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The 1790s was America’s true “crucial decade.” The bold republican experiment represented, as its currency proclaimed, a *novus ordo saeclorum*, or “new order of the ages.” As the first decade of nationhood commenced under a new constitution, every action set a precedent.

“Experience must be our only guide,” noted Pennsylvania statesman John Dickinson at the Constitutional Convention. Lessons learned, especially from recent experience, seemed to many of the Founders vivid and fresh. Concentrations of power inevitably corrupted. Executive authority, which could too easily degenerate into tyranny, must be severely circumscribed; yet legislatures, unchecked, could also behave tyrannically. Party and republicanism were antithetical; party could easily become faction, and faction could quickly upset the delicate balances that allowed representative government to function. Distance posed risk; the larger a political entity became, the greater the challenge of preserving the local and familiar against the anonymity of the large and consolidated. Nothing less than the virtue of the public, a prerequisite for just and effective government, was at stake. Leadership must be strong, but it, and the public it served, must also be ever vigilant.

And so, with a mixture of hope and fear, a fragile republic was born. Its first eight years, under the presidency of George Washington, did little to persuade Old World skeptics that the experiment would succeed. Moreover, the Founders themselves discovered many of their most fundamental assumptions challenged. Indeed, almost immediately, and probably inevitably, serious dispute arose. Is the new constitution permissive—if it does not specifically prohibit an action, then is that action allowed? Or is it restrictive—if it does not specifically authorize an action, then is that action proscribed? At what point does permissible dissent become impermissible disloyalty? How extensive ought a president’s powers to be? What is the role of the cabinet? Should government play an active role in the development of the economy? Or does any such role risk unnatural outcomes and attendant corruption?

Because of Washington’s stature, these vexing questions could be contained, often by a mere presidential utterance. But as his second term came to an end, and contenders vied for succession, the country
found itself in an unfamiliar and threatening place. The election of 1796, the first truly contested election in American history, would test the ability of the new republic, and those charged with its preservation and protection, to allow legitimate political debate to occur and political power to transfer peaceably.

Jeffrey L. Pasley tells the story of this election, which he correctly identifies as an “absolutely seminal” event in American political history, with clarity, perspicacity, and wit. To a world descending into yet another round of armed conflict, and forcing neutrals to choose sides, the American experiment appeared to be short-lived. To an electorate schooled to believe that organized parties, even though primitive by today’s standards, threatened the health of the republic, a campaign of what Pasley calls “metaphors and morality tales” did not bode well. To a people steeped in republican ideology, the choice posed a challenge to the virtue of the citizenry. To a founding generation that so carefully designed its electoral system to diffuse influence and thwart factionalism, the unintended consequences of their elaborate planning would cause alarm. And to readers accustomed to thinking that the election of 1800 was the first to pose an either-or challenge to voters, Pasley’s story will reframe a familiar narrative.

What follows, then, is a careful, gripping story of an often overlooked political moment. Few of the vexing issues would be resolved. Further tests would follow. Many linger still. But the Constitution, and the republican experiment it sought to codify, have proved remarkably resilient, a testimony to the wisdom of the Founders and, not incidentally, for contemporary readers a reminder that lamentations over the present state of politics, in whatever present one may find oneself, are neither as new nor as distracting nor as ominous as might be believed. For these insights, and for a tale filled with colorful personalities and uninhibited rhetoric, readers will relish this lively new work.
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This book began its career as a minor side project that instead took over the nonteaching parts of my life for a number of years. I did not find it easy to write, to say the least, and accumulated many debts to the family and colleagues who helped out. My wonderful wife, Karen Kunkel Pasley—as patient with me as she is not with the ills of the world and misusers of the English language—kept me going through some difficult times. Our sons Isaac and Owen have managed to remain, or appear to remain, pleasantly oblivious to the emotional roller coaster that their father was riding. Our life together has not been without its worries, but the love and support and stability and freedom to be ourselves that we have in our little family are things to treasure.

