



# How Congress Lost, Part V: Politics and Presidential Power Under Adams and Jefferson, 1797–1809

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## Key Points

- While the Washington administration demonstrates the vast powers that the executive could wield in foreign and domestic affairs, the divergent experiences of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson illustrate that this influence does not belong to the president merely by virtue of his office.
- Adams struggled to exert his will because the Federalist Party's loyalty was split between him and Alexander Hamilton. Jefferson, as the unchallenged leader of the Republicans, commanded his partisans in Congress.
- To dominate Congress, the president must also bring with him the status of party leader, a position that election to the presidency did not yet confer at this point in the republic's history.

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George Washington's tenure in the executive branch demonstrated what was to many founders, James Madison included, the surprising power of the president. Madison had primarily feared that Congress would dominate the president.<sup>1</sup> Yet the Washington administration was a vindication of Alexander Hamilton's theory that an energetic executive branch could be the dominant player in the new constitutional order, guiding, directing, and even at times coercing Congress to do what the president wanted.<sup>2</sup>

Yet of the next five presidents—John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Madison, James Monroe, and John Quincy Adams—only one, Jefferson, ever wielded the same influence over Congress that Hamilton, acting as Washington's *de facto* prime minister, exercised. Why?

Part of the difference was ideological. The mental framework through which the Jeffersonians understood the Hamiltonian executive depended heavily on the Country Whig tradition of early 18th-century Britain. That view held that the proper constitutional

arrangement was for Parliament to be the dominant mover in British governance, as it represented the views of the people (or at least the propertied class). But the king's ministers—thanks to the honors, titles, and jobs that the sovereign controlled—had managed to bribe a sufficient number of members to get them to do his bidding rather than that of their constituents. When the Jeffersonians considered a strong, Hamiltonian executive, they immediately thought of this patronage network and reeled in horror. To them, this was corruption, and they would have nothing to do with it. And so the Jeffersonian presidents—Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe—were conscientious about keeping the executive out of Congress's business. This will be the subject of the next report in this series.

Yet that explains only a portion of the story. As this report will argue, the presidency had not yet acquired an *institutionalized source* of political power. Power has many aspects, but in republican politics it requires the ability to induce others in politics to do that which they

would not otherwise do.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, Washington—the one individual of the early republic who was truly *above* politics—wielded supreme political power. He was the great man of the American Revolution, the father of his country, “First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen,” as Henry Lee would eulogize him.<sup>4</sup> His personal reputation conveyed an immense political authority that enabled him to command others while remaining above politics. Hamilton, as indicated in the previous two reports, wielded Washington’s prestige to enormous effect, securing domestic and foreign policy wins for the emergent Federalist Party.

Of Washington’s five successors, only Jefferson entered office with anything approaching that kind of power. And it was, not coincidentally, Jefferson who wielded political power in a fashion similar to Washington. This report will develop this point by comparing Jefferson’s administration to that of Adams.

A major problem for executive power was the uncertain manner of presidential selection. The original Constitution established the Electoral College as the means to choose the president. This turned out to be a clunky and ultimately unworkable system that was substantially reformed by the 12th Amendment in 1804. Nevertheless, the original design endeavored to reconcile two seemingly contradictory goals—how to place the president above Congress, so that he could serve as an effective check on the legislature, and how to reward good presidents with the possibility of reelection.

Obviously, Congress could not be involved in presidential selection—for then the president would become a mere agent of Congress. And the framers did not trust the state governments or the people to choose good presidents. So they created the Electoral College. Electors would select two men for president; the man with a majority of votes would ascend to the top job, and the second-place finisher would become vice president. In the absence of a majority winner, the House would break the tie.

But that plan did not work, as the framers failed to anticipate the rise of political parties. As early as 1792, the Jeffersonian Republicans were plotting to remove Adams from the vice presidency—an office that the framers believed nobody would seek.<sup>5</sup> By 1796, there were national campaigns for president, instigated and coordinated by partisans for the two candidates. By 1800, the Electoral College inadvertently led to a

constitutional crisis, as Aaron Burr—Jefferson’s vice presidential pick—tied Jefferson in the Electoral College and set about convincing congressional Federalists to back him. The 12th Amendment established that electors would make one vote for president and another for vice president. Presidential selection would henceforth be a partisan affair.

