**Choosing Sides: The Rise of Party Politics**

*by Geri Zabela Eddins*

Our first two presidents, George Washington and John Adams, both adamantly opposed the development of political parties. As early as 1780, seven years before the Constitutional Convention first met, Adams declared, “There is nothing I dread so much as a division of the Republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader and converting measures in opposition to each other. This, in my humble apprehension, is to be dreaded as the greatest political evil under our Constitution.” Despite such trepidation, the Founding Fathers wrote nothing about political parties in the Constitution.

**The Federalist and Democratic-Republican Parties Emerge**

During the early, formative years of our nation’s history, the interests of north and south, rich and poor, and industry and agriculture were tossed into the same pressure cooker of dissent until two profoundly different visions for the country erupted. Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton believed that our new country’s federal government should be more powerful. Hamilton particularly advocated for the creation of a national bank that would establish fiscal policy, institute credit, and standardize a national currency. Opponents feared that a stronger federal government would function more like a monarchy and wipe out the newly born democracy. Such opponents, such as Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and House Representative James Madison, believed it more prudent to provide more power to individual states. Jefferson also believed the creation of a national bank was not permitted by the Constitution. Finding the distance separating their visions only widening, Hamilton formed the Federalist Party and Jefferson created the Republican Party. (The Republican Party was later called the Democratic-Republican Party.) Both parties emerged during the midst of Washington’s second term, and Washington was not pleased. Washington believed that such parties would only fracture our nation and “render alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection.” Washington wrote these words in his farewell address, pleading with Americans to set aside their differences and remain unified.

**Two Opposing Parties Rise to the Top**

Despite Washington’s urgent words of caution, the two new political parties assumed center stage in the 1796 election to wrestle not only with domestic issues, but also with our continuing contentious relationship with England. Our hard-fought independence guaranteed our freedom, but it did not guarantee normalized relations. The ratification of the Jay Treaty in 1794, in which England agreed to evacuate their posts on the western frontier and to secure American shipping routes, had helped to calm our turbulent relationship, but opponents believed the treaty was ineffective. So, in one corner stood the Federalist John Adams, who had supported the Jay Treaty as a means to avoid war and continue trade. In the opposing corner stood the Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson, who believed the treaty to be counter to American interests because it did not prevent the British from engaging in impressment (the practice of removing seamen from American ships and forcing them to serve in the British Navy). Social conventions of the time prevented both Adams and Jefferson from campaigning on their own behalf, but their parties’ supporters rose to the challenge and assumed the mantle of their candidates. The Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans vigorously promoted their respective candidates by fighting a brutal battle in the press. Those who championed Adams’ candidacy vilified Jefferson as an atheist and a “mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father.” Jefferson’s supporters did not remain silent. They retaliated with their own vicious attacks against Adams, condemning him as a monarchist who sought to become a king and branding him as a fool and a hypocrite.

Because the election procedures established in the Constitution did not anticipate the rise of political parties, neither party found the complete executive power it had sought. At the time, the Constitution specified that each elector cast two votes but did not specify one as being for president and the other as being for vice president—so all votes were counted together. As a result, Adams received the most number of votes and became president, and his opponent Jefferson received the second highest number of votes and became his vice president. So, the nation’s top two executives represented not only widely disparate views, but also two opposing political parties. When the following election resulted in a tie that needed to be resolved by the House of Representatives, it became clear that the unanticipated rise of political parties compelled significant change to the Constitution. Congress therefore ratified the Twelfth Amendment in 1804. This amendment requires separate votes for president and vice president and also stipulates that the president and vice president must come from different states.

**The Parties Grow and Evolve**

American politics has been dominated by a two-party system ever since Washington retired to Mount Vernon, but the parties have changed, separated, and evolved dramatically as the nation was forced to grapple with new challenges at home and abroad. By 1816 the Federalist Party had dissolved, but Jefferson’s Democratic-Republican Party remained and continues to exist today as the Democratic Party. Over the years different parties have set foot in the national spotlight—the Whigs, the Liberty Party, the Free Soil Party—but by the 1860s the party system had evolved into two major parties whose names we easily recognize—the Democrats and the Republicans. Although we consider the Democrats and Republicans to be the two major parties of modern times, their early policies varied quite a bit from modern standards. A twenty-first century Republican is undoubtedly proud of the early party’s stand against slavery, but is likely to cringe at its support of protectionist tariffs (taxes levied on imported goods to restrict trade) rather than free trade. Individual opinions continue to vary within each party, but today most Republicans believe that government should tax people less, intervene in people’s lives as little as possible, and maintain a strong military. On the other hand Democrats support government programs that help those in need, as well as protection of civil rights, public education, and environmental issues.

