Chapter 12

The Classical Vision Smashes into American Reality

Modern Chivalry, a satirical novel by Hugh Henry Brackenridge, a Scottish-born comrade of James Madison in the Princeton class of 1771, conveys a sense of how hard Americans turned against the classical outlook in the 1790s and early 1800s. Brackenridge and Madison had been friendly at the college, and indeed may have been roommates for a spell. In the rambling novel's first volume, which appeared in 1792, Brackenridge relates the adventures on the American frontier of a Captain Farrago. The captain, a kind of American version of Don Quixote, is portrayed at the outset as a product of "an academic education" of the sort that the author and his friends received at Princeton, pointedly described as resulting in a "greater knowledge of books than of the world."

Farrago was, in fact, a man not quite keeping up with his times: "His ideas were drawn chiefly from what may be called the old school; the Greek and Roman notions of things." It may be illuminating to know that the word "farrago" is Latin for the kind of hodgepodge of low-grade grains used as cattle fodder.

The captain and his servant, the "bogtrotter" Teague O'Reagan, a wily Irishman who though illiterate eventually becomes a judge, enjoy a variety of adventures as they voyage across the new United States. Early on, in an alehouse, the captain finds some villagers

discussing politics. Politicians merely flatter the people, who charge around like a herd of wild buffalo, argues one local. "Is there no such thing as public spirit?" the captain responds. "Is there not a spice of virtue to be found in a republic? Who would not devote himself for the public good?"

He seems to find agreement about the value of the old ways from one of his interlocutors. "The great mischief in democracy is party, said one orator, who had taken his pipe from his teeth, at the same time spitting on the floor." The point here seems to be that even the would-be Federalists were acting like vulgar democrats. Or perhaps simply that everyone now had political opinions and shared them freely.

The captain's adventures conclude in a sequel volume written in the early nineteenth century, with Farrago having been elected governor of a new state, where he promptly represses dissent with Napoleonic vigor. By the end of the tale, classical republicanism has become an object of ridicule. A lawyer turned poet sings a ballad that includes this verse:

The case has ever been the fact
Since Brutus did exclaim,
Virtue I have followed thee,
But found an empty name.

By this point classical learning is not just outmoded, it is an object of suspicion, even derision. At one point the narrator pauses to examine a question: "It naturally will be asked, considering the current of prejudice against learning, why . . . the school-master, was not lynched for publicly talking Latin." The answer, of course, is that "the people did not know it was Latin." Sometimes the ignorance of the mob is an advantage.

Entering a strange new settlement with his followers, Captain Farrago assures them that "there are no scholars amongst us, save a Latin schoolmaster, who has left off the business, and is going to become an honest man." Meanwhile, Teague O'Reagan, now a

judge, decides to write his memoirs, but being unlettered cannot, so he engages the former schoolteacher to ghostwrite them.

As Brackenridge's hero found, in late-eighteenth-century America, the classical frame of mind had become an impediment for understanding the nature of the place. It especially inhibited traditionalists such as John Adams as they wrestled with the dynamic nature of what one historian calls a "unique, revolutionary, pluralistic, changing, progressive nation."

Loyalty and Opposition

IN HIS FIRST INAUGURAL ADDRESS, DELIVERED IN NEW YORK CITY ON April 30, 1789, Washington promised to be a good steward of "the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people." Washington uttered the words, but they almost certainly were drafted by James Madison, America's first great political insider. As Richard Brookhiser writes, "After Washington gave the speech in Federal Hall, Madison wrote the House's response, and Washington's answer to the House's response." In the same vein, the political philosopher Danielle Allen once remarked that a good part of early American history consists of such instances of Madison talking to himself, as he also did by encouraging a Constitutional Convention, then recording its proceedings, then writing papers commenting on the product, and then leading the introduction of the first ten amendments, the Bill of Rights.

Washington, Madison, and the other people leading the young nation were always conscious that there was nothing certain about the United States of America. Every crisis threatened to be an existential test of a new way of living, of how a society had been arranged. They could point to few, if any, instances in history of a democratic republic lasting more than a century or so. With that knowledge in mind, the 1790s would prove to be an alarming decade.

Another stumbling block was conceptual. The notion of a "loyal opposition" is that part of the process of good governance is organized questioning and criticism by those out of power, who in turn maintain deference to the larger state. But that concept had not yet developed in the Anglo-American world. Indeed, the phrase "His Majesty's Opposition" was not used in Parliament until decades later, in 1826. A search of *Founders Online*, the U.S. National Archives' compilation of the letters, speeches, diaries, and other writings of the founders, unearths not a single use of the phrase "loyal opposition." During the 1790s, there was not yet a vocabulary, or psychological space, for political competition. The emerging factions simply lacked the means to describe or accommodate what was happening.

As a result, the founders regarded oppositional activity as suspicious, the result of pernicious plotting. In the 1790s, as political pressures built, this stream of conspiracy thinking grew into a flood. Those in power viewed those who opposed them as enemies of the state. "The Federalists never saw themselves as a party but as the beleaguered legitimate government beset by people allied with revolutionary France out to destroy the Union," states Gordon Wood.

Here, the educations of the Revolutionary generation did not serve them well. The classical mindset would prove a poor framework in which to view the emerging politics of the 1790s, only making the situation worse. To describe their political foes, they reached back once again to Roman history, all too often to the Catilinarian conspiracy. Remember here that to be a "Catiline" was not just to grab for power, but to attack the soul of the nation, to threaten its way of life.

Moreover, the Revolutionary generation had been taught that this most vile sort of activity was a disturbing symptom of a diseased political environment in which, as English political theorist Edward Wortley Montagu had written, "Publick virtue, and the love of their country, . . . were extinct." (This writer, who died in 1761, should not be confused with the Edward Montagu who was the London agent for Virginia in the 1760s.)