Yet presidential selection would remain a problem for presidential power, as victory in the Electoral College did not convey upon the president the role of party *leader*. Jefferson, as we will see, was *already* the leader of his party when he took the reins of government. As such, he could exercise power in a way that was reminiscent of the Washington administration, albeit with the goal of dismantling what Jefferson considered the excesses of Federalist governance. Adams, on the other hand, was not the leader of his party. Though he had been an early leader in the American Revolution, helped draft the Declaration of Independence, and served for years as a foreign minister, his party belonged, at least in part, to Hamilton, who never made peace with the fact that Adams was the president.

The markedly different experiences of Adams and Jefferson establish well the basic principle that presidential power requires the command of a loyal cadre of partisans who will respond to the direction of the chief executive. Jefferson enjoyed such legions. Adams did not.

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When Adams took up the reins of government in March 1797, he was a man out of time. Born in 1735—just three years after Washington, who was now retiring to Mount Vernon—he had been a leading force in the American Revolution, but the political winds had shifted decisively against him. He had earned an (unfair) reputation as an elitist from his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States*, which had argued that one virtue of the upper houses of the state legislatures was that they protected the status of the wealthy.<sup>6</sup> Madison, for instance, never trusted Adams, even though Jefferson had vouched for him as a friend of republicanism.<sup>7</sup> The opposition force that had developed against Hamilton during the 1790s—which referred to itself as the Republican interest—agreed with Madison, not Jefferson, and thus viewed Adams with suspicion from the moment he took office.

So also did much of his own party, or better put, “his own” party—for Adams, like Washington, disdained party politics. He saw himself as a man above parties. Temperamentally, he was closer to the Federalist than the Republican Party. And yet Adams was in every way his own man and had expressed at various points during the 1790s skepticism toward Hamilton’s economic agenda. In fact, though Hamilton had retired from the Treasury Department in 1795, returning to New York City to practice law, he worked feverishly behind the scenes as a leader of the “High Federalist” faction, a group in government dedicated to him and set on undermining Adams at every turn.

Hamilton never reconciled himself to having Adams as the party’s choice for the 1796 contest. His first preference was John Jay, the former chief justice of the United States and negotiator of the controversial 1794 treaty of peace with Great Britain. When Hamilton realized that New England Federalists were staunchly behind Adams for the presidency in 1796, he schemed to have Thomas Pinckney of South Carolina placed on the Federalist ticket as vice president. Hamilton hoped that a unified Federalist front in the North might combine with Southerners casting a vote for a favorite son in Pinckney to catapult the South Carolinian ahead of Adams.

The plan failed. Southern Republicans stayed loyal to Jefferson, voting for him and Burr, the party’s vice presidential nominee. Adams thus became president, and following the rules prior to the 12th Amendment, Jefferson was installed as vice president. History has since remembered this as a miserable situation for Adams, as his political rival was in the number two spot in government. But in fact Jefferson and Adams were still on good terms at this point, even though the 1796 election was notoriously bitter.<sup>8</sup> Jefferson never once indicated his desire to be a candidate for president, and if he had been asked, he might have pointedly declined any nomination. He even expressed pleasure at Adams’s victory in 1796, arguing that the New Englander was ahead of him in stature and reputation during the revolution and was thus deserving of the top office.

The events of Adams’s tenure—in particular the rise of trouble with France—would sour this relationship. And it was only after both men had retired from public life that they would rekindle their friendship.

Still, the larger problem for Adams was Hamilton, who sought to control events from behind the scenes and schemed again in 1800 to push Adams out for another Pinckney (this time, Thomas’s older brother, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney).

Fatefully, Adams chose to retain Washington’s cabinet. For much of Washington’s tenure, the first president had sought to balance regional and ideological interests—hence the elevation of Jefferson to the State Department and Hamilton to Treasury. But by the end of his time in the presidency, his cabinet was thoroughly Federalist and loyal to Hamilton. Only Charles Lee, the attorney general, was loyal to Adams. Timothy Pickering at the State Department, James McHenry at the War Department, and Oliver Wolcott at the Treasury Department were all effectively puppets of Hamilton in the Adams administration’s cabinet. For instance, in the spring of 1798, Hamilton wrote to Pickering about the diplomatic entanglements between Britain, France, and the United States, though he noted that he could not “see all the cards.”<sup>9</sup> In response, Pickering wrote,

I wish you were in a situation not only “to see all the cards,” but to play them; with all my soul I would give you my *hand*; and engage in any other *game* in which I might best co-operate, on the same side, *to win the stakes*.<sup>10</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

Not content to pull the strings within Adams’s cabinet, Hamilton also used his influence with Washington to get himself back into government. Tensions with France had increased dramatically after the Jay Treaty made enormous commercial concessions to Great Britain. And a combination of French attacks on American commercial vessels on the high seas and France’s truculence toward American diplomats in Paris led to a full-blown crisis by 1798. War seemed imminent. Congress authorized the creation of a navy and ordered an increase of the army by 10,000 men. Adams named Washington the lieutenant general and commander in chief of the new fighting force.

