

American Icons: The American Presidency, 1789-1815

On April 30, 1789, George Washington took the oath of office to become the first President of the United States. That event symbolized the beginning of a new era in American history, an era of freedom and independence. But it also proved to be an era of trial and error as Americans implemented the government under the Constitution and experimented with how it all should work.

For the next twenty-five years, American leaders filled in the details of the general outline of government structures laid out in the Constitution. In conjunction with these developments, Americans witnessed the development of political parties and the increasing role of the mass media in politics. Six presidential elections took place, including the hard-fought contest in 1800 which temporarily ended the friendship between the two candidates, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. In the middle of the era, Thomas Jefferson bought the Louisiana Territory from France, nearly doubling the size of the United States and setting the stage for the westward movement which would help turn the United States into a major world power by the twentieth century. At the end of the era, Americans managed to avoid defeat in a second war with Great Britain. For many Americans, the War of 1812 constituted the Second War for Independence.

Throughout these twenty-five years, many Americans provided leadership at different times in dealing with a variety of issues. But Americans throughout time have tended to look to the Presidents (and First Ladies) for guidance and direction. Americans want their Presidents to be heroes. Because of this tendency, Presidents have often become the icons, both good and bad, of American history. This is definitely true for the era of the Young Republic.

The ultimate icon of this era is George Washington, often considered to be the greatest President. Americans seldom criticize the "father of his country," believing him to have brilliantly led the young nation as its first President. Washington's successors are generally household names, but none of them reach the hallowed iconic status of the former Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison have received both praise and criticism for their actions as President. Part of these mixed reactions result from the growing partisanship of American politics in the late 1790s and early 1800s, as clearly shown in the complicated Election of 1800 in which John Adams lost his national influence. Also adding to the confusion are debates over the character of the early Presidents. Thomas Jefferson, in particular, has produced arguments and debates because of his calls for freedom and liberty at the same time that he owned slaves and reportedly had a long ongoing affair with one of them. And Madison has long been overshadowed by his vivacious wife

Dolley whom Americans have long idolized because of her bravery during the War of 1812.

All of these historical figures have become icons in American history. Even though we do not fully understand them, we see them as icons of the best and worst in the history of the early Republic. The books in this series discuss these icons from a variety of vantage points, trying to help us gain a better understanding of who these people were and how their characters and actions shaped the history of the United States.

Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington

by Richard Brookhiser

George Washington is probably the most famous but least understood American President. Americans easily recognize the name and know that he is considered to be the "father of his country," but they know very little about him. Richard Brookhiser seeks to correct that problem because he believes that Americans owe Washington a great deal and that Americans should honor his contributions to the success and stability of the United States. Brookhiser reviews Washington's contributions as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, President of the Constitutional Convention, and first President of the United States. He then discusses Washington's character and how his greatest gift to his nation was to retire each time when his job was complete. Each time he believed that he was retiring and that his public career was ended, but he responded again when his friends convinced him that his country needed him. Brookhiser shows that, in the age that produced Napoleon Bonaparte, George Washington chose to act for the good of the country rather than just for his own ambitions. Washington was ambitious, but he was not blinded by it. He had a good sense of what the United States needed him to do and he did it. As a result, he truly was the "father of his country" in many ways.

American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson

by Joseph J. Ellis

Thomas Jefferson has long been difficult for Americans to understand. He is an icon because he wrote the Declaration of Independence. He is praised for his stand for freedom and liberty and criticized because he owned slaves. Jefferson has been claimed by politicians of all persuasions, and his writings have been used to defend all sorts of ideas. He often stated that slavery was a devastation for freedom-loving Americans, but he never seemed able to figure out a way to live without his own slaves, and he may have carried on a long term relationship with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings. In a thought-provoking study, Joseph Ellis tries to explain what made Jefferson the way he was. He examines his career in some detail in an attempt to understand why Jefferson acted the way he did over time. Ellis describes Jefferson as a sphinx because his actions

are so hard to comprehend. Jefferson seemed to be a bundle of contradictions that are very confusing. Jefferson was a very successful politician who could shape his presentation to fit the audience he was addressing. Ultimately, Jefferson was an idealist who successfully lied to himself and others whenever his ideas and his actions contradicted each other.

Scandalmonger

by William Safire

William Safire's best selling novel dramatizes the effects of the Alien and Sedition Acts on immigrants and journalists (often the same people), of increasingly bitter factionalism on the United States Congress, and of the power of a partisan press on political figures. On the Federalist side (the party of John Adams and Alexander Hamilton), an Englishman, William Cobbett, publishes *Porcupine's Gazette* as a vehicle for excoriating Republican politicians and journalists, including Scotsman James Callender.

Callender is the "scandalmonger" of the title and was, in fact responsible for airing the affair between Alexander Hamilton and Maria Reynolds, a married woman whose husband had solicited Hamilton for a job in the United States Treasury (perhaps). In the "Notes and Sources" for the novel, Safire indicates which aspects of the plot are fictional (very few) and which are historical (most), demonstrating that Washington sex scandals and lurid journalism are nothing new on the United States political scene.

Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800

by John Ferling

The election of 1800 was one of the most controversial in American history. John Ferling presents a thoughtful discussion of the issues and personalities involved in this pivotal event. He presents engaging portraits of the various strong personalities involved. Icons of American history like John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson are discussed as they take sides and try to influence the election. Adams and Jefferson, partners in the fight for independence, had drifted apart as their ideas about the future diverged. It was a hard-fought contest that involved partisan attacks and name-calling on all levels. The two political parties, the Federalists and the Republicans, had very different views of how the United States should be run. When the election was over, the electoral college ended in a tie and many feared that the result would be a civil war. Ultimately, the election was settled by the House of Representatives as provided for by the Constitution. But, in a wonderfully ironic twist, a Federalist-controlled House had to choose which Republican (Thomas Jefferson or Aaron Burr) would be President. For Jefferson, his election as President was the last chapter in the American Revolution and

helped cement his place in American history. The fact that there was no civil war showed that the new government under the Constitution worked.

Dolley: A Novel of Dolley Madison in Love and War

by Rita Mae Brown

Out of the era of the early American presidency, Dolley Madison, the wife of our fourth president James Madison, emerges as one of the few heroines of the period, serving as an inspiration to succeeding generations of American women. She is remembered as a consummate hostess as well as for the fact that she had the foresight to save Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington before evacuating the President's house in 1814 just as British troops were entering Washington. Rita Mae Brown re-creates the character of Dolley Madison as she tried to support her husband and maintain household standards befitting a President during the War of 1812. Brown's novel is set in 1814, but through the imagined journals of Dolley Madison and conversations--especially those with the President--she fills in the "back story" of the relationship of this remarkable couple.

For Further Reading

Brant, Irving. *James Madison*. 6 vols. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941-1961.

Flexner, James Thomas. *George Washington*, 4 vols. Boston: Little, Brown, 1965-1972.

Hickey, Donald R. *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*. University of Illinois Press, 1989.

Malone, Dumas. *Jefferson and His Time*. 6 vols. Boston: Little, Brown, 1948-1981.

McCullough, David. *John Adams*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001.

Risjord, Norman K. *Jefferson's America, 1760-1815*. 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

"*American Icons: The American Presidency, 1789-1815*" was developed by Carol Sue Humphrey, Professor of History at Oklahoma Baptist University and Jennifer Kidney.