They would have remembered with chagrin that Montagu also wrote that Catilinism was a signal not just of political opposition but of impending national catastrophe. "The conspiracies of Catiline and Caesar against the liberty of their country, were . . . the immediate cause of the destruction of the Republick," Montagu concluded in his *Reflections on the Rise and Fall of the Antient Republicks*—that is, Sparta, Athens, Thebes, Carthage, and Rome. The larger cause, he wrote, was love of luxury, which leads to corruption and thus to competing parties. Montagu employed the word "faction" some fifty times in his book. The symptoms of it were "luxury, effeminacy and corruption." In other words, the label "Catiline" implicitly means the beginning of the end of the nation. From this perspective, the growing schism in American politics appeared to lead straight to disaster.

Another of the popular eighteenth-century political writers, the Scot James Burgh, warned in addition that Hannibal had been undone by factionalism in Carthage. "Hannibal probably would have overset Rome, and saved his country . . . if he had not himself been overset by faction. Thus faction was the ruin of Carthage, and riches probably were the cause of faction."

Reinforcing such concerns, some of the founders likely also were familiar with Lord Bolingbroke's warning that the emergence of faction was a sign not just of evil on one side, but of corruption of the entire system:

> *We must not imagine that the freedom of the Romans was lost, because one party fought for the maintenance of liberty; another for the establishment of tyranny; and that the latter prevailed. No. The spirit of liberty was dead, and the spirit of faction had taken its place on both sides.*

Just to be politically aligned was, at least in the eyes of some Federalists, immoral and perhaps treasonous.

Even Jefferson at this point remained reluctant to embrace factionalism, at least in public. It meant giving up a conception of governance that he and his peers had held all their lives. "If I could

not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all," he avowed from Paris in March 1789. But he would soon sing a different hymn.

Jefferson's Roman Response to Manhattan

IT WAS JEFFERSON, RETURNING TO AMERICA AFTER A FEW YEARS AWAY, who sensed the shift in the political climate most vividly. He departed revolutionary Paris in October 1789, and six months later was in New York City, the initial capital during the new era of the Constitution, where he was installed as the first secretary of state. He was startled by the reactionary politics he found there. "I found a state of things which, of all I had ever contemplated, I the least expected," he recalled years later in a document that admittedly might have been written partly to justify his later partisanship. As he made the round of welcoming dinners, he found that "politics were the chief topic, and a preference of kingly, over republican, government, was evidently the favorite sentiment." He felt isolated, noting that he was, "for the most part, the only advocate on the republican side of the question." Where had the revolution gone?

On the other side of the emerging political divide, John Adams, the new vice president, was also having a difficult time adjusting to the new realities of post-ratification America. He may have thought he was being conciliatory when he wrote to his cousin Sam Adams that "whenever I Use the Word Republick, with approbation I mean a Government, in which the People have, collectively or by Representation, an essential share in the Sovereignty."

His cousin responded with a polite but clear correction. "A Republic, you tell me, is a Government in which 'the People have an essential share in the Sovereignty.'" No, Sam Adams informed him: "Is not the *whole* sovereignty, my friend, essentially in the People?" Look at our new fundamental law, he admonished: "We the People is the stile of the federal Constitution." Sam Adams was

correct, dramatically so. John Adams had yet to apprehend how much power had shifted to the people, both politically and culturally. He would spend much of his time in power in the 1790s resisting that trend, eventually going so far as to imprison newspaper editors who criticized him.

Jefferson especially disliked New York and Philadelphia, the first two national capitals, because they were homes to the merchants and financiers who so antagonized him. The monarchical minded, pro-English people in the United States have "some important associates from New York," he wrote in a letter to Lafayette. "Too many of these stock jobbers and King-jobbers have come into our legislature, or rather too many of our legislature have become stock jobbers and king-jobbers."

Eventually, as part of a deal Jefferson cut with Madison and Hamilton, the capital of the United States would not be among the moneymen. Rather, a new city would be built from scratch to the South, between Virginia and Maryland. Jefferson did not say so, but he must also have understood that moving the federal headquarters to the banks of the Potomac also placed it in an environment more inclined to support the perpetuation of slavery.

True to their natures, in building the new capital, President Washington would dwell on questions of land while Jefferson dedicated himself to architectural design. Washington personally selected the site of the White House. Under Jefferson's influence, the major buildings of the new capital would display Roman stylings, shimmering white under the southern sun. "The Federal City on the Potomac . . . was one of Thomas Jefferson's dearest undertakings," write Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick. "He subsequently gave more of his time, energy, and thought to that problem than did any other officer of the state." As secretary of state, he conceived of a competition to design a building for the Congress. He decided that it would be called not "The Congress House," as originally listed, but the Capitol, a nod to ancient history. This building, home to both houses of the federal legislature, would dominate Washington, DC, just as the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill had been the most prominent religious building

in ancient Rome. The upper house was already called the Senate, after the Roman example. The winning design—classical, as might be expected—was submitted by William Thornton, who had trained as a physician at the University of Edinburgh and later received a degree from the University of Aberdeen.

Jefferson prescribed that the bricks used in construction should follow ancient Roman proportions—a flattish eleven inches wide, twice that in length, and about two inches high, with "grain . . . as fine as that of our best earthen ware." As he described it, this new building would be "the first temple dedicated to the sovereignty of the people." Thus was set the neoclassical style of American official buildings, especially courts and state capitol buildings. Jefferson's design was in addition perhaps a bit of a monument to his own efforts to create a republic that was for, of, and by the people. Charles Dickens, visiting the city decades later, when it still had a raw feel, would label it "the City of Magnificent Intentions," a phrase that also summarizes Jefferson well.