The former president intended to take command only should war come. Thus, a great deal of the preparations depended on the general staff, or those top-level officers that would handle the formation and training of the army and advise the former president in case of war. Washington felt that, “if I am looked to as the

Commander in Chief, I must be allowed to [choose the general staff] such as will be agreeable to me.”<sup>11</sup> Hamilton actively lobbied the ex-president to be the first of the major generals serving under him, and Washington acceded to his entreaties.

But Adams resisted. Instead, the president selected Henry Knox as the first behind Washington. The former president was displeased. In September 1798, Washington wrote to Adams, reminding him that he had agreed to take control of an army that did not yet exist on the condition that he would have control over the general staff and insisting on Hamilton. “That he is ambitious I shall readily grant,” Washington admitted,

but it is of that laudable kind which prompts a man to excel in whatever he takes in hand. He is enterprising, quick in his perceptions, and his judgment intuitively great: qualities essential to a great military character, and therefore I repeat, that his loss will be irreparable.<sup>12</sup>

Adams felt he had no choice but to relent, and so the proverbial fox was in the henhouse.

Hamilton and his High Federalist allies wanted war with France—for they believed it would facilitate a closer alliance with Britain and utterly delegitimize the Republicans, who had long been partial to the French Revolution. Hamilton even speculated about marching the army into Virginia to put down the Republicans. But Adams wanted peace, which he ultimately achieved with the Convention of 1800.

Hamilton was aghast at the president’s conciliatory intentions. Hamilton felt that public support for his cause—which had been on the Federalist side in 1798—had been slipping away as the election approached. The alacrity of the crisis had certainly faded. The public chafed under the taxes necessary to fund Hamilton’s army. And Federalists in Congress had gone too far in enacting the Sedition Act. This made it a crime to defame the president, a manifest attempt to stifle the Republican press before the election. But it backfired. Pro-Republican newspapers sprung up all across the country, denouncing Adams, praising Jefferson, and generally causing headaches for Federalists throughout the nation.

In his desperation, Hamilton plotted once more to use the party’s ostensible vice presidential nominee to

push Adams aside. Like his brother, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney was a Southern Federalist. So Hamilton expected Northern Federalists would line up behind him, and just maybe a few Southern electors would vote regional sympathies first. Hamilton furthermore conspired—against the advice of some of his friends—to publish a letter “Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq. President of the United States.” Running an astonishing 14,000 words, this prolix document demonstrated the former secretary at his worst—scheming, petty, vindictive, and ultimately self-defeating. “Not denying to Mr. ADAMS patriotism and integrity, and even talents of a certain kind,” Hamilton argued,

I should be deficient in candor, were I to conceal the conviction, that he does not possess the talents adapted to the *Administration* of Government, and that there are great and intrinsic defects in his character, which unfit him for the office of Chief Magistrate.<sup>13</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

Adams lost the election of 1800 to Jefferson—although the results were close. The superior organization of the New York City Republicans under the leadership of Burr swung the city’s at-large state senate seats to the party. With them, control of the state legislature, and thus New York’s 12 electoral votes, went to Jefferson. That made the difference, for Jefferson bested Adams by just eight electoral votes. Adams retired to private life and for the next quarter century was a prodigious letter writer. In 1823, he wrote to Harrison Otis a brief yet revealing account of his time in the White House:

I was President a mere cipher, the Government was in the hands of an oligarchy consisting of a triumvirate who governed every one of my five Ministers; both houses of Congress were under their absolute direction[.] What ever I proposed to the triumvirate, were sure to be rejected. My Nominations to the Senate were sure to be negatived or thwarted[,] embarrassed and imperiously imposed upon me. . . . The main spring, the prime mover of all this [machinery], was Alexander Hamilton. . . . [If] I was weak, as I certainly was, Alexander Hamilton was stark mad.<sup>14</sup>

In a letter a decade earlier, Adams identified this “American Triumvirate” as consisting of Hamilton, Pinckney, and Washington and lamented that his administration was destroyed by the “unbridled and unbounded Ambition of Alexander Hamilton.”<sup>15</sup>

None of the heroes of the American founding come off especially well during the late 1790s. Hamilton, the man who had built the American financial system from virtually nothing, appears to be exactly what Adams says: a man whose unbridled ambitions had made him stark mad. Washington seems proud and meddlesome, subtly threatening the president with resignation if he cannot have Hamilton as his number two. Adams seems, as he always did, cranky, ostentatious, and maladroit at managing the personalities around him. Meanwhile, Jefferson drafted the Kentucky Resolutions, which introduced the doctrine of nullification that John C. Calhoun would take up decades later. And Madison—the man who labored as prodigiously as anybody to establish the new republic—had retired to Montpelier as the country seemed to be crumbling apart.

