Founding Brothers

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOSEPH J. ELLIS

Joseph J. Ellis received his BA from the College of William and Mary and his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1969. He taught at the United States Military Academy before accepting a position in the History department at Mount Holyoke College. He was eventually appointed to the Ford Foundation Chair in History, and temporarily served as Acting President of the college. In 2001 he was put on leave after he falsely claimed to his students that he had served in the Vietnam War. Ellis took full responsibility for this mistake and apologized; Mount Holyoke reappointed him to the chair in 2005. Ellis' research focuses on the Founding Fathers, the era of the American Revolution, and the Federalist years. He has written biographies of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington, as well as many other books covering the Revolutionary period and its aftermath. He lives in Western Massachusetts with his wife, Ellen Wilkins Ellis, with whom he has three children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Many significant historical events are covered in the book, beginning with the Revolutionary War and the achievement of Independence in 1776. The book mentions that the Constitutional Convention of 1787 was the nation's other "Founding Moment." Several of the book's most significant events occur in 1790, including the Compromise of 1790 and the delivery of petitions to Congress calling for the restriction and abolition of slavery that same year. The book covers George Washington's presidency, which lasted from 1788 to 1796, his decision to step down, and the publication of his "Farewell Address." It also covers the presidential elections of 1796 and 1800, in which John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, respectively, were elected as president. In addition, Ellis makes frequent references to the French Revolution, which lasted from 1789 to 1799. The book also attends to the duel in which Aaron Burr killed Alexander Hamilton in 1804. *Founding Fathers* ends with the year 1826, when both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died on July 4, the fiftieth anniversary of Independence.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Alongside biographies of the individual Founding Fathers, Ellis has also written *Revolutionary Summer*, which covers the summer of 1776, *American Creation*, an evaluation of the successes and failures of the Founding Fathers, *The Quartet*, which mainly focuses on the Constitutional Convention, and *After the Revolution*, which examines culture in the early American Republic. Other major works covering this period include Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, David McCullough's *1776*, which covers the year of American Independence, Catherine Drinker Browen's *Miracle at Philadelphia*, which focuses on the Constitutional Convention, and Jay Winik's *The Great Upheaval*, which, like *Founding Brothers*, covers the decade following the Constitutional Convention.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*
- **Where Written:** Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 2001
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Nonfiction
- **Genre:** Nonfiction
- **Setting:** The United States, mostly focused on the 1790s
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

High Honors. *Founding Brothers* was awarded the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for History.

Crossover. Unusually, *Founding Brothers* perfectly straddles academic scholarship and popular history. In a review for *The Guardian*, Hugo Young wrote that the book was "a work of deep scholarship masquerading as popular history."

PLOT SUMMARY

The American Revolution seemed unlikely or impossible at the time, but in hindsight it appears "inevitable." The revolutionary leaders spoke with the confidence of people who knew they would have significant historical legacies, but at the same time they had no idea if their experiment would succeed. It is important to balance the "tool" of hindsight with trying to understand historical events in their proper context and imagine how it would have felt to witness them at the time.

The last decade of the eighteenth century was an extraordinarily significant part of American history. Much of what occurred in this short period went on to determine the future of the country right up to the present day. *Founding Fathers* focuses on the eight most important political leaders of the revolutionary generation: John Adams, Abigail Adams, Aaron Burr, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington. It tells

their story through a series of six episodes, all of which convey the same four basic themes: the collective teamwork of the revolutionary generation, the close relationship between the personal and the political, their inaction on the issue of slavery, and the awareness the Founding Fathers had of the fact that they were shaping history.

The first chapter focuses on the duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton. Both men arrived at the duel accompanied by their faithful proteges, William Van Ness and Nathaniel Pendleton. Hamilton accepted Burr's invitation to the duel because he never backed down from a challenge, but wrote that he planned to "throw away" his first shot. It is unclear exactly what happened when the men fired at each other. After they did so, Hamilton was hurt and was tended to by Pendleton and his doctor. He died the following day and was mourned as a martyr. Burr was vilified and fled to Georgia, his political career forever ruined. There was much speculation about what actually happened during the duel, and a variety of different interpretations of the event still exist today. The two had a long history of mutual antagonism, and Burr blamed Hamilton for his embarrassing loss in the New York gubernatorial election of 1803. Hamilton claimed that his criticisms of Burr were purely political rather than personal, but in reality this distinction was rather fuzzy. Despite these tensions, it seems likely that neither man wanted to cause the other serious harm.

The second chapter covers the dinner party hosted by Jefferson in which the "Compromise of 1790" was brokered. At the time, Hamilton's financial plan—which included the federal assumption of state debts—was stuck in a gridlock in Congress. At the dinner, Madison agreed for the plan to be brought to the house again on the condition that the nation's **capital** be placed on the Potomac. Madison coauthored *The Federalist Papers* with Hamilton and John Jay, but had since switched to the antifederalist position. Having spent time away in France, Jefferson was less up-to-date with the issues being discussed at the dinner. His personal qualities made him a good facilitator and allowed him to negotiate a deal between Madison and Hamilton.

The question of where the capital would be located was known as "the residency question." In March 1790, sixteen different sites were under consideration, and it seemed most likely that a spot in Pennsylvania would be chosen. Along with Jefferson's dinner, there were likely many other meetings and discussions that occurred around this time to discuss the residency question along with assumption. The period after the decisions were made was difficult, as many were horrified both by assumption and by the placement of the capital on the Potomac. The Compromise of 1790 averted a major political crisis, but the issues that caused the original divide remained.

The third chapter addresses the delivery of petitions to Congress calling for the end of the slave trade and slavery, respectively. The first petition was delivered by Quaker delegates; the second, which was signed by Benjamin Franklin, by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Franklin's support meant that the petitions would have to be taken seriously. A clause in the Constitution stated that Congress could not take any action to curtail the slave trade until 1808, and some delegates argued that even the discussion of slavery was not permitted. James Jackson and William Loughton Smith of Georgia have two long proslavery speeches, the first time such an argument had been explicitly stated in Congress. There was a 43-to-11 vote to forward the petitions to a committee.

While the **Declaration of Independence** could be read as "an unambiguous tract for abolition," little serious action was taken to curtail slavery following the Revolutionary War. There was a major divide between slaveholding and non-slaveholding states during the Constitutional Convention. Now in 1790, the prospect of gradual emancipation faced two pragmatic roadblocks: the significant cost this would incur, since most politicians believed slaveholders would have to be compensated for their losses, and the relocation of freed black people, as most politicians also held that white and black people could not live together in one society. Many concluded that the combination of these issues made emancipation impossible. While most of the Founding Fathers opposed slavery in theory, in reality they were unprepared to take action to stop it because they believed this would tear apart the union. Ultimately, the report that the committee produced contained vague references to "justice" and "humanity," but confirmed that Congress could not take action to curtail slavery until 1808.

The fourth chapter focuses on the end of George Washington's presidency and his Farewell Address. After his second term, Washington was personally eager to retire, and also keen to disprove criticisms that he was acting more like a king than a president. Ellis emphasizes that it is crucial to read the Farewell Address in the context in which it was originally produced. The end of Washington's presidency was characterized by fierce political divisions between Federalists and Republicans. Jefferson's opposition to Federalism was so intense that he developed a "conspiracy theory" that the Federalists were organizing a hostile takeover of the government and that Washington must be "senile" because he was letting it happen.

Washington wrote the Farewell Address with Hamilton's assistance. In it, Washington called for unity and nonintervention in foreign affairs. He failed to mention slavery, which reflected his own contradictory position and inaction on the issue. The reaction to the Address was mostly positive, though Washington's critics continued to accuse him of monarchical behavior. Washington was largely unruffled by this criticism and remained confidently committed to his principles until the end of his life.