Happily for Jefferson, the new capital was safely hundreds of miles away from "the speculators and Tories," to employ the expression Madison used in a 1791 letter to Jefferson.

Madison Rides to the Rescue

AS THAT PUNGENT PHRASE INDICATES, MADISON WAS BECOMING avowedly partisan. Once again he was leading the way in American public life, this time by unabashedly embracing party politics. "In every political society, parties are unavoidable. A difference of interests, real or supposed, is the most natural and fruitful source of them," he wrote in the *National Gazette*, which was established in Philadelphia in October 1791 with assistance from him and Jefferson. Madison went on in that short essay to claim that natural law supported the existence of parties. "In all political societies, different interests and parties arise out of the nature of things, and the great art of politicians lies in making them checks and

balances to each other." The answer to one party was the "check" of another. Indeed, in three short paragraphs totaling 321 words, he used that word "check" five times.

The purpose of the new newspaper, edited by Philip Freneau (Princeton, 1772), a college friend of Madison's, was to be an outlet for anti-Hamilton views, which made it the first nakedly partisan punch thrown in American history. Another old Princetonian, the sometime novelist Hugh Henry Brackenridge, also would write several columns for the newspaper.

Madison's own contributions to the *Gazette* hammered home a new insight. Faction in all its manifestations—partisanship, political competition, contention, compromises, rivalry, and the cutting of deals—was not part of the problem, it was part of the solution. Young Madison was more attuned to his time than were his Revolutionary elders and was decades ahead of them. Arguably, Madison in the early 1790s was playing the role that Washington did during the War for Independence, being the person who grasped the nature of the struggle in which the nation was engaged and then developed an effective strategic response to it.

Most other public men were not yet in step with this new world. "What caused the fall of Athens?" William Wyche, a New York lawyer, asked rhetorically in a 1794 speech in Manhattan. His answer: Faction. "Party is a monster who devours the common good," he warned.

Alexander Hamilton, one of the president's closest advisors during that time, was at this point somewhere between Madison and Wyche in understanding how politics were changing. Like Madison, he accepted that political parties existed, but like Wyche, he saw his opponents not as a necessary part of the system, but rather as mortal foes. He wrote to a new political ally that "Mr. Madison cooperating with Mr. Jefferson is at the head of a faction decidedly hostile to me and my administration, and actuated by views in my judgment subversive of the principles of good government and dangerous to the union, peace and happiness of the Country." In other words, he considered their disagreeing with him to be attacking the state.

John Adams, more than anyone, was clinging to the old ways. He griped to a friend that "I own I did not expect that truth, honor and virtue would so soon have been trampled under foot in America, as much aware as I was of the turpitude usually produced by ambitious rivalries." George Washington held similar views, though not so fervently expressed. As he contemplated standing for a second term as president, he considered the stakes to be huge—indeed, the very existence of the United States. "The abuses of public Officers—and of those attacks upon almost every measure of government with which some of the Gazettes are so strongly impregnated; & which cannot fail, if persevered in with the malignancy they now team, of rending the Union asunder," he wrote in a private letter.

A month after Washington sent that letter, Hamilton wrote privately about the nakedly ambitious Aaron Burr (Princeton, 1772), then a senator from New York, that "if we have an embryo-Cæsar in the United States 'tis Burr." There were few worse insults in eighteenth-century America.

Three days later Hamilton, who never seemed to have enough enemies to satisfy himself, lit into his main target, Jefferson. Every republic, he wrote in phrases laden with condemnation, has "the Catilines and the Cæsars of the community . . . who leading the dance to the tune of liberty without law, endeavor to intoxicate the people with delicious but poisonous draughts to render them the easier victims of their rapacious ambition; the vicious and the fanatical of every class who are ever found the willing or the deluded followers of those seducing and treacherous leaders." Jefferson was a sly one, he warned, a "Cæsar *coyley refusing* the proffered diadem" who in fact is "tenaciously grasping the substance of imperial domination." Hamilton ended the diatribe with a final reference: It was Caesar, the liberal, "who *overturned* the republic," he noted, while it was Cato, the conservative, "who died for it."

In a series of pseudonymous essays published around this time, from August through December of 1792, Hamilton blasted away

at Jefferson, Madison, and their sponsorship of the *National Gazette*. Hamilton also reportedly told Jefferson he considered Julius Caesar "the greatest man that ever lived." Historians suspect that Hamilton was just baiting Jefferson with that remark. Even so, it was, when seen in the context of American classicism, a provocative crack.

Hamilton finally went to President Washington to protest about Jefferson, saying that the secretary of state had opposed him "from the first moment of his coming to the City of New York to enter upon his present office" and also had supported "a formed party" in Congress "bent upon my subversion." He also told the president that Jefferson was backing the nettlesome opposition newspaper, writing that, "I cannot doubt, from the evidence I possess, that the National Gazette was instituted by him for political purposes and that one leading object of it has been to render me and all the measures connected with my department as odious as possible."

Washington, exasperated, sought to repair the breach between his two key cabinet members. Jefferson, in a conversation with the president at Mount Vernon, countered that he had heard Hamilton say that "this constitution was a shillyshally thing of mere milk & water, which could not last, & was only good as a step to something better." Jefferson was telling Washington that it was Hamilton who was having a destabilizing effect.

Jefferson indeed was becoming an unabashed party man. He grumbled to Madison that he thought Hamilton was "daring to call the republican party a faction." Adams, sensing this shift, decried Jefferson's new direction in a letter to Abigail Adams. "I am really astonished at the blind Spirit of Party which has Seized on the whole soul of this Jefferson: There is not a Jacobin in France more devoted to Faction."