Putting aside the personal shortcomings of an otherwise legendary cadre of men, there is an important institutional insight to be obtained from the Adams presidency, particularly through his reminiscences of it. Adams inherited all the constitutional authorities that his predecessor had. But whereas Washington was strong, Adams was, in his own words, weak. Hamilton was the proximate cause, no doubt. But more broadly to blame was a division within the Federalist coalition—a division that Adams was unable to bridge. It was not simply a matter of his vanity and prickliness, which made him a hard man to admire. It was also that his elevation to the presidency did not confer on him the mantle of party leadership. His Federalist rivals in 1796 never accepted the legitimacy of his leadership or, more importantly, felt *compelled* to accept it. The acquisition of the presidential office did not yet induce rivals to bend the proverbial knee.

Washington could extract obedience from potential rivals because he was Washington. Adams had no such credibility and thus found himself beset at every turn by disobedience from his nominal allies. Jefferson’s experience was more like Washington’s, for the two of them entered the presidential office with sufficient political capital.

Jefferson’s ascension to the presidency was paradoxical. Like Adams and Washington before him, Jefferson was suspicious of parties. The Country Whig view, developed in early 18th-century Britain and popular among the founders, was that parties were dangerous to the harmony necessary to sustain a republic. Neither Washington nor Adams saw themselves as party men, but Jefferson was the leader of such a party. Indeed, he was the first president of that kind. And it was the development of a superior party organization that propelled him past Adams in 1800.

As president, Jefferson played two conflicting roles—national conciliator and party boss. On the one hand, he pursued a policy of accommodation. He did not go measure for measure against the High Federalists. He allowed the Sedition Act to expire and declared in his inaugural address not only that a free discourse was essential to the republic but that Federalists and Republicans had more in common than many of them imagined:

We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all republicans: we are all federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union, or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated, where reason is left free to combat it.<sup>16</sup>

He took this idea seriously. He retained many Federalist officeholders and kept crucial aspects of Hamilton’s economic system, above all the Bank of the United States.

On the other hand, Jefferson understood the need to cultivate party loyalty in government. As the author of the Declaration of Independence, nobody stood more for the principles of liberty in the public mind than Jefferson. It was a main reason why the opponents of Hamiltonian Federalism rallied to the *Jeffersonian* banner in the early 1790s. Republicans in Washington, DC, and throughout the country saw him as their leader, and Jefferson made the most of it. For starters, he did away with notions of ideological or regional balance within the cabinet. Rather, he drew on his two most trusted lieutenants to manage the major departments—Madison at State and Albert

Gallatin at Treasury. Both men were truly remarkable characters in their own right—Madison the great intellectual at the Constitutional Convention and Gallatin the only Republican who could match Hamilton’s understanding of public finance. Jefferson’s cabinet was arguably the most harmonious and helpful to the president in the entire history of the country.

While he disdained the sorts of formal soirees that Washington and Adams hosted, he regularly hosted intimate dinners in the White House with members of Congress. As he explained to David Williams in 1806, this enabled him to

cultivate personal intercourse with the members of the legislature that we may know one another and have opportunities of little explanations of circumstances, which, not understood might produce jealousies & suspicions injurious to the public interest, which is best promoted by harmony and mutual confidence among it’s functionaries.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, Jefferson was being modest here. Most members of Congress in Jefferson’s term were unimpressive characters, new to the government and not personally acquainted with the heroes of the revolutionary period. Jefferson, with his legendary history, towering intellect, free-flowing conversation, and plenty of Madeira wine, utterly dazzled these men. They were happy to take his suggestions.

For more formal occasions—and especially to include the ladies of Washington, DC—the president leaned on Madison and his charming wife, Dolley. From their four-bedroom house on F Street, the secretary of state and his wife would host tea parties and dinners for foreign diplomats, the local gentry, members of Congress, and the emerging class of Washingtonian socialites. Card games, alcohol, and even tobacco kept the good times rolling. Between the Madisons’ skills at hosting and Jefferson’s personal charms, the backbench Republicans in Congress stood no chance of developing their own ideas about public policy.

