

George Washington never had to campaign for the presidency. No one even thought of running against him as long as he was willing to serve. Thus America's first campaign was for the third election, in 1796.

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# A Campaign to Remember

by Sherwin D. Smith



Actually the contest began nearly four years before. It had taken no time for the new nation to split into two deeply opposed parties. The Federalists were led by Alexander Hamilton. They represented, in general, the bankers and merchants of the North. The Democratic-Republicans were led by Thomas Jefferson. They were strongest in the South and the newly opened West. They spoke for farmers and craftsmen.

By the start of 1796 it was clear that Washington would not run for a third term. He did not make the news public until September, when he gave his Farewell Address. But in June he told Hamilton that he was going to retire. By then the behind-the-scenes fight was in full swing.

In those days there were no conventions to choose candidates. Party leaders simply made up their own minds and then tried to persuade their followers to go along.

As early as February, Democratic-Republican leaders were urging Jefferson to run. "You owe it to yourself, to truth, to the world," said one of them.

Jefferson played coy. "I have no ambition to govern men," he said. He had served his country as author of the Declaration of Independence. He had been the first secretary of state. Now, at fifty-three, he had retired to his beloved home at Monticello. He kept in touch with political affairs, but that was all. He insisted that he was more interested in farming. Also, he was doing his house over. He had just torn off the whole second story, and was anxious to get a roof back on.

As it turned out, he never did say yes. But

he didn't say no either. So in the end he became the Democratic-Republican candidate. His running mate was Aaron Burr.

The Federalists did not need to persuade anybody. From the start they knew that John Adams would run. He had served two terms as Washington's vice-president, so he was a natural choice. For his running mate the Federalists picked Thomas Pinckney.

The candidates took no part in the campaign. It was waged by their followers, in a flood of pamphlets, newspapers, and speeches. And it dealt with personalities more than with issues.

Jefferson was attacked for being too much of an egghead. He was a philosopher, said one pamphleteer. Such a man, he said, was the worst kind of politician. Another critic wrote him off as a weak man who could not make up his mind: "I might think him fit to be a professor . . . but certainly not the first magistrate of a great nation."

Jefferson was even accused of being a coward. Fifteen years before, when he was governor of Virginia, he had fled from advancing British troops. So had the whole state legislature, but that fact was not mentioned by his enemies. They said that a man who had left his post in an hour of danger could not be trusted.

Both men were charged with being war lovers. Jefferson, said his enemies, would plunge the country into war with England. Adams, said his enemies, was pro-British. He would drag the country into war with France.

Jefferson was attacked for not seeking the office with more vigor. It was, according to some, mere hypocrisy. They called it a trick to

advance his "schemes of concealed ambition." On the other hand, the opposition said that Adams was *too* eager for the office. They feared that he was secretly planning to make himself a king. Some even thought that he wanted to pass that title on to his son.

Adams was a man who made enemies easily. In fact, his worst enemy was the leader of his own party, Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton thought Adams was egotistic and short-tempered. And so he actually tried to defeat his party's man. His scheme depended upon the electoral college as it then worked.

Today each elector casts one vote for president and one for vice-president. But in those days the elector did not tell which man he meant for which office. He just cast two

votes. The man with the most votes became president. The one with the next highest number became vice-president.

Hamilton set out to persuade a few Federalist electors not to vote for Adams. This, he hoped, would make Pinckney come in ahead. But he was out of luck. Adam's supporters heard of the plot. So *they* refused to vote for Pinckney. When the count was in, Adams got 71 votes, Jefferson 68, and Pinckney only 59.

Hamilton's scheme had backfired. His man was out of the race. Adams became president and Jefferson vice-president. It was the only time in American history that men of opposing parties served together in those offices.

## CHECK YOUR READING

1. Washington did not have to campaign because
  - A there were no elections then
  - B another man did it for him
  - C no one ran against him
  
2. The Federalists were strongest in the
  - A North
  - B South
  - C West
  
3. In his Farewell Address, Washington announced that he would not
  - A support Adams
  - B run a third time
  - C finish his term
  
4. Jefferson said that he was not interested in
  - A governing men
  - B running a farm
  - C following politics
  
5. Adams was a natural choice for the Federalists because he had served as
  - A secretary of state
  - B vice-president
  - C governor of Virginia
  
6. The campaign was largely a series of
  - A personal attacks
  - B talks on issues
  - C quiet discussions
  
7. Jefferson's actions at the approach of the British troops caused him to be called
  - A an egghead
  - B a coward
  - C a hypocrite
  
8. Both Adams and Jefferson were criticized for being
  - A unwilling to run for office
  - B eager to get into war
  - C unable to campaign actively
  
9. Hamilton thought that Adams was too
  - A anti-British
  - B bookish
  - C egotistic
  
10. Hamilton failed in his attempt to elect
  - A Pinckney
  - B Jefferson
  - C Burr