More directly germane to this project, Karen once again acted as my copyeditor and indexer of first resort, and Isaac, who seems to have inherited his father’s affinity for dusty library stacks and microfilm rooms, has grown up to be a crack research assistant, quotation checker, and book toter. (Those heavy volumes of Founders’ papers do not carry themselves home to my study or back again to be renewed.) I should also ask my family’s forgiveness for any neglect they suffered as I was chained to my desk in the basement. My graduate students of the past few years, Steve Smith, Jonathan Jones, Mike Marden, Bill Lewis, and Kris Maulden, probably suffered a little of that, too, while remaining valued comrades and, I hope, learning something. At the same time, the progress of their predecessors Lawrence Hatter and Eric Schlereth through the profession were extremely heartening.

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Many of those mentioned above are also regulars at my favorite thing about the historical profession, the annual meeting of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic. The atmosphere of openness, helpfulness, and friendship at SHEAR has always made it puzzling to me when people complain about the “conference circuit.” I expect some interesting discussions there in the future about the contents of this book, with Nancy Isenberg, Reeve Huston, Bill Shade, Bill Rorabaugh, Dan Feller, and others already mentioned. To John Quist, Craig Hammond, and the rest of the SHEAR Anti-Temperance Society, I raise a craft-brewed local ale. Literally. Without the inspiration and encouragement of Richard R. John, I would never have gone to SHEAR or most anywhere else I have gotten to go in the profession.

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Onuf has always been a good and generous friend to my work despite my occasional cantankerousness. Commenting on a paper by Washington University in St. Louis graduate student Nathan Green, who was pursuing a different interpretation of some of the same material, helped crystallize my thoughts on the election of 1796. I am grateful to Nate and his adviser, David Konig, for the invitation.

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Having said all this, and with hope that I have not forgotten too many other people and institutions that helped along the way, let me paraphrase the usual statement and affirm that any remaining errors and eccentricities are my responsibility alone.

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The New Republic in 1790: When the Constitution went into effect, the area of United States–controlled settlement had crossed the Appalachians in only a few places, and even much of the territory of the first sixteen states was still in Native American hands or near a frontier with European colonies. American politics took shape in this circumscribed yet transnational context. (Note that Washington, D.C., was as yet only a site, with Alexandria, Virginia, the largest town in that location.) (Map courtesy of the Florida Center for Instructional Technology.)
INTRODUCTION

THE UNINTENTIONAL CAMPAIGN

Few presidential elections turn out as expected, but the 1796 presidential campaign was never supposed to happen at all.

The varied group of revolutionary heroes Americans now call the Founders differed on many topics, but all agreed on their detestation of political parties and their fear of organized political competition.1 “I never submitted the whole system of my opinions to the creed of any party,” Thomas Jefferson wrote. “Such an addiction is the last degradation of a free and moral agent.” John Adams pronounced the development of an enduring party conflict, the kind of thing we have to come to call a party system, “the greatest political evil” he could imagine. “There is nothing which I dread so much as a division of the republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader, and concerting measures in opposition to each other.” Adams opposed even holding presidential contests. Competitive elections for offices that were “great objects of Ambition, I look at with terror.” As the Founders saw it, the fragile young republic would be unlikely to survive the strain of constant battles for power, and good, trustworthy leaders would never want to engage in those battles. More than just an elite prejudice, opposition to parties was the conventional wisdom of the era. A teenage orator in York, Pennsylvania, warned his classmates against “the odious distinction of party names.”2

More than just conventional wisdom, antipartyism was a basic part of the Founders’ political philosophy.
One of the top authors on the bookshelves of Adams, Jefferson, James Madison, and many others was Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke. Adams read his famous treatise, *The Idea of a Patriot King*, five times, and Jefferson commended Bolingbroke to students (along with Tom Paine) as one of the two best political writers in English. Back in the early eighteenth century, Bolingbroke and many others had denounced the British parliamentary system for allowing a “prime” minister, the leader of the majority in Parliament, to act also as chief executive. As Bolingbroke saw it, to allow a party to control a government like this was to do nothing less than corrupt the morals of the whole nation. A patriotic head of state needed to rise virtuously above self-interest and personal belief and seek “the greatest good of [his] people” as a whole. His mission was “to defend and maintain the freedom” of the national constitution, and to do that he had to “defeat the designs, and break the spirit of faction, instead of partaking in one, and assuming the other.”