The initial tentative seedlings of organized political parties began to emerge at this time, in the form of Democratic Societies. They were inspired in part by revolutionary organizations in France, and indeed adopted the term "Citizen" to address each other, in the style of the French Jacobins. The first appeared in

Philadelphia in May 1793. Eventually there were about thirty-five spread across the states. These seem to have been rather inchoate in their activities, perhaps half fraternal clubs, half political discussion groups. They shared copies of anti-Federalist newspapers and encouraged people to vote. Some of the societies contemplated going further, with the one in Portland (now in Maine) requesting its members in 1794 to arm themselves in order to "be prepared to defend the Rights of Man."

Jefferson on the Farm

JEFFERSON GREW INCREASINGLY UNHAPPY IN GOVERNMENT. HE COMplained, in one of his candid letters to Madison, that he labored all day and then found his "rare hours of relaxation sacrificed to the society of persons . . . of whose hatred I am conscious even in those moments of conviviality when the heart wishes most to open itself to the effusions of friendship and confidence, cut off from my family and friends, my affairs abandoned to chaos and derangement, in short giving every thing I love, in exchange for every thing I hate."

In the next paragraph, he shared an even more shocking observation, about the declining condition of George Washington. "The President is not well. Little lingering fevers have been hanging about him for a week or ten days, and have affected his looks most remarkeably. He is also extremely affected by the attacks made and kept up on him in the public papers. I think he feels those things more than any person I ever yet met with. I am sincerely sorry to see them."

A few weeks later, Washington finally erupted, losing his temper in a cabinet meeting about the French at which some of the newspaper attacks on him were mentioned. Washington did not express anger often, having spent decades working to contain his passions and emotions. But when he did let go, the detonation was memorable. Jefferson recorded it like a political seismograph:

The Presidt. was much inflamed, got into one of those passions when he cannot command himself. Run on much on the personal abuse which had been bestowed on him. Defied any man on earth to produce one single act of his since he had been in the government which was not done on the purest motives. That he had never repented but once the having slipped the moment of resigning his office, and that was every moment since. That by god *he had rather be in his grave than in his present situation. That he had rather be on his farm than to be made* emperor of the world *and yet that they were charging him with wanting to be a king.*

Jefferson's account rings true, especially that "*by god* he had rather be in his grave," which feels like a verbatim transcription. One can only wonder at the emotional cost to Washington of this outburst. He truly must have been at the end of his rope.

Jefferson resigned as secretary of state at the end of 1793. John Adams confided to Abigail that he was happy to see him go. "His soul is poisoned with Ambition," Adams told his wife after he heard of Jefferson's intention to leave. A few days later he reported,

Jefferson went off Yesterday, and a good riddance of bad ware. I hope his Temper will be more cool and his Principles more reasonable in Retirement than they have been in office. . . . He has Talents I know, and Integrity I believe: but his mind is now poisond with Passion Prejudice and Faction.

Never does Adams seem to appreciate that Jefferson was trying to understand and adjust to the political realities of the new nation. Adams, failing to do so, would be blindsided by them a few years later.

Jefferson seems to have been genuinely happy at home, away from government. Responding to a note from his old legal tutor, George Wythe, about getting copies of Virginia laws that had been passed while Jefferson was governor, he affected nonchalance about government work:

I may be able to engage some young man in Charlottesville to copy acts for those who need them, for hire. I have no body living with me who could do it, and I am become too lazy, with the pen, and too much attached to the plough to do it myself. I live on my horse from an early breakfast to a late dinner, and very often after that till dark. This occasions me to be in great arrears in my pen-work.

This talk of putting hand to plow is a bit rich, given that it is implausible that Jefferson ever worked the fields, as indeed John Adams did. Nevertheless, he was accurate in insisting that his primary attention was on the state of his farm. He observed at one point that it was producing sufficient potatoes and clover "to feed every animal on my farm except my negroes." On the negative side, this is perhaps for us today the most stomach-turning sentence he ever wrote.

But he knew that out beyond his fields, the hold on the president of Hamilton and other Federalists—that is, advocates of a strong central government—was growing. This worried him, especially given his belief that Washington was declining in mental capacity. Without Jefferson around to remind Washington of republican principles, of giving as much power as possible to the people, "the federalists got unchecked hold of Genl. Washington," he complained. Jefferson becomes quite damning at this point: "His memory was already sensibly impaired by age, the firm tone of mind for which he had been remarkable, was beginning to relax, it's energy was abated; a listlessness of labor, a desire for tranquillity had crept on him, and a willingness to let others act and even think for him." Jefferson's dismal assessment might be doubted, but not the depth of his disappointment. He concluded somberly that Washington "had become alienated from myself personally."

He almost pleaded with Madison to come to Monticello. "I long to see you," he wrote in April 1795. "May we hope for a visit from you?" It was time to begin planning the presidential campaign of 1796. Jefferson and Madison were about to invent American presidential politics, and the older man's visionary thinking would need to be anchored by his younger friend's practical mind.

The Whiskey Rebels

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, SEEKING TO REDUCE ITS WAR DEBT, IMposed a tax on whiskey and other distilled spirits. The farmers of western Pennsylvania felt unfairly burdened by the tax, especially because its structure favored the larger year-round distillers of the East. They responded with threats of violence to intimidate the officials sent to collect it. Many of the rebels were veterans of the Revolution, and local militias seemed to side with them. Their efforts climaxed in 1794, stoking Federalist fears that factionalism and extreme democracy would indeed rip apart the country. Improbably enough, it was outside Pittsburgh at Braddock's Field—the site of the shocking defeat suffered by the British general thirty-nine years earlier—that several thousand anti-taxers gathered. Members of the three Democratic Societies in western Pennsylvania appear to have been especially active in organizing the tax resistance movement.