And so an informal yet important party organization developed in the government. Congressional Republicans—who counted as the majority in both chambers—met in caucus to determine policies, which for the most part were worked out in the cabinet, suggested at evening dinners by Jefferson, and reinforced

by the charms of the Madisons. Meanwhile, Gallatin—who had been a leader in the House in the late 1790s—still had multiple contacts and good relationships in both chambers, and he could serve as a kind of party whip if need be.

Much of Jefferson’s tenure was the first true period of presidential-party governance. Though the president was moderate in his approach to the Federalists, he nevertheless insisted on—and received from Congress—a number of important policy reforms: the end of nearly all internal taxes, a dismantling of the Navy, paying down the debt, and the acquisition of Louisiana. He could do all this while eschewing the formalities of past presidents—not only the public events but even an in-person State of the Union address—because he was the undisputed leader of the party that controlled the government.

But it was not to last. Britain and France returned to war in 1803, and the new nation felt once again caught between the mightiest powers of Europe. At Madison’s urging, Jefferson embarked on a trade war that decimated the American economy, had little effect on Europe, and utterly exhausted the president. By the end of his second term, he was basically checked out, anticipating a return to his beloved Monticello. Madison, his successor in the White House, would bring in a different vision of how the presidential office should function in a republic. This will be the focus of the next report in this series.

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If the Washington administration demonstrated the executive branch’s potential power over Congress, the contrasting examples of Adams and Jefferson illustrate how that power does not exist in a political vacuum. The executive can dominate Congress only insofar as members of the legislature see the president (or, in the case of Washington, his top minister) as a leader. Jefferson possessed such a hold over members of Congress, while Adams did not.

Importantly, the acquisition of the presidency *did not yet convey* the requisite political power to manage Congress. Washington and Jefferson possessed that power before they became president. Adams—thanks to the machinations of Hamilton—had no such influence. Adams’s victory in the presidential election of 1796 did

not bestow such power on him, for Hamilton continued to scheme and plot to shove him aside—even twice trying to swap him out for a Pinckney.

It would be many years before election to the presidency endowed the chief executive with substantial sway over Congress. There are many reasons for this,

but an important one is that the next three commanders in chief—Madison, Monroe, and Quincy Adams—had a distinctively different vision of the presidential office than their successors. Their more modest and “republican” understanding of executive power will be the subject of the next entry in this series.

## About the Author

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## Notes

1. See, for instance, James Madison to Edmund Randolph, May 31, 1789, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-12-02-0122>.

2. See *Federalist*, no. 70 (Alexander Hamilton).

3. See, for instance, Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, “Decisions and Nondecisions: An Analytical Framework,” *The American Political Science Review* 57, no. 3 (1963): 632–42, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/abs/decisions-and-nondecisions-an-analytical-framework/830AA58A11A2E64961803E49BB337F76>.

4. Henry Lee, “A Funeral Oration on the Death of George Washington,” National Institutes of Health, <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/georgewashington/education/materials/Transcript-Funeral.pdf>.

5. See, for instance, James Madison to Melancton Smith and Marinus Willett, October 19, 1792, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-14-02-0351>.

6. See Luke Mayville, *John Adams and the Fear of American Oligarchy* (Princeton University Press, 2018). Gouverneur Morris had a similar view as Madison.

7. See, for instance, James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, June 6, 1787, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0019>.

8. Adams was accused, among other things, of being a monarchist. Jefferson, on the other hand, was said to be an atheist and Jacobin. See Jeffrey Paisley, *The First Presidential Contest: 1796 and the Founding of American Democracy* (University Press of Kansas, 2016).

9. Alexander Hamilton to Timothy Pickering, June 8, 1798, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-21-02-0280>.

10. Timothy Pickering to Alexander Hamilton, June 9, 1798, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-21-02-0282>.

11. George Washington to James McHenry, July 5, 1798, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/06-02-02-0296>.

12. George Washington to John Adams, September 25, 1798, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/06-03-02-0015>.

13. Alexander Hamilton, “Letter from Alexander Hamilton, Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq. President of the United States,” October 24, 1800, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-25-02-0110-0002>.

14. John Adams to Harrison Gray Otis, April 4, 1823, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-7800>.

15. John Adams to James Lloyd, February 11, 1815, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6408>.

16. Thomas Jefferson, “First Inaugural Address,” speech, US Capitol, Washington, DC, March 4, 1801, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-33-02-0116-0004>.

17. Thomas Jefferson to David R. Williams, January 31, 1806, Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-3158>.

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