

Handout Week Four: Jefferson's Enemies

Mick Chantler, Instructor mickchantler@gmail.com

While friendship and fraternity propelled Jefferson's career and enabled him to consolidate his personal power, the perhaps inevitable corollary was the development of deep and bitter enmities with those outside his charmed circle of republican comrades. Jefferson could hate well—he carried grudges for years, and seemed to revel in the venomous personal and partisan feuds of his era. Today we will dissect the many vendettas Jefferson engaged in over his long career in politics, from his early clash with Patrick Henry, through his struggles with Aaron Burr and John Marshall, to his rather pathetic fight at the end of his life with the “consolidationists” who had engineered the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

Jefferson had the regrettable tendency to regard his political opponents as evil men bent on the very destruction of his cherished agrarian republic. Consequently, his battles took on a Manichean tone which at times causes one to question Jefferson's emotional objectivity and balance. It was difficult to “respectfully disagree” with Jefferson; generally one either played the role of disciplined acolyte, or found oneself cast into outer darkness. To illustrate this rather unattractive bent in his personality, we will consider how Jefferson turned against his friend and kinsman Edmund Randolph because the latter did not agree with Jefferson on key issues when they served together in Washington's cabinet.

Just as the names of Lincoln and Douglas, or Kennedy and Nixon, are forever linked in the American political psyche, Hamilton and Jefferson played the roles of archetypal enemies in the early days of the Republic. Indeed, Jefferson's contentious relationship with the Treasury Secretary defined the terms of American political discourse during the Washington Administration. While the godlike Washington tried to remain serenely above the tumult, his lieutenants engaged in a political bloodletting that nearly tore the infant Republic apart. We will show how the contestants disagreed bitterly on almost every aspect of public life: foreign affairs, economic policy—specifically the debate over the national debt, the Bank, and international commerce—and the very meaning of the Constitution. We will demonstrate how the struggle between these talented and committed heavyweights gave rise to the party system in American politics and created the parameters for the lasting split in the American body politic into “conservative” and “radical” wings. (Although even in their lifetimes, it was sometimes hard to say who represented the conservative side of the argument.)

Jefferson's warm friendship with John and Abigail Adams fell victim to the political bloodletting of the 1790s, one of the many tragic losses in Jefferson's life. We will examine the dissolution of this lengthy and rewarding relationship which dated back to the Second Continental

Congress and grew deeper during their trying years in Europe, and speculate on the emotional cost of this breach to both men, and to Abigail—one of the few women whom Jefferson treated as a full intellectual equal. But we will also trace the remarkable resurrection of their friendship during the final years of their lives in retirement, and relive the amicable correspondence of the period from 1812-25.

People to Know:

Philip Mazzei-Jefferson's Florentine neighbor and correspondent during the tumultuous years of the 1790s. It was in a private letter to Mazzei that Jefferson indiscreetly denounced George Washington as an "apostate" given over to "monarchical and aristocratical heresies" and that The Father of His Country had abandoned "that noble love of liberty and republican government which carried us triumphantly through the war." Jefferson went on to Mazzei that Washington had once been a "Samson in the field and Solomon in council, but had his head shorn by the harlot England." Naturally, such unkind (and unjust) words alienated Washington, and the two never spoke again. Washington went to his grave feeling betrayed by Jefferson's comments, while Jefferson elected not to comment on the missive for many years. Rather typically, Jefferson refused to take responsibility for the damning letter, and toward the end of his life weakly defended himself by saying that he really hadn't meant what he said, and that Washington understood this.

Samuel Chase-Federalist Supreme Court Justice and determined opponent of Jeffersonian Republicans during the "Reign of Witches," as Jefferson described the persecutions under the Alien and Sedition Acts. As president, Jefferson moved against the Supreme Court and "suggested" that impeachment articles be drawn up against the intemperate Chase. Typically, Jefferson acted covertly, using his surrogates in Congress to take the initiative: "Might this seditious and official attack on the principles of our Constitution go unpunished? And to whom so pointedly as yourself will the public look for the necessary measures," Jefferson wrote to a loyal Republican leader in the House. "I ask these questions for your consideration. For myself, it is better that I should not interfere." These "questions" were Jefferson's coded command to his lieutenants in Congress to launch impeachment proceedings against Chase. As in this case, Jefferson usually conducted his nastiest quarrels by proxy, so he could appear to remain serenely above the dirty, brass knuckles dimension of politics.

James Callender-Republican journalist and scandalmonger during the 1790s. Jefferson employed Callender as a literary hit man during the party conflicts of the Adams years, endorsing and helping to pay for his attacks on Hamilton, Adams, and other Federalists. Characteristically, Jefferson denied having been party to Callender's scurrilous attacks, but the wily Scotsman kept copies of the President's letters of approval, proving his complicity. When

Callender tried to blackmail Jefferson by demanding the postmaster's job in Richmond in return for his work, the President refused. Callender took his revenge by "outing" Jefferson's ongoing affair with Sally Hemings. Callender accosted the President and shouted threateningly, "Sir, you know that by lying I made you President, and I'll be damned if I do not unmake you by telling the truth." The duplicity Jefferson demonstrated in his dealings with Callender was sadly consistent with his lifelong strategy for political infighting. It was the Mazzei business redux, with Jefferson righteously denying both to himself and the world his role in the covert action to discredit his opponents. As on other occasions, Jefferson appeared shocked and dismayed when the truth came out. He was caught in his web of denial, and his lying made Callender's charges regarding Sally Hemings appear more believable.