Using the Ciceronian pseudonym Tully, Hamilton published a series of essays in Philadelphia newspapers denouncing the anti-tax insurgents. The question, he wrote, is "Shall the general will prevail, or the will of a faction? shall there be government, or no government?" The only proper response, he added in the next essay, two days later, was to quote Cicero: "How long, ye Catilines, will you abuse our patience." Summarizing the situation in a letter to President Washington, Hamilton wrote that "these acts of violence were preceded by certain Meetings of Malcontent persons, who entered into resolutions calculated at once to confirm, inflame and Systematize the Spirit of opposition."

A few months later, the signing of a new American agreement with England, the Jay Treaty, provoked another round of violence in Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts. "It was very hard for Federalists to believe that these outbursts, these lawless proceedings so uncomfortably reminiscent of the French Revolution, were spontaneous," writes historian Marshall Smelser. "There simply had to be a plot."

Jefferson and his followers saw the treaty as anti-French and unnecessarily pro-British. When Washington threw his enormous prestige behind the treaty, Jefferson bitterly quoted Addison's *Cato*: "a curse on his virtues, they've undone his country." Even worse, in the play, this is actually Cato's condemnation of Caesar. Deploying Cato against Washington indicates just how contentious Jefferson was feeling. Consciously or not, Jefferson was moving to a new level of ferocity in American politics. He quietly coached Madison in how to organize congressional opposition to the treaty.

Washington's Warnings

WASHINGTON WAS INDEED CONCERNED THAT THE AMERICAN EXPERIment seemed to be falling apart. Would his life's work end in failure? Jefferson in his notes states that Washington had told Edmund Randolph, Jefferson's successor as secretary of state, that if the nation broke up, he would go with the North. It makes sense, given that Washington's sympathies were with the Federalists, who were more the party of the commercial North.

In 1796, Washington prepared to make another of his memorable exits, voluntarily stepping down after two terms as president. His countrymen saw him once again as assuming the role of Cincinnatus, the soldier who rescued his country and then relinquished power. In his farewell address—really a letter to the people, as it was not delivered as a speech but rather published in newspapers—Washington felt that Americans needed some clear directives. First, he told them that "it is of infinite moment, that you should properly estimate the immense value of your national Union." He warned them "in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party."

He also urged them to be vigilant of "the insidious wiles of foreign influence," because "history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of Republican Govern-

ment." Such a warning resonates even today, more than two centuries later.

The farewell address may have been the last major instance of classical republicanism being offered by a top official as the model for public behavior in America. "Tis substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government," he asserted in one of the letter's three invocations of "virtue."

President Adams?

WITH WASHINGTON GONE, AMERICAN PARTISANSHIP WAS UNCORKED. Washington was succeeded in 1797 as president by John Adams, one of the stranger figures in American history. Adams' classical orientation would not serve him well when he was president. He would become a man out of time, proving unable to comprehend the rising surge of populism. He reacted to it eccentrically. There is a reason that in the center of today's Washington, DC, there are grand monuments to his predecessor and his successor, but none for him. Washington is on the one-dollar bill, Jefferson on the two, and even Hamilton on the ten, but Adams appears on none. At Mount Rushmore, Washington and Jefferson gaze out shoulder to shoulder, and again, Adams is nowhere to be seen. In one of his more discerning comments, he would reflect late in life that "Mausoleums, Statues, Monuments will never be erected to me."

Adams was not completely mistaken in assessing the precarious state of American politics. Populism tends to look good from a distance, but close up it can be frightening. Gordon Wood has observed that John Adams, coming from New England, had seen more of democracy in practice than had Thomas Jefferson of aristocratic Virginia. Adams never would have casually commented, as Jefferson once did to Adams' wife, that, "I like a little rebellion now and then. It is like a storm in the Atmosphere." Jefferson

wrote that sentence a few weeks after receiving the pamphlet in which Adams condemned the brutality of the people.

French Terror, French Virtue

IN THE 1790S, TWO MORE FEARS STIRRED THE CALDRON OF AMERICAN politics. The founders always had been acutely aware of the destruction of the Roman Republic and the short duration of the Athenian democracy. But now there was a new, contemporary example of a republic going sour, in France.

That was significant because in the late eighteenth century, the world had just two leading examples of "democratic republican" government—that is, nations ruled by the majority of the people. One was the United States. The other was France, and that became a problem for Jefferson. He had been in Paris to witness the revolution's first, exhilarating phase, but departed before it descended into terror. Jefferson had been optimistic at the outset of the upheaval in France, telling Washington at the end of 1788 that "the nation has been awaked by our revolution, they feel their strength, they are enlightened, their lights are spreading, and they will not retrograde." Like the Americans, he might have added, the French revolutionaries were dazzled by classicism. They often invoked Cicero and accused their political enemies of Catilinism.

For several years after he left Paris in October 1789, Jefferson maintained that the fates of the United States and France were intertwined. "I look with great anxiety for the firm establishment of the new government in France," he wrote to George Mason in February 1791. "I consider the establishment and success of their government as necessary to stay up our own."

But by mid-1793 it became clear that the French experiment had gone off track—first into a reign of terror, followed eventually by a "first consul," Napoleon Bonaparte, who would consolidate his power into a dictatorship. The unjustly neglected Gouverneur Morris, one of the livelier founders, became American ambassa-

dor to France in 1792. His reports to the president were far more pessimistic than Jefferson's had been. "The present Government is evidently a Despotism both in Principle and Practice," he wrote. "Terror is the order of the Day. . . . The Queen was executed the Day before Yesterday."

Even worse, Maximilien Robespierre, the leader of the French radicals, claimed that his group was motivated by virtue:

> *If the basis of popular government in peacetime is virtue, the basis of popular government during a revolution is both virtue and terror; virtue, without which terror is baneful; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing more than speedy, severe and inflexible justice; it is thus an emanation of virtue.*

This is a striking equation, insisting that terror and virtue go hand in hand. The thought builds an intellectual bridge between the ancient world and modern totalitarianism. It is itself a terrifying assertion to make.