The fifth chapter begins with America's first contested presidential election in 1796. The two frontrunners were

Jefferson and Adams, who, despite their differing political views, had always been close friends, having been brought together by the Revolution. Adams had served as vice president under Washington, a role he found made him frustratingly impotent. During this time, Adams and Jefferson's political difference became so explosive that their friendship hung by a thread. As the election approached, both Adams and Jefferson initially denied that they were interested in the presidency, although Adams more quickly admitted this wasn't true. In the end, Adams narrowly beat Jefferson, and offered his old friend a bipartisan shared platform as president and vice president from different parties. Jefferson agreed to serve as vice president but refused the bipartisan plan, claiming it was for personal reasons.

Adams inherited significant problems as president, from the Federalist/Republican rift to the "undeclared war" being waged against France. He tended to ignore his cabinet and seek advice only from Abigail. He made a series of controversial foreign policy decisions, including appointing his son John Quincy as Minster to Prussia, which ultimately paid off. However, his support for the Alien and Sedition Acts was disastrous, helping to accelerate the downfall of federalism. Meanwhile, Jefferson commissioned a scandalmonger to write a libelous book about Adams. In the 1800 election, Jefferson was elected as president and Burr as vice president, with Adams coming third. Adams and Jefferson did not speak for twelve years after this.

Adams retired to his home in Quincy, Massachusetts, where he remained embittered about his political defeats and the actions of his enemies. In 1804, when Jefferson's youngest daughter died in childbirth, Abigail wrote a letter of condolences which Jefferson mistook for an attempt and reconciliation. Abigail reacted to this by angrily scolding Jefferson for all the ways in which he had wronged her husband. Following this, the silence between Quincy and Monticello resumed for another eight years. In the meantime, Adams began writing to Benjamin Rush. In his letters, Adams criticized the overly romantic and simplistic version of the Revolution that had emerged in recent years. His own account was messier and far more critical of the revolutionary leaders.

In 1809, Rush wrote that he'd had a dream that Adams and Jefferson reconciled, started a correspondence, and eventually died at nearly the same time. Adams believed this dream might be "prophecy," yet it took him another two years to reach out to Jefferson. Finally, in 1812, the men began writing to each other. They reflected on the Revolution, debated politics and other matters, and forgave each other for the hurt they'd caused. By the late 1810s they were among the only surviving members of the revolutionary generation and wrote that they were looking forward to reuniting with their "band of brothers" in the afterlife. On July 3, 1826, one day before the fiftieth anniversary of independence, Jefferson slipped into a coma. He died the next day, on July 4, as did Adams, just as Rush predicted.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

John Adams – John Adams was a key figure in the American Revolution who went on to be the second president of the United States. Born in Quincy, Massachusetts, Adams attended Harvard and held a variety of jobs before his involvement in the Independence movement propelled him into political life. Ellis describes Adams as an argumentative man with a sensitive ego. His presidency was challenging due to the problems he inherited, such as the quasi-war with France and vicious divide between Federalists and Republicans. Despite his prominence in the Revolution, he was also accused of secretly harboring a desire to install a monarchical-style government. He served one term, before losing the 1800 election to Thomas Jefferson; at this point, he retired to his home in Quincy. His close friendship with Jefferson, which suffered during the period in which they served as president and vice-president, recovered in later years, during which time he and Jefferson exchanged many letters while both were retired. He was married to Abigail Adams, who was his closest confidant and advisor.

George Washington – George Washington, for whom the nation's **capital** was named, was a military hero during the Revolution and the first president of the United States. He was born in Virginia to a family of planters and, unlike many of the other Founding Fathers, never traveled to Europe. He was a slaveholder, though he ensured that the slaves he owned were freed and financially supported after his death. At six feet, four inches, Washington towered over most of the people around him and had a robustly healthy, majestic presence. Even before becoming president, he was so revered that there was no question that he would be chosen to be the first leader of the country. Washington's presidency was defined by an emphasis on national unity and noninterference in international affairs. During Washington's second term as president, critics began to accuse him of behaving like a monarch; it was partially in response to these accusations that Washington decided to resign after his second term, thereby setting a precedent for future presidents. His Farewell Address is known as one of the most important political documents in American history.

Aaron Burr – Aaron Burr was a politician from New Jersey who served as Thomas Jefferson's vice president for one term. He had an antagonistic relationship with Alexander Hamilton, whom he blamed for his loss in the New York gubernatorial election. The friction between the two men escalated to the point that Burr invited Hamilton to a fatal duel in which Hamilton was killed. It is believed that Burr did not want to kill Hamilton (and perhaps didn't even intend to harm him), although there is no certainty over exactly what took place

during the duel. Hamilton's death stained Burr's reputation and political career, and he spent the rest of his life away from the spotlight.

Benjamin Franklin – Benjamin Franklin was the oldest member of the Founding Fathers. Aside from serving as a politician, Franklin was also an author, publisher, scientist, and activist. In the period that the book covers, Franklin was already old and frail. He mainly appears through his involvement with the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, which delivered a petition to Congress calling for the immediate abolition of slavery. The fact that Franklin signed the petition gave it significantly more authority than it otherwise would have had. He died in 1790.

Alexander Hamilton – Alexander Hamilton was born out of wedlock on the island of Nevis in the West Indies. He rose to prominence through his role in the Revolutionary War. The founder of the Federalist Party, Hamilton served as Secretary of the Treasury under George Washington. Hamilton was the main champion of the Federalist cause, and led the campaign for the assumption of state debts. Ellis portrays him as a man of exceptional ambition and talent who made many enemies, including John Adams and Aaron Burr. Hamilton's history of undermining Burr culminated in Burr inviting him to a duel. Burr shot and killed Hamilton, probably unintentionally. Hamilton's funeral was an "extravaganza of mourning," and he was memorialized as a martyr of the Federalist cause.

Thomas Jefferson – Thomas Jefferson was a member of the Founding Fathers and the author of the **Declaration of Independence**. He was Governor of Virginia during the Revolutionary War and went on to be the third president of the United States, having served as vice president under John Adams. He was born in Virginia and was a wealthy landowner and slaveholder, although he publicly stated that he opposed slavery and believed it should be abolished. (Although this does not appear prominently in the book, it has been proven that Jefferson fathered several children with one of the enslaved women on his estate, Sally Hemings.) Jefferson served as Minister to France, and developed a highly favorable opinion of the French Revolution. Jefferson was a Republican; although he denied being strongly partisan, his behavior often indicated otherwise. His strong opposition to what he saw as the Federalist takeover of government at times took the form of a paranoid "conspiracy theory," and even led him to fall out with George Washington. He had a close but tumultuous friendship with Adams, which involved a period of twelve years in which they did not speak. The two reconciled later in life, and exchanged many letters in which they nostalgically reflected on the revolutionary era and continued to debate political matters. He and Adams both died on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of American Independence.

James Madison – James Madison was a member of the Founding Fathers and the fourth president of the United States, though the book does not cover his presidency. Madison was born into a wealthy slaveholding family in Virginia and went on to attend Princeton. He was small, weak, and often unwell, and predicted that he would die young, although he lived to the age of 85. Unlike many of the other Founding Fathers, Madison was calm and shy, with little rhetorical skill. However, Ellis argues that this actually helped his political career, as it made those around him trust him as a voice of reason. The pivotal role he played in the Constitutional Convention earned him the nickname "Father of the Constitution." He coauthored *The Federalist Papers* with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, but later rejected Federalism on the grounds that it was a corruption of revolutionary values. He was a talented negotiator, having helped facilitate agreements such as the Compromise of 1790.