George Washington based his whole political career on this model of leadership, especially as presented in his favorite play, Joseph Addison’s *Cato*, in which a Roman general kills himself rather than join Julius Caesar’s party. The U.S. presidency, with its independence from any faction-laden legislative assembly, was to some degree designed for Washington so he could embody these sternly ascetic notions of leadership.³

Probably the Founders would not have been so interested in Bolingbroke if their reality had always measured up to his prescriptions. In fact, they had already experienced a great deal of party conflict during the Revolutionary era, especially in the new state legislatures where voting rights had been expanded and less august men with less elevated minds had found their way into office. Ordinary farmers and ambitious local politicians seemed more inclined to pursue their own interests and team up or pander to win votes than they were to model classical heroes or think of the national interest. One widely accepted interpretation is that the movement to create a stronger Federal government was motivated largely by the desire to move key decisions, especially economic ones, out of the reach of such parochial, party-mongering hands. The Framers of the Constitution developed the presidency as a kind of temporary elective monarchy that could fulfill the role of the Patriot King, selected by the people, but only indirectly, and wielding authority that could trump the national legislature.⁴

The voting system we now call the Electoral College was an ad hoc compromise rather than a careful design, but it was another layer in
a constitutional structure the Framers hoped would prevent the development of political parties or any other kind of organized competition for control of the national government. The president was to be chosen by men who were elected in their own states, by any method the state chose, and picked from no set list of candidates. They could vote any way they chose and never meet together as a national body. How could any party possibly manage to control a body so fleeting and evanescent? The size and diversity of the country, and the complexity of the multilayered structure that the Framers had created, would make nationwide party organization almost impossible. Their hope was that George Washington or a patriotic executive much like him could lead, and enlightened gentlemen like themselves would come to the national capital and deliberate in peace, making wise, well-reasoned decisions for the good of all, without the need to compete for public favor or toe party lines. Their certainty about the lack of serious contention for the presidency extended to the provision that would prove so awkward after the resolution of the 1796 election—namely, that the vice presidency would go to the second-place finisher in the electoral vote. This meant that under normal circumstances, a president’s major competitor would automatically be his understudy, a thinkable notion only in the absence of fundamental disagreements and dueling parties.5

Of course, this was not the way events played out at all. Despite the opposition to political parties, political divisions quickly developed after 1789 that would cause parties to form. The choices facing the young nation were simply too momentous to be contained by the relatively flimsy electoral framework that had been devised at the Philadelphia Convention. Having acknowledged that “we the people” were the ultimate source of all authority in a republican government, the Framers tried to blunt the force of popular opinion only to have to reach out for it themselves when faced with what seemed a battle for the soul of the new nation. However, it was a long way even from that concurrent decision, made shortly after the Constitution took effect, to a seriously contested presidential election. Thus, while 1796 was probably the shortest and least expensive campaign in the history of the presidency, the situation that produced it was many years in the making.

While avoiding the strong temptation to write a history of the whole postrevolutionary period, I have tried to trace out the long process that led to the campaign in the pages below, following the way the division manifested itself in increasingly expansive political battles over policy.
issues, especially foreign relations with Great Britain and France, that finally gave rise to a presidential contest. To paraphrase Clausewitz, I see the presidential campaign as the continuation of earlier policy debates (and broader ideological conflicts) by other means.

It might seem that there is little left to say about such a frequently covered event as the election of 1796. After all, there have been thousands of books published over the years on Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, the rise of political parties, the development of the presidency, and related topics, and most of them have had to address the first “real” presidential election in one way or another. However, there has not been a book published directly on the subject since the 1950s, and neither of those studies, one by political scientist Manning Dauer and the other by historian Stephen Kurtz, actually take 1796 as their sole focus. Instead, Dauer and Kurtz both deal with 1796 as only one episode in a story defined by the more easily intelligible Adams-Jefferson rematch of 1800.6

In researching the election, it has been easy to see why it has remained a relatively unpopular topic of study despite being mentioned so often. It lacks most elements of the familiar presidential election narrative that has proved so sturdy for journalists and historians: no formal party organizations, no nominations, no conventions, no speaking tours, no debates, not even a national vote or candidates who actually participated in the campaign. But historiographically, the problems run deeper than the lack of a familiar story. In many respects, the unfamiliar forms taken by the 1796 contest have come to dominate the interpretation of it, with scholars using the strange-looking package as an excuse to skate over the election or dismiss its significance, especially its popular and partisan aspects. (Many works on the politics of the Founding Era now take the Founders at their word and eschew the discussion of party labels or popular politics almost entirely.) The election of 1796 shows up as a fuzzy precursor to presidential politics, a disruption in the personal relationships among the major Founding Fathers, or, in many of the most ambitious and systematic political histories, as not much of anything at all.

