001.

McCullough, David. *John Adams.* New York: Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 2002.

Meyers, Marvin, ed. *The Mind of the Founder: Sources of the Political Thought of James Madison.* Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1990.

Peterson, Merrill D. *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Other Books of Interest:

Adams, James Truslow. *Jeffersonian Principles: Extracts from the Writings of Thomas Jefferson*. Rochester, NY: Simon Publications, 2001.

Akers, Charles W. *Abigail Adams: An American Woman.* Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1999.

Bailyn, Bernard. *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence.* New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 1992.

Other Books of Interest (continued):

Bell, Rudolf M. *Party and Faction in American Politics: The House of Representatives, 1789–1801.* Vol. 32. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1974.

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