Abigail Adams – Abigail Adams was John Adams' wife and John Quincy's mother. Despite not having received a full education, she was intelligent and keenly interested in politics. While her husband was president, Abigail made sure to follow what was being published in the press and report it all to him. She fatefully encouraged John to support the Alien and Sedition Acts, which is now recognized as the worst mistake of his presidency. She was also originally a close friend of Thomas Jefferson's but fell out with him at the same time as her husband, although they eventually reconciled.

John Quincy Adams – John Quincy was John Adams and Abigail Adams' son. His father appointed him as Minister to Prussia during his presidency, despite the fact that John Quincy worried this would look nepotistic. It turned out to be a prudent move, as John could trust his son's reports from Europe during a particularly tense and climactic period in international relations.

James Monroe – James Monroe was Thomas Jefferson's "loyal [...] disciple." Like Jefferson, Monroe was a Virginian, and attempted to persuade Jefferson out of agreeing to the Compromise of 1790 on the grounds that it was not sufficiently beneficial to Virginia. Monroe served as Minister to France under John Adams, during which time he betrayed Adams' orders in order to advantage Jefferson.

Benjamin Rush – Benjamin Rush was an American political leader and one of the signers of the **Declaration of Independence**. During the period when John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were not speaking, Rush had a prophetic dream that both men would reconcile and die at nearly the same moment. Incredibly, this turned out to be true—both died on July 4, 1826. Rush was delighted with the role he played in facilitating the reconciliation.

MINOR CHARACTERS

William Van Ness – William Van Ness was Aaron Burr's protégé. He attended the duel in which Alexander Hamilton was killed, and hurried Burr away after seeing that Hamilton

was injured in order to protect Burr from legal trouble.

Nathaniel Pendleton – Nathaniel Pendleton was Alexander Hamilton's "loyal associate," who also attended the duel at which Aaron Burr killed Hamilton.

John Jay – John Jay was the first Chief Justice of the United States. He coauthored *The Federalist Papers* with Alexander Hamilton and James Madison.

James Jackson – James Jackson was a representative from Georgia who gave a long proslavery speech in Congress after Quakers and members of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society delivered antislavery petitions in 1790.

William Loughton Smith – William Loughton Smith was another representative from Georgia who gave a proslavery speech in Congress in 1790.

Elbridge Gerry – Elbridge Gerry was a representative from Massachusetts who expressed sympathy with slaveholders during the debate on slavery in 1790.

Thomas Pinckney – Thomas Pinckney was a politician from South Carolina who came third in the first contested American presidential election. The possibility of losing to Pinckney infuriated John Adams, who called him a "nobody."

Napoleon Bonaparte – Napoleon Bonaparte was a French military leader who rose to prominence during the French Revolution and thereafter became the French Emperor. He sold the Louisiana Territory to the United States in 1803, doubling the size of the republic.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CONFLICT VS. COMPROMISE

Founding Brothers, a nonfiction book by Joseph Ellis, emphasizes that the period following the American Revolution was defined by an extraordinary amount of conflict, from petty disputes to discord so serious that it threatened the very existence of the republic. Compromise was an extremely necessary—and extremely difficult—task for the leaders of the nation. Indeed, Ellis argues that one of the most extraordinary aspects of the leaders of this era was their ability to resolve conflicts through compromise, and that this ability should be one of the defining elements of their legacy. At the same time, there is a major exception to this. The issue of slavery was so divisive that the Founding Fathers decided the question would have to be put on hold until a later date. While this decision is to some degree framed as a compromise in the book, it was also a capitulation to the pro-slavery side, as slavery was allowed to proliferate while the issue was "tabled."

Founding Brothers shows that the post-Revolutionary period was riddled with conflict, which was fueled not only by genuine ideological disagreement but also by practical issues, personal and political rivalries, uncertainty, and rumor. The post-Revolutionary moment was particularly characterized by conflict due to the fact that, after the struggle against the British was won, the leaders of the United States were no longer united in common struggle: "Bound together in solidarity against the imperialistic enemy, the leadership fragments when the common enemy disappears and the different agenda for the new nation must confront its differences." Following this loss of a "common enemy," conflicts that had been ignored, suppressed, or simply hadn't existed prior to the birth of the independent American nation suddenly materialized in full force. The legacy of the Revolution itself became a highly contested topic, as conflicts between Federalists and Republics turned into "ideological warfare" and certain leaders, such as John Adams, were accused of betraying the Revolution by favoring monarchical-style government.

The book emphasizes that the Founding Fathers should be admired for their ability to achieve compromise under these extraordinarily difficult circumstances. One of the examples of a successful resolution of conflict detailed in the book is the Compromise of 1790, in which Alexander Hamilton achieved his aim of the federal government assuming state debts, while Jefferson and Madison were granted their desire to have the nation's **capital** in the South. The conflicts leading up to this compromise were extremely serious and threatening to the republic, and at times a solution seemed so unlikely as to appear ludicrous (as is demonstrated by the example of congressmen who joked that the capitol needed to be put on wheels and moved from place to place). However, through discussion, bargaining, and mutual trust, the leaders reached a compromise that is "most famous for averting a political crisis that many statesmen of the time considered a threat to the survival of the infant republic."

On the other hand, Ellis also argues that the Compromise of 1790 "exposed the incompatible expectations concerning America's future that animated these same statesmen." While the Founding Fathers may have possessed extraordinary skill in achieving harmony between warring sides, in certain cases, such harmony could not be achieved because the visions and desires of these different sides were simply "incompatible." This is particularly true in the case of slavery. The Founding Fathers' decision to "table" the issue of slavery and revisit it at a later date left a sizable stain on the revolutionary generation's legacy. Not only did this decision allow the horror and brutality of slavery to continue for many more years, it also laid the groundwork for the Civil War. The lesson of this is that

conflict—particularly a conflict as fundamental as the issue of slavery—will never disappear simply by being ignored. Even if the conflict appears to momentarily subside, it will return in full force at a later date.

Ellis acknowledges that the Founding Father's decision to dodge the question of slavery helped the United States survive its first decades as an independent nation. Yet *Founding Brothers* also stresses that it was not only for pragmatic reasons that the issue of slavery was put to one side. The Founding Fathers themselves faced internal conflict regarding the issue of slavery, as is made clear by their contradictory and evasive statements and actions on the matter. While most were united in condemning slavery as a moral evil, many avoided and suppressed serious discussion of abolition. Madison, for example, argued that the consideration of abolition was "premature, politically impractical, and counterproductive."

Founding Brothers portrays a group of leaders able to reach agreement and compromise in the most unlikely circumstances, in a climate defined by passionate ideological disputes and uncertainty about the future. At the same time, the "evasiveness" of the Founding Fathers when it came to the issue of slavery was so problematic that it is difficult to straightforwardly praise their ability to compromise without centering this enormous caveat.

HEROISM, LEADERSHIP, AND COLLABORATION

Founding Brothers praises the Founding Fathers as seven truly extraordinary men who deserve the god-like reputation that they have gained in the public imagination. Author Joseph Ellis notes that while other historians have attempted to tell the story of the early American republic through minor figures or ordinary citizens, it is important to focus on the Founding Fathers themselves, because they are emblematic of the revolutionary moment and the nation that emerged as a result. Although the revolutionary generation wanted to shed the god-king model of the European monarchy, the Founding Fathers were (and still are) imbued with a god-like status, which Ellis argues is well-deserved. However, he also points out that the Founding Fathers were still only human, and that collaboration among men, rather than godly heroism, was crucial for the shaping of America.