Using a working definition of party politics drawn from mid-twentieth-century social science and the industrial democracies that spawned it, the political science–influenced “new political historians” who dominated political history through the 1980s generally looked for institutionalized parties: freestanding organizations that had openly identified personnel, commanded voter loyalties, fielded candidates for public
office, and dispensed of patronage when they won power. This whole conception of political parties treated parties largely as devices for collecting votes, and thus tended “to empty party politics of its social, cultural and ideological content.”

Obviously, the institutionalized party is a tough standard to apply to an environment like the early United States, where parties were constitutionally unrecognized and so thoroughly disapproved of that it was a source of scandal for any public official suspected of participating in one. In America, the first private citizens to even approximate the organization of a political party, the members of the Democratic-Republican Societies of 1793–1794, got themselves denounced as revolutionists by no less a personage than George Washington, though all they had done was express opinions.

The institutionalized party may also be a false standard. The institutionalized party as defined by classic social science barely exists in present-day America either. Party labels do organize most twenty-first-century elections in the United States, but the parties still lack key aspects that institutional parties have in the rest of the world. The major U.S. political parties do not have “card-carrying” members, for instance, and in most states do not directly or formally control either initial candidate selection or final placement of candidates on the general election ballot. Modern candidates select themselves by filing the proper forms with the government and put themselves on the general election ballot by winning state primary elections or delegates at state party caucuses. American parties have voters who typically side with them and perhaps some campaign money to give out, but the political process is in the hands of candidates, their staffs, fundraisers, and consultants, in conjunction with the news media and the public agencies that actually conduct elections.

Yet we could hardly argue there are no parties in 2012, when eighteen Republican primary debates were televised before the election year even began. By many measures, the early twenty-first century has been one of most intensely partisan and polarized eras in U.S. history, a time when one’s choice of discount store or fast-food restaurant can be imbued with partisan meaning and minor lifestyle questions like what sort of lightbulb to use have been politicized. It has also been a period in which formal party institutions such as central committees and national conventions have declined sharply in importance. Political scientists have observed that modern parties have to some extent returned
to their uninstitutionalized early national condition, but without losing any of their significance, and probably gaining some, as communities of opinion and networks of activists rather than centralized formal organizations.\textsuperscript{9}

My own opinion is that when thinking of parties, political scholars (and journalists) are far too transfixed by visions of cigar-chomping party bosses running centralized, militantly nonideological organizations based on political patronage. The problem is that these images really only apply very well to the specific period and place they come from, that is, roughly the first two-thirds of the twentieth century (give or take a few decades), during the heyday of such canonical urban machines as Daley in Chicago, Tammany in New York, and Pendergast in Kansas City. This also happens to be when the academic discipline of political science, and hence most scholarly conceptions of the political party, were developed. This image and conception has little application to the parties of the Early American Republic.\textsuperscript{10}

The real importance of parties in the time of the Founders is as rather loose but intense communities of political ideology, emotion, and action that took form among politicians, political writers, and their audiences, especially but by no means limited to the adult white males who could actually vote. One might drop Benedict Anderson’s often-dropped phrase “imagined communities” to describe this concept, but a less pretentious term such as “affinities” or “affiliations” might also suffice.\textsuperscript{11} These kinds of parties could be loathed or ignored as formal institutions, to the extent that they could even change form and media when necessary, but still inspire passionate followings that reached deep into society. The New England writer Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s lightly fictionalized story “A Reminiscence of Federalism” gives us a glimpse of the feelings that a partisan community could generate, the intensity that was possible even in the absence of formal organizations: “I now look back, almost unbelieving of my own recollections, at the general diffusion of the political prejudices of those times. No age nor sex was exempt from them,” despite the fact that neither women, children, nor poor men, in this age of property requirements for voting, could directly participate in elections. Party affiliation was not a matter of membership or private choice, but an all-encompassing cultural stance. “For myself, having been bred, according to the strictest sect of my political religion, a federalist, I regarded Mr. Jefferson . . . as embodying in his own person whatever was impracticable, heretical and corrupt in
politics, religion and morals.” In her western Massachusetts hometown, Sedgwick remembered, “All qualities and relations were merged in the political attribute. I have often heard, when the bell tolled the knell of a departed neighbour, the most kind hearted person say, ‘we’ or ‘they have lost a vote!’” We might surmise that these early party affiliations actually thrived on the fact that parties of the Early Republic were not separate entities but only aspects of real people living their real lives.12