Hamilton captured the Federalist repugnance for events in Paris. "In reviewing the disgusting spectacle of the French revolution, it is difficult to avert the eye entirely from those features of it which betray a plan to disorganize the human mind itself, as well as to undermine the venerable pillars that support the edifice of civilized society," he wrote.

By 1800, as he prepared to run for president, Jefferson was backpaddling as fast as he could. In a letter to a political ally, he emphasized that voters should be told that the fates of the American and French experiments were not linked, and that "whatever may be the fate of republicanism there, we are able to preserve it inviolate here." Make it clear, he added, that, "Our vessel is moored at such a distance, that should theirs blow up, ours is still safe." To that end, he added, we need to respect the will of the majority, even when we think it wrong, in the hope and belief that it eventually will come right.

There was another scare, far closer to American shores. In August 1791, only two years after the start of the French Revolution,

slaves in France's colony of Haiti began their revolt, which ultimately proved successful, with the establishment of an independent republic led by black men. American slaveholders watched this unfold with fear. This was their worst nightmare.

Conspiracies Abound

ON TOP OF THE FRENCH HORRORS, THERE WERE GENUINE CONSPIRACIES at home. William Blount, a senator from Tennessee, conspired with the British to have them seize Louisiana, which he hoped would boost the values of his own vast landholdings by opening the Mississippi River to navigation through to New Orleans. In 1797, a letter by Blount about the arrangement wound up on John Adams' desk. He gave it to Jefferson, who had it read aloud in the Senate. Blount became the first federal official to be impeached and was expelled from the Senate.

Scandals grew out of conspiracies. An emigrant Scot journalist named James Callender became a leading propagandist for the Jeffersonians. In 1797 he published the sordid details of an affair Hamilton had conducted with a young woman named Maria Reynolds, who with her roguish husband had proceeded to blackmail him. Hamilton, defending himself, claimed he was a victim of "a conspiracy of vice against virtue."

Sometimes it seems as if Jefferson, Hamilton, and Adams, not knowing what to do in this increasingly bitter environment, simply attacked one another instead. Adams, always emphatic if not always accurate, held Hamilton in surprisingly low estimation. He was late to the Revolution, Adams claimed, and at one point quit the fight over "a miff with Washington." Adams did not even credit Hamilton with being Washington's best ghostwriter, as others did. "Great Art has been used to propagate an Opinion that Hamilton was the Writer of Washingtons best Letters and most popular Addresses: especially that to the Governors of the States on his resignation of his Command of the Army. This I know to

be false. It was the joint production of Col. Humphries and another Gentleman a better Writer and more judicious Politician, whom I will not name at present."

Even Abigail Adams, usually more sober-minded than her mercurial husband, was looking for enemies under the bed. She attributed the growth of party feeling to an insidious French-led conspiracy to undermine the United States. "Their Emissaries are scatterd through all parts of this extensive union, sowing the seeds of vice, irreligion, corruption, and sedition," she wrote privately to an old friend in the spring of 1798. "Hence has grown up that spirit of Party, and of faction."

On the other side of the growing divide, Jefferson, though apprehensive, retained his core optimism. He assured a Virginia political ally that "a little patience and we shall see the reign of witches pass over, their spells dissolve, and the people recovering their true sight, restore their government to it's true principles." That was a provocative choice of words. One can only wonder if he was alluding to the witch trials a century earlier in Massachusetts, the home of leading Federalists such as John Adams, Theodore Sedgwick (attended Yale), Fisher Ames, and Rufus King (Harvard, 1777). One leading Federalist, Timothy Pickering, the secretary of state, actually was from the town of Salem, which had been the center of the seventeenth-century hysteria over witchcraft.

The Alien and Sedition Acts

WHEN WE SEEK TO UNDERSTAND JOHN ADAMS, IT ALWAYS HELPS TO look to Cicero. And in considering Cicero, notes the classicist Moses Hadas, it is vital to remember that to him, "nothing was more important than the maintenance of the established order." Cicero, writes one of his biographers, was "a temperamental conservative caught in the nets of revolution." So, too, was Adams. He long had worried that the new nation would drift toward factionalism followed by separation or civil war.

Viewed in this Roman light, the Sedition Law of 1798 was "the capstone of the new Federalist system," writes legal historian Leonard Levy. But seen in the context of American history, it was the last gasp effort of classical republicanism to stave off surging populism. Adams and the Federalists were trying to rely on the values and preserve the approach that had brought them to independence. But in the process, they would only underscore how times had changed, and how elites could no longer shape how the broad mass of Americans would think and speak. Public opinion was exploding. During the 1790s, the number of newspapers published in the United States more than doubled from 100 to more than 250. Adams was appalled by this noisy babel of new American voices. It mattered little to him that the majority of newspapers were Federalist, or leaning that way, with some 103 in his camp and just 64 that were anti-Federalist. Nonetheless, the very existence of opposition journals was an affront. They were the seedbed of the new partisan vocabulary that was developing to allow Americans to discuss the emerging politics of the time.

Adams' defenders, then and now, argue that the Sedition Law rested firmly on existing English common law, and so was not a great departure. But this confuses theory with practice. In fact, in the new United States, as Levy writes, the law was rarely applied, and so American newspapers "operated as if the law of seditious libel did not exist."

By changing the enforcement of the common law and passing a new federal law on top of it, Adams was lashing out at the new political system that was emerging, with political parties as its machinery. As historian Jill Lepore puts it,

> *The American two-party system, the nation's enduring source of political stability, was forged in—and, fair to say, created by—the nation's newspapers. Newspapers had shaped the ratification debate between Federalists and Anti-Federalists, and by 1791 newspapers were already beginning to shape the first party system, a contest between Federalists and those who aligned themselves with a newly emerging opposition.*

Seen in the context of the American reality of the 1790s, rather than through the classical lens of an aging Revolutionary generation, Adams actually was acting in a reactionary and destabilizing manner.