While the revolutionary generation may have sought to reject the god-king model of the European monarchy, the culture of leadership with which they replaced it also tended to posit political leaders as gods. Indeed, what was distinctive about this new reign of politician-gods was that it operated through collaboration, rather than the arbitrary, supreme authority of a singular king. The focus on conflict, compromise, and collaboration in *Founding Brothers* emphasizes that this distinction is a major one. The new model of political leadership demonstrated by the heroes of the revolutionary generation was of a group of "gods" whose power was kept in check by their differences and disagreements—that is to say, by each other.

Much of Ellis' descriptions of the Founding Fathers reflects the god-like status that these men acquired both during their lifetimes and ever since—a status, Ellis argues, that is deeply deserved. Ellis describes the Founding Fathers as "gods on Mount Olympus," illustrating that they are etched into history with the prestige and power of gods from Greek mythology (who, it is worth noting, both supported and undermined each other—and, like the Founding Fathers, got into frequent quarrels). For example, Ellis observes that Benjamin Franklin seemed "immortal," like a god who had come to earth. Ellis describes him as "the greatest American scientist, the most deft diplomat, the most accomplished prose stylist, the sharpest wit," concluding that "Franklin defied all the categories by inhabiting them all with such distinction and nonchalant grace." Similarly, Ellis observes that "by the time [George Washington] assumed the presidency in 1789—no other candidate was even thinkable—the mythology surrounding Washington's reputation had grown like ivy over a statue, effectively covering the man with an aura of omnipotence, rendering the distinction between his human qualities and his heroic achievements impossible to delineate." These descriptions suggest that the heroic status of these leaders actually obscured the reality that they were men, like the metaphor of ivy growing over a statue. At the same time, Ellis himself seems to concur with much of the mythology surrounding these figures. Rather than seeking to disprove the mythological image of the Founding Fathers by focusing on their flaws (as John Adams did in his correspondence with Benjamin Rush), *Founding Brothers* largely concludes that the heroic, god-like impression of the men it describes is both deserved and accurate.

On the other hand, the emphasis on conflict and compromise in *Founding Brothers* shows that each of these men was indeed only human, and that collaboration was necessary in order to build the American republic. This forms a major difference between the emerging American system of government and the monarchical rule of European nations. For example, Ellis points out that "the American presidency was fundamentally different from a European monarchy [...] presidents, no matter how indispensable, were inherently disposable." At first this statement appears to contradict itself. How can a president be both "indispensable" and "disposable"? The answer is that the American presidency is indeed a sort of paradox, wherein the president is expected to be both those things. As the book points out, the president was so important that he was considered indispensable. For example, people worried that when Washington died, the republic would die with him. At the same time, Washington himself undermined his own king-like status by resigning after his second term, thereby reminding

the public that no matter how apparently transcendent his powers, in reality he was "disposable," meaning that another man would eventually come to fill his role and be able to successfully lead the nation. This form of succession is a kind of collaboration, wherein heroic leadership and the shaping of history is seen as a group exercise, where differences between people strengthen and enrich the nation as a whole.

THE PERSONAL VS. THE POLITICAL

The title *Founding Brothers* foregrounds the relationships between the Founding Fathers, indicating that the Joseph Ellis' nonfiction book will depict these relationships rather than simply focusing on the men as individuals. *Founding Brothers* highlights that these relationships were both personal and political, a fact that was true of rivalries as much as it was true of allegiances. Major rivalries were rarely the result of purely political disagreements, as personal issues were usually involved as well, while seemingly personal rivalries often had political underpinnings, too. This confluence of the personal and political made running the country a challenging and touchy exercise for the Founding Fathers. At the same time, *Founding Brothers* emphasizes that the friendship between these seven "brothers" was an enormous source of strength to the nation's leadership and thus to America as a whole.

Throughout the book, Ellis emphasizes how disputes and rivalries had both personal and political origins. The conflict between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton resulting in the duel in which Hamilton was killed grew out of Burr's political disappointments, part of which he blamed on Hamilton's ongoing negative comments about his personal character. Similarly, the tensions between Thomas Jefferson and George Washington that emerged toward the end of Washington's presidency were a blend of the personal and the political: "Beyond the purely personal dimensions of their estrangement [...] this episode provides an invaluable clue to the larger and more impersonal political concerns that were on Washington's mind when he sat down to compose the Farewell Address." Ellis also points out that the long hostility between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson following Jefferson's election as president, though underpinned by political tensions, was stoked by Abigail Adams' attack on Jefferson's personal character. In each of these cases, rivalries and disagreements among the men were rooted in both political and personal concerns.

While the book straightforwardly asserts that each of the major rivalries depicted had both personal and political elements, the question of whether friendships could survive political disagreements is more complex. Ellis explores this idea in particular detail through the depiction of the complicated relationship between Jefferson and Adams. Ellis argues that the two men were an unlikely pair due to their sharp political disagreements, but that, for example, during the long period in which Jefferson and Adams did not speak, Jefferson insisted that there was only one instance in which Adams had behaved in a manner that was objectionable on a personal level—all the rest of their differences were ideological. (However, Abigail Adams then disputed this, suggesting that Adams' political disagreements with Jefferson were much more intertwined with personal issues than Jefferson might have presumed.)

On the other hand, the reconciliation between Jefferson and Adams suggests that while friendship across political difference might be difficult, it is possible. Ellis explains that "once they no longer had to pose as partners," Jefferson and Adams were eventually able to resurrect their friendship, and that the correspondence between the two men that lasted until the end of their lives is testament to the powerful, intimate nature of their friendship. In this correspondence, the two friends looked forward to an afterlife in which they would be able to reunite with their fellow "founding brothers" and enjoy each other's company without the political pressures that dominated their lives on earth. This rather moving vision of fraternal harmony suggests that there was indeed a deep and fundamental personal bond between the men, even if it was at times damaged by political disagreements and rivalries.

PRESENT VS. HINDSIGHT

Early on in *Founding Brothers*, Ellis emphasizes that the events leading up to and following the American Revolution can, from our present-day position, seem like they were destined to happen. In hindsight, we know that the Revolution was ultimately a success, that the republic both survived and thrived, and that the principles laid out in the **Declaration of Independence** and in the Constitution continue to shape America today. However, all of this was unclear at the time. The Founding Fathers had no idea if the American experiment would turn out to be successful, and much of what was occurring around them was also unknown to them due to misinformation, rumor, and the simple problem of not witnessing everything first-hand. Ellis endeavors to explain how the events following the Revolution appeared to those living them at the time, rather than presenting them only from the position of hindsight. In doing so, he suggests that even though we have far more knowledge about these events now than anyone did back then, there is also a special advantage to the perspective of those alive at the time. Some truths conveyed in the present are not available to those viewing the situation in hindsight.

There are many ways in which hindsight improves our knowledge of historical events. Thanks to the work of historians, we now have a comprehensive picture of the events surrounding the birth of the American republic. We know, for example, that meetings about the issue of slavery or the location of the nation's **capital** occurred in secret. We also have insight into private correspondence, revealing the inner

thoughts and feelings of the major historical actors under consideration. In this sense, hindsight strengthens our understanding by revealing information that was kept hidden at the time.

Another way in which hindsight strengthens our knowledge is due to the fact that we know the consequences of events in the past. As Ellis explains: "What is familiar history for us, however, was still the unknown future for them." We know, for example, that the Founding Fathers' decision to "table" the issue of slavery did not resolve or mitigate the problem, but rather led to an enormous amount of suffering and, eventually, to the Civil War. Ellis argues: "Hindsight permits us to listen to the debate of 1790 with knowledge that none of the participants possessed. For we know full well what they could perceive dimly, if at all—namely, that slavery would come to be the central and defining problem for the next seventy years of American history." Indeed, hindsight tells us that not only did the slavery problem not disappear, the legacy of slavery and related racial tensions continue to shape life in America over 200 years later in the present.