While the tendency among historians has been to downplay the significance, coherence, and even existence of parties in the early years of the Early Republic, my long immersion in the politics of this period, especially the partisan newspapers, has convinced me that “Federalist” and “Republican” were deeply meaningful and highly coherent categories for the politicians and citizens of the 1790s, even if the names could be inconsistent and the institutional presence lacking. While I try to be as precise as possible when a figure’s or text’s party affiliation is unclear or nonexistent, I freely use party labels in these pages, including “Democratic-Republican,” a formulation rarely employed at the time that nevertheless captures both the ancestor relationship of Thomas Jefferson’s party with the modern Democratic Party and the fact that all of the Early Republic’s serious democrats affiliated themselves with the group then most often called the Republicans. “Democrat” was applied by many Federalists as an insulting term for a dangerous radical, just like “Jacobin.” For intelligibility, I have also followed the modern practice of capitalizing party labels when discussing groups of politicians, though quotations have been rendered as found whenever possible. In the 1790s, standard English capitalization and punctuation was a work in progress, regarding political language and everything else.

It may be useful to make my position clear on the issue of party lineages, a concept that has sustained a good deal of collateral damage from historians battling over which political movements and what institutions should be considered as truly democratic and why.13 I do believe that the histories, cultures, and symbolism of the current major American parties are only intelligible if we considered them, as their more historically aware leaders and thinkers have considered themselves, as descended from earlier parties on the “left” and “right.” Hence the modern Republican Party had Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt among its earlier icons, and those two considered themselves devotees of the Whig Henry Clay and the Federalist Alexander Hamilton, respectively. The lineage is even clearer with the Democrats, whose partisans
once regularly attended Jefferson-Jackson Day dinners and got Thomas Jefferson enshrined on the Tidal Basin during the New Deal era. While it is true that some Jeffersonian Republicans became Whigs instead of Democrats during the Jacksonian era, and that some Federalists crossed party lines in the other direction, the later Democratic Party’s strident embrace of their heritage as the party of Jefferson and Jackson seals this issue for me.¹⁴

Of course, none of the major parties has ever had a monopoly on democracy or goodness as genuine values, and the configuration of the major parties has undergone periodic changes as particular social groups and regions changed predominant party affiliations. One of the most striking of these shifts has been the exchange of African American and white Southerners between the major parties that has taken place since the national Democrats embraced civil rights legislation under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson in the 1960s. Yet the ideological and symbolic lineages remain even if the bipartisan embrace of the Mount Rushmore–level icons has confused matters a bit. Most importantly, the descent of particular politicians and families and regions and groups and ideas and policy preferences can be easily traced from era to era even if some of them have traveled significant distances and across party lines over the long run.¹⁵

By writing of parties and using their names, I do not mean to implicitly oversell the existence of early American political parties as free-standing institutions. Most politicians and observers of the time knew which major politicians, which newspapers, and which ideas belonged with each side (“federal” or “republican” were the most common terms), but the parties of 1796 were undeniably patchy and almost completely informal, inspiring grave doubts even in Noble Cunningham, the 1796 election’s greatest enthusiast among prominent historians of the Founding Era. Among other issues, Cunningham worried about the “lack of party control” over most elections, as evidenced by the large number of candidates receiving votes in various congressional races: fourteen for one Massachusetts congressional seat, forty-six for another in New Jersey. The picture does not get much more impressive even when drawing on the American Antiquarian Society’s New Nation Votes database of voting statistics, which only became available in the twenty-first century. In many jurisdictions, little seems to have happened during the election of 1796 at all, or at least not enough to leave much documentary trace. According to the New Nation Votes records, New Jersey’s seven elector
races were either uncontested or no one bothered to record the opponents’ names if there were contests. Likewise, no known opposition candidate is listed for ten of the twenty-one Virginia electoral districts, with all of those unopposed winners reputed to be supporters of the Old Dominion’s favorite son, Thomas Jefferson.\textsuperscript{16}

