

Fighting Words!

A Brief History of Contentious American Presidential Campaigns

“Negative ads increase dramatically during 2012 presidential election,” a Los Angeles Times headline declared recently. “Negative Ads Dominate 2012 Election, Study Shows,” another headline announced. Rancor and acrimony in presidential campaigns are nothing new. In fact, since the early 19th century those running for top office have engaged in negative campaign tactics. This is the second of a two-part series on some of the most vitriolic presidential elections in history.



- Rachel March

Despite the preponderance of acrimonious attacks by both sides in the current presidential election, the reality is that political campaigns of today are probably no more and no less vitriolic than in the past. In Part I (*Zman* 29, Sivan 5772/June 2012), we showed how the presidential campaigns of 1928, 1964 and 1972 were not only heated, but downright dirty.

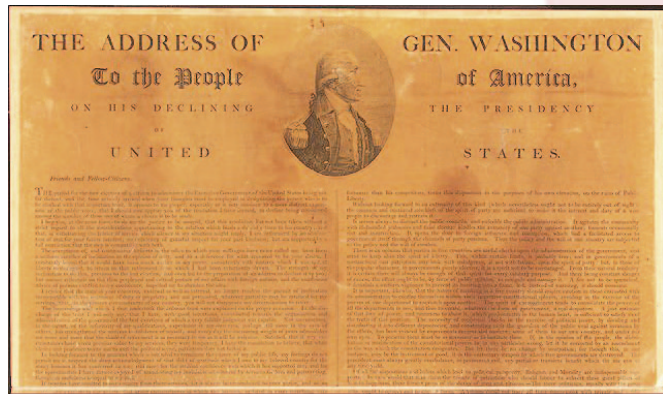
Now we will cover three more campaigns,

starting with the election of 1800 that pitted American icons Thomas Jefferson and John Adams against each other, turning them from friends into enemies; the 1876 campaign where one side literally stole the election from the other; and the 1960 campaign between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy. All are filled with surprising examples that prove how politics was never meant for the faint-hearted.

Although we like to think of the “old world” as gentlemanly and standards of decency deteriorating over time, one of the most heated and vindictive presidential campaigns took place a mere 12 years after the first election for the President of the United States. Although this was the fourth presidential election, it was only the second time that there were actually two candidates facing off against each other (as opposed to the first two elections in which Americans voted for the much revered George Washington who ran unopposed).

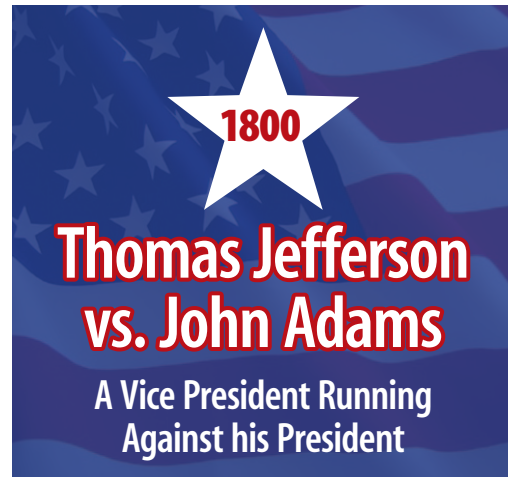
As mentioned in Part 1, Washington was averse to the existence of political parties and hoped they would never come into existence. However, his hope was shattered in 1792 during the second presidential election when the first American political parties emerged. As a result, even the much beloved President Washington was not spared, becoming a frequent target of vituperative attacks from leaders of opposing parties. Ultimately pained and disillusioned, Washington decided not to run for a third term (George Washington set the precedent for a two-term limit for the Presidency—a tradition that prevailed until Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency, after which the 22nd Amendment of 1951 was created which codified the two-term limit), and on September 19, 1796, issued a farewell address to the nation in which he lamented the acrimonious politics spawned by the political parties.

But it did not do much to quell the oppositional factions.



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Indeed, as soon as it became known that he would not be running for re-election, avaricious politicians began vying with each other for his coveted position. Fortunately, Washington did not give the political world much time before the next election, so the campaigning remained more or less within the bounds of decency. Nevertheless, four years later the days of decency in presidential campaigns came to an abrupt halt.



In 1800, the United States of America had a population of 5.3 million. Washington, DC, had replaced Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as the capital (or as the “Federal State” as it was then referred to). And the young nation, testing the waters of democracy, was about to experience a negative, rancorous presidential race the likes of which it had never seen.

The 1800 election campaign between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson can undoubtedly be considered one of the dirtiest campaigns in American history. And there is at least one good reason why: This was the first and last time that a president ran against his own vice president!

The two primary parties back then were the Federalist Party (which is no longer in existence) and the Democratic-Republican



The two best friends who became arch enemies.

Party (which is considered by many to be a forerunner of the current Democratic Party). The contest was a repeat of the one from four years previous in 1796 with the same presidential candidates facing off once again in pursuit of the presidency.

The Candidates

Federalist John Adams, incumbent. The most prominent issue of the day during John Adams’ presidency was America’s relations with France, which was in a state of war with England. Since America had signed a treaty with England, France declared that all American overtures to England would be viewed as acts of war against France. Consequently, it was common for French militia to board American freight ships to confiscate the cargo.

When the Federalist Adams attempted to raise taxes to establish a strong navy to combat the ongoing threat of French warships, the Democratic-Republicans were quick to denounce him as a warmonger. Conversely, when he tried to negotiate with France, he was criticized for kowtowing to the enemy. In short, whatever he did was used against him.

Truth be told, the Federalists themselves were not very fond of their own presidential candidate. However, since he was the only available candidate, they had to make do with him. Because Adams hailed from the North (Massachusetts), the party chose as their vice presidential candidate General

Charles Pinckney, a diplomat from South Carolina, to balance the ticket.

Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson, incumbent vice president. During the last four years of his term as vice president, Jefferson deliberately distanced himself from his boss, John Adams. Consequently, he remained unscathed by the onslaught of problems that plagued Adams, and entered the presidential campaign from a position of strength. Since Jefferson hailed from a Southern state, Virginia, the Democratic-Republicans chose as their vice presidential candidate Aaron Burr, an attorney from New York who had been the Democratic-Republican vice presidential candidate four years earlier and had since garnered significant popularity.

The Campaign

What a difference four years can make! The 1796 presidential campaign began barely 100 days before election day. But in 1800 the parties began exchanging slurs a full year before the first vote was cast!

Today, Americans have come to grips with partisan politics. Back then, however, they were absolutely shocked and outraged by what they saw... to the point that they began having second thoughts about the very concept of democracy! Americans found the malice of that campaign particularly loathsome because the two opposing candidates had been very close friends. In fact, they had



The two opposing candidates had been very close friends. In fact, they had banded together to write the Declaration of Independence. Here: The drafting committee (center) presenting its work to the Second Continental Congress. The first two committee members (from right) are Jefferson and Adams.