At the same time, Ellis is careful to avoid giving credence to the cliché that "hindsight is 20/20" (meaning that hindsight shows us the complete, accurate version of an event). While hindsight often produces an abundance of information from which the truth can be deduced, in other cases too little information or conflicting evidence further obscures the truth within our contemporary perspective. For example, Ellis emphasizes that little is known about what happened in the duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton, despite it being one of the most famous events in early American history. Rather than picking one interpretation of events and filling in the gaps to construct a full narrative, Ellis presents another, different interpretation of what occurred during the duel, with commentary about which version is more likely to be accurate and why. This reminds us that hindsight is not "20/20" but often severely limited, and there is much that we will simply never be able to know about the past.

Hindsight can also corrupt our understanding of historical events due to the tendency to romanticize these events and fit them into a neat, coherent narrative. In correspondence with Benjamin Rush, John Adams expresses suspicions over the historical narrative of the American Revolution that romanticized events that were in reality "desperately contested and highly problematic occasions." He emphasizes the authority of his own, "deconstructed" account because he was "present at the creation [of the republic]." Adams was also critical of the romanticized portrayal of the Founding Fathers and other leaders as heroes, which may make us question the depiction of these figures in *Founding Brothers* itself.

Not only can hindsight make us produce romanticized narratives, but it can also lead us to distort the past by imposing our own contemporary perspective and values onto it. Ellis argues that George Washington's Farewell Address has come to mean many different things over time, but "unless one believes that ideas are like migratory birds that can fly unchanged from one century to the next, the only way to grasp the authentic meaning of his message is to recover the context out of which it emerged." For this reason, *Founding Brothers* provides the original context such that we can get as close to Washington's original meaning as possible—even if interpreting it from a contemporary perspective is difficult to fully escape.

PATRIOTISM AND AMERICAN VALUES

In the final decades of the eighteenth century, the Founding Fathers made a radical assertion of American values through the **Declaration of Independence** and the Constitution, sending a message that had a profound impact on the world at large and resonated for many years to come. At the same time, *Founding Brothers* depicts a contradiction between this decisive assertion of American principles and a reality that was defined by confusion and conflict over what these principles actually were. The creation of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution may have helped solidify a sense of Americanness, but—as Ellis points out—some major aspects of the republic, most notably slavery, violated these principles. Furthermore, many of the values that were at the core of the new American republic were abstract, leading to confusion over how they should actually be implemented. At a time when the nation was still vulnerable, it was vital that its leaders proved themselves to be patriotic beyond doubt. Yet the book identifies an irony in this, due to the fact that it involved showing loyalty to values that were very much still hotly disputed and, in some cases, in conflict with reality.

The book demonstrates that certain political leaders from this era were associated with American values to an absolute degree. Ellis calls Benjamin Franklin the "prototypical American," and mentions that people associated George Washington with the new nation so much that they feared that if Washington died, the republic would die with him. To some extent, Franklin and Washington set a somewhat impossible standard to which the other Founding Fathers then scrambled to meet. Being the earliest leaders of a new nation meant there was a great deal of pressure to embody the values of that nation, even when those values were still being defined and developed. This sometimes took absurd proportions, such as when Thomas Jefferson hopefully asked if he was indeed dying on July 4 (although he asked the question on July 3, both he and John Adams did indeed both die on July 4).

At the same time, there is also a question over whether even the ultimate American leaders Franklin and Washington embodied Americanness in every way. For example, Adams thought that Franklin was "naïve about French motives," which he believed were in fact not sufficiently "pro-American."

Meanwhile, the fact that Washington arguably became a king-like leader of the American republic was itself a contradiction in terms. How could a country that had defined itself by rejecting the monarchy then invest its identity so intensely with a single leader?

Examples of such contradictions proliferate throughout the book. Again, one of the biggest examples of such contradiction is slavery. All the Founding Fathers professed to believe in the fundamentally American principle that "All men are created equal," and that they have a right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," yet none took decisive action in ending the institution of slavery. Instead, the revolutionary generation chose to put aside the issue of slavery, leaving the problem for future generations to deal with. It is difficult to reconcile this truth with the idea that the Founding Fathers truly embodied American values, considering how severely their behavior violated the words that they themselves had written. Although the book doesn't explore this issue fully, it briefly considers the prospect that despite the professed thoughts of the Founding Fathers and the words of the Declaration of Independence, slavery had in fact become part of American identity. Ellis mentions "the realistic recognition that slavery had been grafted onto the character of the southern states during the colonial era and had become a permanent part of American society south of the Potomac," thereby suggesting that the contradiction between the values professed by the Founding Fathers and the reality of American culture was perhaps more profound than we might assume.

To some extent, the book declines to resolve the issue of how the Founding Fathers may or may not have violated the American values that they themselves helped to define. At the same time, it does show that internal conflict and disagreement did not solely pose a threat to the new republic but was actually vital in defining its values. Ellis points out that the Alien and Sedition Acts, which were "designed to deport or disenfranchise foreign-born residents, mostly Frenchmen, who were disposed to support the Republican party" and made it a crime to publish any "false, scandalous, and malicious writing or writings against the Government of the United States" were "unquestionably the biggest blunder of [John Adams'] presidency." Enforcing patriotic obedience was an unwise move precisely because demanding loyalty to American values *goes against American values*. In this sense, the book suggests that while there were certainly contradictions and complexities in defining American values during this era, these values were no less meaningful and powerful as a result.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE CAPITAL

In *Founding Fathers*, the capital (Washington, D.C.) symbolizes the intensity of the competing needs and interests that dominated American life in the period following the American Revolution. The question of where America's capital city should be was one of great debate, causing so much indecision that some congressmen joked about the capital having to be placed on wheels and rolled around from place to place. The newly formed republic consisted of different states (with different cultures, climates, histories, and interests) that now faced the challenge of acting as one nation. As the book details, the decision about where the capital should be ended up being part of the Compromise of 1790, during which the debate about assumption was solved through a bargain that also settled the residency question. The chosen location on the Potomac was a concession to the South (and particularly Virginia), and was also a way of keeping the country's financial institutions, which were mostly located in Philadelphia and New York, separate from its seat of government. In addition, it was significant that the nation's leaders picked a location that was, at the time, not an existing urban center; this reflected the values of decentralized power that many leaders of the era (and particularly Republicans) wanted to preserve as the country moved forward into the future. The fact that Washington, D.C. was named after George Washington was, according to Ellis, a foregone conclusion. Even during his lifetime, Washington was an integral part of American identity. It has stayed that way ever since in part due to the capital named after him.

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

The Declaration of Independence takes on several distinct symbolic meanings within the era the book captures. On one level, it represents the extraordinary achievement of the revolutionary generation—an achievement that seemed unlikely or impossible before it happened. The Declaration also symbolizes the intense optimism, hope, and vision of this moment in American history. Members of the revolutionary generation believed that they were overturning the existing world order for the better. If the words of the Declaration sometimes appear melodramatic or flamboyant, this is because they reveal the profound, dramatic vision at the heart of the Revolution. The Declaration is also significant because, unlike the Constitution, it was the work of one man: Thomas Jefferson. Throughout the book, Ellis explores the difficulties inherent within collaboration and the danger that accrues when something as important as the legacy of the Revolution is subject to many different interpretations. This danger is inherent within the symbolic meaning of the Declaration of Independence. While it is a document with one author, it is a statement made on behalf of the revolutionary

generation and the American people more broadly. In this sense, the Declaration belongs to everyone. Another important aspect of the Declaration is its inconsistency and hypocrisy. As Ellis explores, the great failure of the revolutionary generation was their inability to take action on slavery. Although these leaders all denounced slavery as evil, they left it as an unresolved issue, and their inaction eventually led to the country falling apart during the Civil War. While the Declaration of Independence is an extraordinary and powerful document, the fact that it asserts rights that did not exist for enslaved people (and women) at the time shows that it is also flawed.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Founding Brothers* published in 2002.