Partly because of Adams' blunders, the final two years of his administration brought the politics of the new republic to a white heat. Political participation was increasing rapidly, often to the point of illegality, with voter turnout sometimes exceeding 100 percent of the eligible (white male adult taxpaying) population.

The fight culminated with the party in power cracking down on the opposition press. In the two years after the Sedition Law was enacted, twenty-five journalists were arrested and ten convicted. There were five major anti-administration newspapers at the time; the editors of four of them were indicted. One of the more notable cases involved Thomas Cooper, a Pennsylvania newspaper editor who in November 1799 published a handbill stating that President Adams was incompetent and had meddled with federal judges. For this he was found guilty of malicious libel, fined $400, and sentenced to six months in jail. Benjamin Bache, grandson of Benjamin Franklin, was indicted, but died of yellow fever before his trial. Thomas Greenleaf, the leading anti-Federalist editor in New York, also was charged but died in the same epidemic. The federal government then indicted Greenleaf's widow, Anna, for "being a wicked and malicious person seeking to stir up sedition." When she in turn fell ill, her printing foreman was charged with libel, fined, and sentenced to four months in prison.

Vermont's rowdy Republican representative, Matthew Lyon, was jailed for printing a letter to the editor that referred to "the bullying speech of your president and the stupid answer of your senate." "Ragged Matt, the democrat," as the Federalists liked to call him, was found guilty of sedition, sentenced to four months of imprisonment, and fined $1,000, quite a sum in the days when the median price of an American house was $614. While behind bars he was reelected to Congress with 4,576 votes, almost twice those of the runner-up. The government then imprisoned a Vermont newspaper editor who had sought to raise money to pay Lyon's fine.

This was pure political power poured into the judiciary. Enforcement of the law was selective and uneven, to the extreme. "Every defendant was a Republican, every judge and practically all the jurors were Federalists," records Smelser. It was not clear how far the judges would take this crackdown. In November 1798, William Cushing (Harvard, 1751), a justice of the Supreme Court, urged a Richmond grand jury to look into "combinations or conspiracies to raise insurrections against government, or to obstruct the operation of the laws made by proper authority."

Nor were judges of different views immune to prosecution. Jedediah Peck, a county court judge in upstate New York, was a Federalist yet had some qualms about the Alien and Sedition Acts. After he made them public, he was arrested and shipped in irons to New York City for a planned trial.

Hamilton smelled treason in the burgeoning opposition to the acts. He urged Theodore Sedgwick of Massachusetts, a Federalist leader in the Senate, to conduct a congressional investigation of "the tendency of the doctrines advanced by Virginia and Kentucke to destroy the Constitution of the U[nited] States." Turning over a few rocks, he added, would lead to discovery of "the full evidence which they afford of a regular conspiracy to overturn the government." Always plotting, Hamilton a few months later advised Timothy Pickering, who just had been fired by Adams as secretary of state, to "take with you copies and extracts of all such documents as will enable you to explain both Jefferson & Adams." In other words, bring with you any dirt you may have on those two. One historian terms this Hamilton letter an act of "political espionage."

The Country Loses Its Father

WASHINGTON WAS DISGUSTED WITH THE STATE OF POLITICS. PEOPLE were "attacking every character, without respect to persons—public or Private, who happen to differ from themselves in Politics," he complained to Connecticut governor Jonathan Trumbull Jr.

(Harvard, 1759), who had been one of his aides during the war. Party loyalty was everything, while the quality of men was disregarded: "Let that party set up a broomstick, and call it a true son of Liberty, a Democrat, or give it any other epithet that will suit their purpose, and it will command their votes in toto!"

In November 1799, he wrote confidentially that "I have, for sometime past, viewed the political concerns of the United States with an anxious, and painful eye. They appear to me, to be moving by hasty strides to some awful crisis."

He would die a worried man. On Thursday, December 12, 1799, and the following day, Friday the 13th, he did farm oversight work on horseback, even though the weather was an atrocious mix of rain, snow, and sleet. That evening he was hoarse. Between two and three on the morning of Saturday, December 14, he awoke Martha to tell her he felt ill, and that his throat was painfully sore. Doctors came and during the course of the day bled him four times, which probably sped him toward his demise that evening. His secretary, Tobias Lear (Harvard, 1783), reported to President Adams that Washington went out like a Roman: "His last scene corresponded with the whole tenor of his life.—Not a groan, nor a Complaint escaped him in extreme distress.—With perfect resignation, and in full possession of his reason, he closed his well spent life."

In his will Washington tried to free as many of the enslaved people on his plantation as legally possible. Some were the property of Martha and her heirs. Others were married to those owned by Martha. He was the only founder involved in human bondage who tried to emancipate so many enslaved people. One can only wonder if this is because, as a man who learned mainly by observation and experience, he had come to see the practice of race-based slavery differently than his peers did. Jefferson was far better at avoiding reality than was Washington.

The death of Washington was a major psychological moment for the early republic, now fatherless in a real sense. In Philadelphia, Abigail Adams wrote the day the papers there carried the news of his passing that "every countanance is coverd with Gloom." John

Adams had said in his inaugural address of Washington that, "His Name may be still a rampart, and the Knowledge that he lives a Bulwark, against all open or Secret Ennemies of his Countries Peace." Now that great safeguard of the republic was gone. People knew it really was the end of an era. The death was "commemorated all through the country by the tolling of bells, funeral ceremonies, orations, sermons, hymns and dirges, attended by a mournful sense of loss, seeming to cast a pall over the entire heavens," wrote Samuel Griswold Goodrich, then a youth and later an immensely popular nineteenth-century writer under the pen name Peter Parley. He recalled a doleful hymn composed for the occasion that ended with the couplet,

With grief proclaim from shore to shore,
Our guide, our Washington's no more.