My purpose here is not to argue what stage of “party development” the Early Republic had achieved by 1796 or to claim that “real” parties existed then. A rather semantic and truly academic debate on this topic took place back in the 1960s and 1970s and ended in more or less abject defeat for defenders of the so-called first party system. As long as the political party is defined in the modern institutional terms described above, the answer to whether the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans, the parties of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, are “real” parties is always going to be “no.” Back in the 1980s, when scholars were working to establish the date for the full development of mass democracy and the party system, the moment seemed to be continually pushed forward in time, settling in the middle of the nineteenth century well after even the strenuously fought campaigns involving Andrew Jackson.\textsuperscript{17}

However, the unintentional result of this victory of careful social science over democratic mythology has created a problem for our understanding of early American politics that I hope to rectify. It has turned the first contested presidential election into a relatively uninteresting bit of political juvenilia, the only presidential election since Washington stepped down that it is permissible to write about almost without mentioning voters, policy issues, or party ideologies. Hence the most prominent recent scholarly interpretation of the election focuses on elite machinations alone, confirming the tendency of popular “presidential historians” to describe politics largely in terms of leaders and personalities. The major candidates’ habit of holding themselves above the fray and the evolving, inconsistently termed nature of party identifications as parties were just developing gets read as the essential nature of politics in this period. “It is this remarkable instability of political ties that best characterizes the presidential election of 1796,” writes Joanne B. Freeman, and it was the “very personal and transient nature of politics in the early republic” that accounts for “the prevailing anxiety and high emotion” rather than any principles, issues, or interests that might have been at stake. In fact, there was a shaking out, and a few loose cannons, but not that much instability, especially at the aggregate level. The partisan images of Jefferson and Adams in 1796 were clear and starkly
polarized, even though many individual politicians stuck to the old, less accountable, nonpartisan ways as long as they could. It was far more convenient not to be pinned down. There were some attempts to game the constitutional electoral system’s lack of attention to the possibility of party tickets and running mates, but that mostly concerned vice presidential candidates. Such attempted exploits turned out to be futile anyway, as the two candidates with demonstrable popular support and clear party identities came in first and second. It was the Constitution’s failure to recognize parties that produced the quirky result of both major candidates winning office, not necessarily any lack of partisan polarity.\textsuperscript{18}

In my view, the rush to dispense with parties in writing about the 1790s is a mistake born of an excessive focus on what seems to interest twenty-first-century publishers and popular readers about early American political history—the personal interactions of famous personalities. If we look chiefly for what the Founders were doing about the election of 1796, then we will find that many of them, especially the candidates, were not doing much, as the political mores of the time dictated. As James Roger Sharp puts it, neither Jefferson nor Adams “campaigned or as much as lifted a finger to win the election.” Abigail Adams congratulated her anxious husband on having been “an inactive spectator” to the events that decided his political fate.\textsuperscript{19}

However, if we think a bit more broadly about the cultural structures of American presidential politics, then this first contested election was absolutely seminal. It set the geographic pattern of New England competing with the South at the two extremes of American politics with the geographically intermediate states deciding between them. It established the basic ideological dynamic of a democratic, rights-spreading American “left” arrayed against a conservative, social order–protecting “right,” each with its own competing model of leadership. One can even detect the creation of what linguist and political commentator George Lakoff calls the essential “conceptual metaphors” of American political life, government as “strict father” or “nurturant parent,” but it is not necessary to go that far. Historian Alan Taylor has described a similar idea as the competing political “personas” of Federalists and Democratic-Republicans: “fathers” versus “friends” of the people. It was the Federalists, especially, who got the battle of metaphors started with their efforts to emasculate the image of Thomas Jefferson, but the opposition redressed the balance with a vengeance in the attacks they mounted on the allegedly monarchical, tyrannical tendencies of George
Washington and “Daddy Vice,” as Vice President John Adams referred to himself.20