Preface Quotes

No event in American history which was so improbable at the time has seemed so inevitable in retrospect as the American Revolution. On the inevitability side, it is true there were voices back then urging prospective patriots to regard American independence as an early version of manifest destiny. Tom Paine, for example, claimed that it was simply a matter of common sense that an island could not rule a continent [...] Several other prominent American revolutionaries also talked as if they were actors in a historical drama whose script had already been written by the gods.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

The opening passage of the book introduces the idea that the American Revolution may look "inevitable" to us in hindsight, but at the time many believed that it was unlikely to succeed. While Thomas Paine, author of *The Rights of Man*, argued that English colonial rule was unsustainable, this did not necessarily mean that the experiment of the American republic would survive either. Yet despite this uncertainty, many leaders of the revolutionary generation "talked as if they were actors in a historical drama," suggesting that they knew their actions were momentous, and that the eyes of history were watching them.

Of course, we know now that this premonition was correct. Yet it is also important to consider how the expectation that their actions would go down in history influenced the behavior of the revolutionary generation. During this period in American history, the stakes of every political decision were high, not only because the republic was new and fragile but also because political actors correctly believed that their actions would be scrutinized by future generations.

Hindsight, then, is a tricky tool. Too much of it and we obscure the all-pervasive sense of contingency as well as the problematic character of the choices facing the revolutionary generation. On the other hand, without some measure of hindsight, some panoramic perspective on the past from our perch in the present, we lose the chief advantage—perhaps the only advantage—that the discipline of history provides, and we are then thrown without resources into the patternless swirl of events with all the time-bound participants themselves.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Ellis previously explained that when we look back on the American Revolution, it can seem like an "inevitable" historical event. In reality, it was messy, improvisatory, and unlikely to succeed. In this passage, he explains the importance of examining historical events with just the right amount of hindsight. Of course, there is an extent to which hindsight is inevitable—it is not really up to us how much of it we employ because we cannot control the fact that we are viewing past events through a contemporary lens.

What Ellis means, then, by not having too much or too little hindsight is the ability to balance the "panoramic perspective" we gain from our position in the present with placing historical events in the context in which they happened. Although we can never lose our present-day perspective, we can try to understand how historical events would have appeared to those living at the time, who had no idea what the consequences of these events would be.

The central players in the drama were not the marginal or peripheral figures, whose lives are more typical, but rather the political leaders at the center of the national story who wielded power. What's more, the shape and character of the political institutions were determined by a relatively small number of leaders who knew each other, who collaborated and collided with one another in patterns that replicated at the level of personality and ideology the principle of checks and balances imbedded structurally in the Constitution.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Ellis has identified that it is currently trendy for historians to tell the story of this period in American history by focusing on peripheral or ordinary figures whose lives were "typical" of the era. Focusing on the Founding Fathers may not be fashionable; however, Ellis argues that it is vital. As individuals and as a collective, the Founding Fathers were responsible for literally shaping the course of history and developing the American republic. Furthermore, the relationships they had with one another are important to study, because the conflicts and compromises they reached on an interpersonal level "replicated" the diversity of opinion and opportunities for dissent made possible by the Constitution. We can thus learn much from studying the friendships and antagonisms that existed between these men.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Strictly speaking, Hamilton's concession should have been the end of it. Affairs of honor were supposed to involve only personal charges. Political or ideological disagreements, no matter how deep, lay outside the field of honor on which a gentleman could demand satisfaction. Hamilton's distinction between personal and political criticism was designed to change the dispute with Burr from an affair of honor to a political difference of opinion.

Related Characters: Aaron Burr, Alexander Hamilton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Ellis has outlined the drawn-out hostility between Hamilton and Burr that eventually led them to engage in a fatal duel. Burr demanded that Hamilton publicly apologize for "derogatory" statements he'd made about him, which Burr believed contributed to his loss in the New York gubernatorial election. Hamilton at first refused to apologize and then—encouraged by Pendleton— made an apology establishing that his criticisms of Burr were purely political, and not insults about Burr's character. As Ellis explains, this should have made it clear that their dispute was not a matter of "honor," but rather simply a political disagreement. In reality, this distinction was not so clear cut. The accusations Hamilton made against Burr were both personal *and* political. The men worked together in government, but they also knew each other as people. Because of this, it was not easy for a political critique to be separated from personal antagonism. Hamilton's attempt to distinguish personal from political may have made him look more innocent, but on some level it was disingenuous. Unsurprisingly, it only furthered enraged Burr.

The hyperbolic tone of Hamilton's anti-Burr comments derived not so much from intense personal dislike per se as from his intense fear that the precarious condition of the infant nation rendered it so vulnerable to Burr's considerable talents. Burr embodied Hamilton's daring and energy run amok in a political culture still groping for its stable shape.

Related Characters: Aaron Burr, Alexander Hamilton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Ellis has recorded all the moments at which Hamilton undermined Burr's political career, and posed the question of whether Hamilton was justified in doing so. Although the men were ideologically opposed, there were similarities in their personalities. Both were energetic, ambitious, and talented; in this passage, Ellis argues that Hamilton felt threatened by Burr not necessarily because he hated him as a person, but because he felt the future of the republic was at stake. This is why many of the conflicts between the Founding Fathers escalated to such dramatic heights. The stakes were incredibly high, as no one could be sure if the republic would survive and flourish or if it would implode. Unsurprisingly, this led the revolutionary generation to sometimes act in melodramatic, paranoid, or aggressive ways.

Chapter 2 Quotes

In fact, Jefferson's headache coincided with a veritable plague that seemed to descend on the leadership of the Virginia dynasty. Madison was laid up with dysentery, Edmund Randolph remained in Virginia to care for his wife, who had nearly died delivering a stillborn baby, and, most ominously of all, George Washington came down with the flu and developed pulmonary complications that the physicians considered life-threatening. "You cannot conceive the public alarm on this occasion," Jefferson reported to William Short, his former secretary in Paris, adding that Washington's demise would in all probability have meant the abrupt end of the whole national experiment.

Related Characters: Thomas Jefferson (speaker), George Washington, James Madison

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Ellis has outlined the great ideological divide between Madison and Hamilton over the issues of assumption and the recovery of public credit. Both Madison and Hamilton were greatly passionate about their respective opinions on these issues, and the clash between them was intense. Jefferson, on the other hand, knew less about the issues at stake, in part because his mind was on other things. He had just returned from five years in France, was busy attending to other matters, and was also suffering from debilitating migraines.

This passage outlines that Jefferson's problems were not unique in this period. Other key figures in the revolutionary generation—including President George Washington—were also suffering from personal issues and ailments that prevented them from fully engaging in political life. Jefferson's description of the "public alarm" caused by Washington's illness points to the fragility of the new republic and the extent to which the identity of the nation was so closely conflated with the lives of a few individual men. It may seem extreme to imagine the whole country collapsing if Washington died, but the nation was so young and vulnerable at this point that its survival seemed entirely dependent on leaders like Washington.

