



[Ben W. Heineman Jr.](#) - Ben Heineman Jr. has held top positions in government, law and business. He is the author of *High Performance with High Integrity* (Harvard Business Press, 2008).

## The Origins of Today's Bitter Partisanship: The Founding Fathers

By Ben W. Heineman Jr.

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*The political rivalry between Obama and Boehner pales in comparison to the animosity rampant among Jefferson, Hamilton, Washington, and Adams*



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Many commentators say that today's vitriolic relations between the two major political parties are as bad as they have ever been. President Obama's jobs speech yesterday sets the stage for a bitter election year and yet another likely "no" from the Republicans on major elements of his program, despite the public's evident distaste for gridlock in Washington.

But this partisanship is surely no worse than the 1790s -- when the two-party system emerged out of the competing visions, and personal hatreds, of the Federalists led by Hamilton and the Republicans led by Jefferson and Madison. Indeed, the fundamental issues of America's first decade and the source of its vicious political divisiveness -- the

balance between federal and state power, the tension between government action and personal liberty, and the ambiguities in the Constitution on these and other crucial issues -- remain a powerful source of contention today.

Most of us know that the creation of a national government under the Constitution, written in 1787, was spawned by the inability of the 13 newly freed colonies to act in concert under the Articles of Confederation adopted after victory over the British at Yorktown in 1781.

Yet few of us except keen students of history know that Madison, who in 1789 was along with Hamilton the most articulate advocate for ratification of the new Constitution and establishment of a new national government, reversed course in the 1790s. He and his mentor, Thomas Jefferson, had a dark vision of the new administration of George Washington.

At one level, they viewed it as a return of oppressive British rule, with strong central authority too far removed from the people and too similar to monarchy in its conception of the presidency and imposition of economic policies on the states. At another level, Madison and Jefferson were concerned about the transfer of power in a national government to a northeastern merchant class and away from southern planters -- and, according to historians; they feared at an even deeper level that a national government could someday abolish slavery (although until after 1808 the Constitution prohibited any governmental limitation on slavery).

Thus the political party of Jefferson and Madison was born, with its call for return to the Spirit of '76 concealing many complex reasons for its emergence. The main target of their growing partisanship was Hamilton, architect of the Washington administration's national economic policies. For his part, Hamilton, as leader of the Federalists, believed that Madison and Jefferson were equally dangerous in their inexplicable abandonment of Constitutional principles of nationalism and their dangerous and hypocritical populism (reflected in initial enthusiasm for the French Revolution). His loathing of them matched theirs of him.

Seeking to stand above the fray as bipartisan leaders of the whole nation were Washington and his successor, John Adams. They were bewildered by the political rancor and incapable of adapting to the divisive politics of the decade. For example, much of the political bitterness was played out in views of Britain and France. Both Washington and Adams believed deeply in neutrality for a young America as relations between the great European powers deteriorated into war. They sought mightily to negotiate peaceful terms with both nations when they threatened American commerce on the high seas.

However, to oversimplify complex diplomatic history, the Republicans bitterly attacked the Jay Treaty of 1796 resolving commercial disputes with Britain (and ending British hostilities on America's Northwest borders), and the Hamilton-led Federalists attacked Adams for seeking a similar treaty with France (which was accomplished in the last

months of his presidency). Indeed, Washington was called a monarchist by republican critics simply for announcing a doctrine of neutrality.

The no-holds-barred rhetoric of the time was remarkable. Two Republican organs -- Philip Freneau's *National Gazette* succeeded by Benjamin Franklin Bache's *Aurora* -- make the talking heads of partisan cable TV look mild in comparison. The *Aurora* called Washington's Farewell Address the "loathings of a sick mind," asked whether he was "an imposter or an apostate" and accused him of being traitorous, like Benedict Arnold. Of Adams, it said he was but "old, querulous, bald, blind, crippled and toothless" and, during his re-election campaign, a worthless public figure who needed "like polluted water to be cast out the back door." For his part, Hamilton referred to the Republicans as Jacobins, ruthless purveyors of "peoples'" rights who would bring a reign of terror to America from France. Indeed, during the presidential election of 1800, Jefferson hired a "publicist," James Callender, to attack his opponent, John Adams ("a repulsive pedant...a gross hypocrite").

The fevered competition broke relationships among the Founders. Adams and Jefferson, who had been strong friends during the revolution and later as diplomats in Europe, split bitterly (only to be reconciled years later in their old age). Hamilton and Madison, co-authors of *The Federalist Papers*, became mortal enemies. And, in the service of their partisan passions, each took actions judged harshly by history. Jefferson was disloyal and duplicitous to Washington (when Secretary of State) and to Adams (when Vice-President). He and Madison supported the violent newspapers of the time. And Hamilton was not only grossly disloyal to Adams (who was not sufficiently anti-Republican) but was a driving force beyond *The Alien and Sedition Acts* (attempting to suppress Republican speech) and a hare-brained scheme to raise a standing army to protect against a non-existent French invasion.

In drafting the Constitution and seeing it ratified, the founding generation sought to control factions with faith that the many groups in a large nation would be forced work together in the national interest. As Joseph Ellis notes in *American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies at the Founding of the Republic*, "the creation of a two party system succeeded despite entrenched resistance by all the founders to its very existence." Yet emerge it did, in one of the most political fraught decades in our history, with resonance for the issues, divisions and rancor of today.

President Adams sought to stand above the political fray and moderate between the emerging parties, seeking principled national consensus. His archenemy, Thomas Jefferson, was instrumental in creating one of the first political parties and, behind his Olympian self-presentation, acting in a fiercely political way. John Adams was a one-term president. Thomas Jefferson served two terms.

Is there a message from this formative history for President Obama?

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