Even with their patchiness, the two campaigns of 1796 managed to construct remarkably coherent images of the two candidates that connected clearly to the policy issues and cultural tensions of the day, especially those raised by the French Revolution. The young United States found its government severely pressured to choose sides in the world war that spun out of that revolution, and its politics were roiled by the democratic enthusiasms it spawned. Keynoted by congressman and pamphleteer William Loughton Smith of South Carolina, with some inspiration from Edmund Burke and guidance from Alexander Hamilton, the Federalist attacks of 1796 wrapped their caricature of Jefferson in a powerful conservative critique of French revolutionary radicalism, the Enlightenment, and post-Christian morals. With the Sally Hemings revelations still in the future, the critics focused chiefly on Jefferson’s lack of manly qualities, as evidenced especially by his interest in science and technology. According to the Federalists, here quoted in a sort of dual biography of the two candidates published in Boston, the “timid and wavering” Jefferson was not cut out to be a “statesman, still less . . . a patriot.” Woe betide America if “her liberties depended upon the depth of his political knowledge, the strength of his virtue, or the vigour of his mind.” Jefferson’s inability to “act the man” would invite foreign aggression and lead to national ruin: “our national honour forfeited; war probably ensue, our commerce be destroyed, our towns pillaged.” Better to opt for the “security” of the “resplendent abilities,” “faithful services,” “inflexible patriotism,” and “undeviating firmness” of John Adams, who would have the wisdom and strength to stand against “mad democracy” and “the wiles of ambition.” The basic images of liberalism and conservatism in American politics have never strayed very far from this original Federalist template.21

The politics of the 1790s was not a primitive (or sophisticated) competition of personality cults, or at least not any more primitive than our own. In fact, the “informed voter” model of party politics touted in civics lessons and journalism schools, where the media provide information that allows voters to select the candidate who best matches their own policy preferences from a list of issues, has rarely been more than an aspiration in American politics. By taking a small leaf from the work of George Lakoff and other scholars of modern political culture, we can proceed on the premise that even with fully developed party politics,
partisanship not only can be but may be *most effectively* expressed in terms of metaphors and morality tales rather than platforms and arguments. This seems to be particularly true under the conditions that the ends of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries had in common: newly potent institutions of political communication—newspapers then, cable news and the Internet now—and a popular aversion to the concept of party loyalty. In both eras, lofty sentiments praising political rationality, individualism, and independence coincided with bitter partisan invective and manipulative emotional appeals. One can cite no less an authority on this point than Federalist mastermind Alexander Hamilton: “Nothing is more fallacious than to expect to produce any valuable or permanent results, in political projects, by relying merely on the reason of men. Men are rather reasoning than reasonable animals,” Hamilton counseled fellow Federalists. “For the most part” people were “governed by the impulse of passion,” and successful politicians had to understand that.  

Infusing but also restraining some of the passion of 1796 was the fact that the election partly involved the country’s halting search for new, more republican conceptual metaphors than the main one that underpinned the only form of government any American knew before the Revolution, namely, monarchy. Monarchy rested on what Lynn Hunt has called “the family model of politics,” in which the king stood as father to his people. The family model fell into crisis in France, as the French people passionately rejected and killed parents who came to seem threatening and abusive, but it had been kept going in America by the presence of George Washington. The “nation as family” metaphor would return to American life by the era of “Father Abraham” Lincoln (at the latest) and would become the dominant conceptual metaphor in recent American politics, at least according to Lakoff. But it was troubled in 1796.