The Compromise of 1790 is most famous for averting a political crisis that many statesmen of the time considered a threat to the survival of the infant republic. But it also exposed the incompatible expectations concerning America's future that animated these same statesmen.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Ellis has given a detailed account of the events leading up to and following "the Compromise of 1790," and in particular the dinner party Jefferson held that made this compromise possible. The issues of assumption and "the residency question" (where the nation's capital would be located) were extremely divisive, and even threatened the ongoing unity of the republic. However, as Ellis explains here, while a major crisis was averted, the problems under discussion did not simply disappear. Even though they related to specific problems being faced by the government in the 1790s, they emerged from a much more fundamental split at the heart of the nation. The "incompatible expectations concerning America's future" that divided leaders in the 1790s are intimately connected to political divides—such as states' rights versus federal power—that still exist today.

The permanent residence of the capital on the Potomac institutionalized political values designed to carry the nation in a fundamentally different direction. It was also symbolic in a personal sense for Jefferson and Madison. For the Compromise of 1790 signaled the resumption of their political partnership after five years of separation. Now, "the great collaboration" was truly an alliance worthy of its name.

Related Characters: James Madison, Thomas Jefferson

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Ellis has discussed the legacy of "the Compromise of 1790," detailing the disproportionate influence Virginians continued to wield in the years following, as well as the effect of placing the capital in Washington, D.C, which was

not yet a proper city. One particularly significant aspect of the compromise was the fact that it announced the return of Jefferson and Madison's "great collaboration." Working together, these two Virginia statesmen had an enormous impact on the development of the early American republic. As a pair, they were far stronger than either would have been alone (despite the fact that they were both extraordinary leaders). In this sense, the Compromise of 1790 proves Ellis' point that the achievements of the revolutionary generation tended to be the result of collective efforts and the power of collaboration.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Hindsight permits us to listen to the debate of 1790 with knowledge that none of the participants possessed. For we know full well what they could perceive dimly, if at all—namely, that slavery would become the central and defining problem for the next seventy years of American history; that the inability to take decisive action against slavery in the decades immediately following the Revolution permitted the size of the enslaved population to grow exponentially and the legal and political institutions of the developing U.S. government to become entwined in compromises with slavery's persistence; and that eventually over 600,000 Americans would die in the nation's bloodiest war to resolve the crisis, a trauma generating social shock waves that would reverberate for at least another century.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

In February 1790, a group of Quakers along with delegates from the Pennsylvania Abolition Society delivered petitions to Congress demanding the end of the slave trade and slavery itself. Although several representatives, particularly those from the Deep South, stressed that it violated the constitution for abolition to even be *discussed* in Congress, the House ultimately voted to forward the petitions to be heard by a committee. In this passage, Ellis explains that the knowledge we inevitably gain from hindsight about the future of the slavery debate casts a major shadow over our impression of the 1790 petition incident.

Our evaluation of how Congress reacted to the petitions will inevitably be colored by the fact that we knew the slavery divide ultimately proved disastrous for the country. Of course, many people would argue that even if slavery did not lead to the Civil War, it was still immoral and unforgivable for Congress to refuse to take steps to curtail it in 1790. Yet even those who are more sympathetic to the actions of leaders at the time will be aware that their "silence" on the issue paved the way for future conflict.

❝ Any attempt to take decisive action against slavery in 1790, given all these considerations, confronted great, perhaps impossible, odds. The prospects for success were remote at best. But then the prospects for victory against the most powerful army and navy in the world had been remote in 1776, as had the likelihood that thirteen separate and sovereign states would create a unified republican government in 1787. Great leadership had emerged in each previous instance to transform the improbable into the inevitable. Ending slavery was a challenge on the same gigantic scale as these earlier achievements. Whether even a heroic level of leadership stood any chance was uncertain because—and here was the cruelest irony—the effort to make the Revolution truly complete seemed diametrically opposed to remaining a united nation.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

Ellis has explained that the prospect of an emancipation plan being passed in 1790 was extremely unlikely for two main reasons: one was the enormous cost such a plan would incur, due to the assumption that slaveholders would have to be compensated for their losses; the other was the question of where to relocated the freed slaves. In this passage, he suggests that, given all we know about this period, the likelihood of an emancipation plan being passed and then succeeding was extremely small. At the same time, his comparison to American Independence, which also seemed highly unlikely to succeed before it happened, proves that it is difficult to make definitive statements about what would or would not have been possible in the past.

At the same time, Ellis emphasizes that the American Revolution was made possible by the "heroic level of leadership" that carried it to fruition (and shepherded the nation through its early, chaotic years of existence). The reality is that the same kind of leadership did not exist when it came to the matter of slavery. The Founding Fathers, while opposed to slavery in theory, were not prepared to dedicate their lives to eradicating it, and too many other

political leaders—particularly those from the Deep South—were determined to block emancipation at every turn. Great leadership can make the impossible happen, but only if those leaders have the willpower to do so.

What Voltaire was to France, Franklin was to America, the symbol of mankind's triumphal arrival at modernity. When the two great philosopher-kings embraced amid the assembled throngs of Paris, the scene created a sensation, as if the gods had landed on earth and declared the dawning of the Enlightenment. The greatest American scientist, the most deft diplomat, the most accomplished prose stylist, the sharpest wit, Franklin defied all the categories by inhabiting them all with such distinction and nonchalant grace.

Related Characters: Benjamin Franklin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Ellis has argued that only extraordinary political leadership would have made emancipation possible in 1790. The person who rose to this challenge was Benjamin Franklin, despite his old age and illness. Having witnessed all the major events in the founding of the American republic, Franklin seemed to be "an American immortal." Here, Ellis again emphasizes how American identity was so closely linked to the Founding Fathers as individuals. Franklin was an American ideal, a hero with whom ordinary people could identify yet who was also exceptional and god-like.

There is a hint of irony in the fact that Ellis compares Franklin and Voltaire to gods ushering in the Enlightenment, as one of the main facets of the Enlightenment was a turn away from faith and toward science and reason. However, this somewhat lavish description of the two men shows how majestic and almost superhuman they were in the eyes of the people.

Chapter 4 Quotes

The very notion of a republican king was a repudiation of the spirit of '76 and a contradiction in terms. Washington's presidency had become trapped within that contradiction. He was living the great paradox of the early American republic: What was politically essential for the survival of the infant nation was ideologically at odds with what it claimed to stand for.

Related Characters: George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

After serving two terms as America's first president, George Washington announced that he would not be seeking reelection. This was partially due to the fact that he was old, physically weak, and craved retirement. It was also in response to criticisms that he had become more like a king than a president. Here Ellis outlines the irony inherent in the fact that the early American republic actually needed a king-like leader as its first president in order to establish itself and survive following the Revolution. Even if such rules are not beneficial to democracy in general, there are exceptional moments in history when they are necessary.

Yet the "paradox" lies in the fact that the whole revolutionary project rested on rejecting such leaders. Indeed, this is a paradox not unique to the American Revolution, but shared my many revolutions (think of the French Revolution which led to Napoleon, or the Russian Revolution which led to the oppressive, totalitarian rule of Stalin). This is why it is important that Washington's presidency ended after two terms.

Unless one believes that ideas are like migratory birds that can fly unchanged from one century to the next, the only way to grasp the authentic meaning of his message is to recover the context out of which it emerged.

Related Characters: George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

The main messages of the Farewell Address, beyond Washington's announcement that he would not seek a third term as president, were his calls for unity across partisan lines and his support for American isolationism. Washington's ideas have been subject to much scrutiny since the Address was published, and Washington could have no idea how his words would come to be interpreted over the years. Ellis argues that it is crucial to understand the Farewell Address in the context in which it was written. The ideas that Washington sets out within it—even while

they may appear abstract and universal—were in fact bound to a specific time and context.