Adams' son-in-law, William Stephens Smith (Princeton, 1774), took the news ominously. The last great restraint on partisanship was gone. "Now the President will be fretted, perplexed, and tormented; now the full force of party will be brought forward," he worried. "He will now find himself, like the Roman Cato, sustaining a painful prëeminence."

But President Adams did not just attack his ideological adversaries. Considering himself above petty party politics, he also lashed out at Hamilton, a fellow Federalist, who was rumored to have ambitions to lead a military takeover of the government. In one note, he tartly observed that "General Washington never assumed the Character of perpetual Dictator—. That Pretension was reserved for one of his Aids."

Resisting "a new order of things"

DAVID DAGGETT [YALE, 1783], A PROMINENT CONNECTICUT FEDERAList, used an oration on July 4, 1799, to attack the Jeffersonians:

"The object of this party is to destroy ancient systems—ancient habits—ancient customs—to introduce a new liberty, new equality, new rights of man, new modes of education, and a new order of things." Daggett might not have chosen the best occasion on which to give a divisive speech, but his description of the new party was fairly accurate. In Europe, Daggett would not have been considered as speaking for the aristocratic class. He had paid for his way through law school partly by working as a butler. But different battle lines were being drawn in the new United States, one reason the politics of the time were so tempestuous. There was indeed "a new order of things" emerging, as Daggett stated. Especially, the workingman expected to be heard, and would no longer reflexively defer to the wealthy and well-educated.

On the other side of the political divide, William Manning, a farmer in Billerica, Massachusetts, composed a stirring call for the new order. "I am not a Man of Larning my selfe for I neaver had the advantage of six months schooling in my life," he began. "I am not grate reader of antiant history for I always followed hard labour for a living." What he did know of those "antiant" events was that the "long & bloody history about the fudes & animoityes, contentions & blood sheds that hapned in the antiant Republicks of Athens, Greesh & Roome & many other nations" all boiled down to a struggle between "the few & the Many." He was firmly on the side of the latter, believing that the greed and ambitions of the few formed the core of the problem:

> *The higher a Man is raised in stations of honour power and trust the greater are his temtations to do rong & gratify those selfeish prinsaples. Give a man honour & he wants more. Give him power & he wants more. Give him money & he wants more. In short he is neaver easy, but the more he has the more he wants.*

So, he argued, government by aristocrats was not the solution, as Daggett thought, but the problem. "The Reasons why a free government has always failed is from the unreasonable demands & desires of the few. They cant bare to be on a leavel with their

fellow creatures." Manning was unable to get his manifesto published, partly because the two editors to whom he sent it already had been arraigned for seditious libel. Yet it is noteworthy for illuminating how some Republicans were thinking at the time—and perhaps why, a few years later, they would displace the Federalists so rapidly and completely.

When Washington was alive, he was all the Federalists needed to make their case. But with him gone, they had almost nothing else to offer the American people. It is striking that as a political movement they left behind them no essential speech or essay that stated who they were and why the American people should support them. One of the few memorable Federalist documents, to be put alongside the government reports of Hamilton, is Noah Webster's dictionary of the American language, which he compiled during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Webster's work seems to represent a fallback position for moderate Federalists: If you cannot control the people, perhaps you can control their language, and thus how they think and speak. As one scholar states, "Webster's main motivation for writing and publishing it was not to celebrate American life or to expand independence. Instead, he sought to counteract social disruption and reestablish the deferential world order that he believed was disintegrating."

Not only was Washington gone, but Adams was often absent from his job, spending seven months of 1799 not at the capital but "angrily secluded" at his home in Massachusetts. Thomas Jefferson wrote later that at about this time, in 1798 and 1799, he worried that "a final dissolution of all bonds, civil & social, appeared imminent." Jefferson drafted the Kentucky Resolutions, a series of statements opposing the Alien and Sedition Acts and toying with secession. Madison did much the same in Virginia, saying the acts were unconstitutional, though he did so more moderately. Both sets of resolutions were adopted by their state legislatures.

The question was on the table: Could the United States survive without Washington as its unifying symbol?

The Conspiracy Most Feared

SLAVE UPRISINGS WERE ANOTHER DREADED FORM OF CONSPIRACY, AND sometimes the fears were grounded in reality. In Virginia, Governor James Monroe called out the militia to put down a rumored revolt in the Richmond area. This effort, now known as Gabriel's Rebellion, "is unquestionably the most serious and formidable conspiracy we have ever known of the kind," Monroe informed his old legal mentor, Thomas Jefferson. These black insurrectionists received none of the leniency shown the white men who had participated in Shays' Rebellion and the Whiskey Rebellion. Some twenty-six enslaved men were executed in Virginia. "Nothing is talked of here but the recent conspiracy of negroes," James Callender wrote to Jefferson from the Richmond jail, where he had been imprisoned for his journalism. This insurrection and a subsequent one eventually would induce the state of Virginia to pass a law requiring freed blacks to leave the state, meaning that being set free required a person to leave forever one's family and friends, and everything else one had known while in captivity.

As psychiatrists know, sometimes what people don't talk about is as important as what they do. All of the founders almost certainly were aware of Spartacus, the gladiator who famously led a slave revolt in ancient Rome. But *Founders Online,* which is compiling the works of the founders in searchable form, shows that in all their letters, speeches, pamphlets, and other writings, only John Adams, the only one who never owned an enslaved person, ever refers to him. To everyone else, slavery was treated as much as possible with a conspiracy of silence. It was the greatest failing of the founders, hardly explainable even today.