Federalists wished devoutly to keep the model going. They begged Americans to remain “dutiful children to the *Father* and *Saviour* of his Country,” George Washington, and follow his legatees. The Federalist poet and presidential elector St. John Honeywood rendered the question of the election directly into the language of the family model: “Whom hail we next as *father* of the *state*?” Yet neither Jefferson nor Adams filled this role very well, metaphorically or actually. Jefferson did not seek it, and many of his supporters actively opposed it, complaining bitterly about Washington’s paternal stance and accusing both Washington
and Adams of trying to make themselves kings. Portly little John Adams hardly measured up to the tall, regal Washington as a father figure to look up to, but his status as a real father with a family full of sons raised serious questions for the future of the country, at least for the more radical Democratic-Republicans. This metaphorical tension was fodder not only for the first presidential campaign, but for what might also be thought of as the first “culture war” in American national politics, 1796 launched a long if intermittent tradition of presidential campaigns mixing the personal and the political in sometimes maddening but often revealing ways.24

It may reassure some readers to learn that such speculations do not take up the bulk of the pages that follow. Neither long-term continuities nor a politics conducted in terms of cultural metaphors have been very popular ideas with most American political historians, who are rightly concerned about oversimplifying and flattening the past to make it more comparable to the present. Without rejecting those concerns at all, this book tries to illuminate some familiar events and figures by taking a different approach, treating the politics of 1796 as a revealing rough draft of what came later rather than mere juvenilia or a dispatch from some distant political planet.25

One other note about my approach in these pages seems in order. Unlike almost every other recent study that covers presidential politics in the mid-1790s, this book tries to take seriously the well-accepted historical fact that the candidates were completely uninvolved in the 1796 campaign, and that the other frontline Founders (except Alexander Hamilton) were only slightly more involved than the candidates. Because the Founders are such compelling and bankable personalities, almost everything written about politics or political thought in the 1790s seems to become another entry in the vast corpus of Founder Studies. As coeditor of the book and manifesto Beyond the Founders, calling for new and less narrow approaches to early American political history, my intention here is not to pen yet another Founder tome. There are literally hundreds of works that tell the story of 1796 from the Founders’ perspective. Most of these are quite effective as far they go, but unsurprisingly, they tend to leave the event a little murky because their primary characters were uninvolved or only involved from a great distance. While Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Hamilton do stalk the pages below, I have tried to be truer to what was new and significant about the presidential campaign of 1796, a moment when national
political competition (i.e., competition among candidates) had to reach out in public, to the voters, for the first time. Thus I focus as much as possible on the external, on the public images of the candidates that were created for public consumption, by friends and especially enemies, through the means of the press (newspapers, pamphlets, and handbills). If the candidates appear to be ciphers at times, that is just an accurate reflection of how the election of 1796 played out for ordinary citizens and even most of the direct participants in the campaign, who operated in local communities and never saw or heard a presidential candidate. Since the subject here is how the American presidential campaign came to be (or started at any rate), I also try to stay closer to the figures who were most directly involved in creating and organizing the campaign, an angle of vision that highlights the relatively unknown, midlevel figures who are the lifeblood of any major political effort, especially national ones. For the late eighteenth century, this means that newspaper editors, minor officials, now forgotten congressmen, and individual elector candidates all take a leading role in the story. What I have tried to practice is not so much a populist “history from the bottom up” that pumps up the agency of the masses as a more practically minded “history from the middle out” that means to show how politics actually works, how high and low (or “grass roots”) politics are connected.26

Though limited by the only half-popular nature of the 1796 presidential voting and even more by the relative paucity of information available on it, I try to emphasize popular politics as much as possible in these pages. What can be documented is the fact that the first contested presidential election came about as a result of popular politics, broadly conceived, even if parties and elections themselves were not yet highly participatory. Elite disagreements played their role in the original sparks of the party conflict, but by 1796 those original disputes had long since spilled out of the cabinet and into the newspapers, streets, and polling places, as the rise of opposition to the Washington administration and its policies took on a life of its own, fueled by the democratic enthusiasm unleashed across the Atlantic by the French Revolution. Through an unpredictable series of events that will be detailed below, the constitutional system envisioned by the Framers was effectively rewritten to include competitive elections, and rather than insulating national policymaking from local majorities, the new system simply nationalized local elections in locations that were relatively diverse and divided. The Electoral College was rendered little more than a troublesome apportionment

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device the first time it was actually used to decide a presidential contest. The rudiments of a national democracy took shape without the benefit of a basic electoral infrastructure to support it (quite the opposite) and with only the beginnings of mass participation, at least outside of a few major cities. Yet take shape they most assuredly did. The rise of an unexpectedly popular presidential politics is the legacy of 1796 and the larger subject of this book.