For that city and the name it was destined to carry, symbolized the conspiracy that threatened, so Jefferson and his followers thought, all that Virginia stood for.

Related Characters: Thomas Jefferson, George Washington

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

Once he retired from the presidency to Mount Vernon, Washington remained involved in the construction of the capital city named after him and of the University of Virginia. This led figures such as Jefferson and other antifederalists to become even more suspicious of Washington. One reason they had originally favored the Potomac location for the capital was that a city didn't actually stand there—unlike Philadelphia or New York, it was not a built up urban zone populated by bankers, merchants, and other financial elites. Part of Jefferson's "conspiracy theory" involved believing that if the government was either too centralized or too closely related to these urban elites, the result would be a corruption the values of the Revolution.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Lacking a consensus on what the American Revolution had intended and what the Constitution had settled, Federalists and Republicans alike were afloat in a sea of mutual accusations and partisan interpretations. The center could not hold because it did not exist.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Ellis has described the "political chaos" that characterized John Adams' presidency. This was in part due to the ongoing "quasi-war" with France, as well as the severe ideological rift between Federalists and Republicans. This rift became disastrous because there was actually no "consensus" over what the values of the Revolution were and what its meaning should be. Of course, documents like the Declaration of Independence and Constitution were intended to define the meaning of the Revolution and the principles on which it was founded. However, as we know well from the present as well as the past, it is easy to interpret these principles in completely different, contradictory ways.

Chapter 6 Quotes

Jefferson's position on political parties, like his stance on slavery, seemed to straddle a rather massive contradiction. In both instances his posture of public probity—slavery should be ended and political parties were evil agents that corrupted republican values—was at odds with his personal behavior and political interest.

Related Characters: Thomas Jefferson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

Once Jefferson became president, he and Adams did not communicate for twelve years. However, when Jefferson's youngest daughter died in childbirth, Abigail chose to send him a letter of condolences. Jefferson's misinterpretation of this gesture led to a tense exchange of letters between him and Abigail, who accused him of being a "party man" (meaning that he was overly loyal to, and controlled by, his political party). Jefferson denied this, but, as this passage shows, such a denial was not entirely honest. As Ellis points out in the book, Jefferson hated conflict—including conflict within himself. For this reason, he had a habit of holding two contradictory viewpoints about a particular issue while convincing himself that they were non-contradictory. In many cases this was politically savvy, but it was also, as Abigail's accusations indicate, dishonest and arguably immoral.

For at the highest level of political life in the early republic, relationships remained resolutely personal, dependent on mutual trust, and therefore vulnerable to betrayals whenever the public and private overlapped.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

In Abigail's angry letters to Jefferson, she made two dramatic accusations: first, that Jefferson (despite his claims otherwise) was a "party man," and second, that he had purposefully vilified John Adams. This was an especially terrible crime because Jefferson and Adams had once been such close friends. Here, Ellis suggests that because all the major figures of the Revolutionary era had close personal relationships with each other, it was unsurprising that there were so many difficult friendships, fallings out, and fierce antagonisms. When the intensity of close friendship is combined with the responsibility of running a new country together, it is hardly surprising that so much interpersonal drama unfolded.

❝ The correspondence can be read as an extended conversation between two gods on Mount Olympus because both men were determined to project that impression.

Related Characters: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

Ellis has described the extraordinary correspondence between Jefferson and Adams that lasted from 1812 until their deaths in 1826. The fact that, per Rush's prophecy, the two men died within hours of each other on the fiftieth anniversary of American Independence gives the correspondence extra poignancy. Ellis notes that both Adams and Jefferson seemed aware that their correspondence would be read by generations of future scholars, politicians, and citizens. They basked in their own significant reputations and the enormous legacies they (correctly) anticipated they would have after their deaths. No longer forced to make policy decisions and play the game of electoral politics, they could focus on shaping their legacies and enjoy the thought of the admiration that would surely be bestowed on them for many generations to come.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE: THE GENERATION

The American Revolution seemed "improbable" at the time, but in hindsight it was "inevitable." Many of the figures involved in the Revolution spoke as if they were "actors in a historical drama." Members of the revolutionary generation would claim that, in the words of John Adams, they were "present at the creation." The extraordinary legacy of the Revolution is evident in the many revolutions that followed it, with republican governments replacing monarchies and colonial rule all across the globe. Today, the liberal principles established in the United States during this period hold sway around the world.

The opening passage establishes that the "revolutionary generation" had a somewhat contradictory experience of the Revolution. On one hand, the Revolution seemed unlikely to succeed because there was no historical precedent. On the other, the leaders predicted that their actions would go down in history, suggesting they believed the Revolution would ultimately succeed.

The revolutionary leaders may have spoken confidently, but in reality the values they fought for were still developing during their lifetimes. Military historians have concluded that if British commanders had been more aggressive at the beginning of the Revolution, they would have succeeded in stifling it, and the signers of the **Declaration of Independence** would have been executed for treason. It may have been inevitable that America eventually achieved independence from Britain, but it was not inevitable that this happened in one decisive but "improvisational" moment, rather than gradually. American institutions that survive to this day were created in a "sudden spasm" of creation.

Living in contemporary times, it is easy to take the authority of American political institutions or documents like the Declaration of Independence for granted. We can forget that these things were all created by human beings who had no idea whether or not they would endure in the future. Even though we can never fully dismiss the knowledge we gain from looking at historical events from our present era (that is, looking at events in hindsight), it is important to be aware of how our contemporary perspective can distort how we view the past.

Almost everything that the Revolution achieved was without any global precedent. In particular, no republican government had successfully presided over any territory as large as the thirteen colonies, which were not unified in any real way at the time. Hindsight is useful but "tricky," and it is hard to know how much of it to employ. Ellis argues for a mode of hindsight that allows us to balance the knowledge we gain from our contemporary perspective with an understanding of the perspectives of those who lived during the post-Revolutionary period. He compares this to being "nearsighted and farsighted at the same time."

Ellis' metaphor of being "nearsighted and farsighted at the same time" is an implicit rejection of the cliché that "hindsight is 20/20" (the idea that hindsight shows us the complete, accurate version of an event). Ellis' argument instead emphasizes the limitations of human knowledge. Witnessing events firsthand and looking back at them retrospectively both provide a useful, but inherently limited, perspective. Combining these two perspectives helps make up for those limitations.

Hindsight informs us that the abundance of the American natural landscape was a source of "limitless potential." Meanwhile, the perspective of the revolutionary generation reminds us of a key problem: that the argument in favor of independence from Britain—a critique of centralized, distant authority—could also be used to undermine the new republican government of the United States of America. Although American's long-term potential was indeed "limitless," on a more immediate level the scale of the republic, along with its internal conflicts, made it seem likely that the nation would split into a number of different "state or regional sovereignties."

Here Ellis introduces another important contradiction. Part of the "American dream" lies in the ability to start fresh, taking advantage of resources in order to flourish. However, starting fresh can be a daunting task—particularly in a situation as extreme as the one the Founding Fathers faced. In creating a new country, they had to balance their desire to overturn the old system with their ability to learn from history and make prudent choices to ensure future success.

History didn't turn out this way thanks to the work of the handful of political leaders who drafted the Constitutional Convention in 1787. While the Constitution can certainly be viewed in a critical light, it is also true that Convention was a "miracle" in that it managed to solve problems that seemed entirely unsolvable. The Constitution managed to create a federal government that stayed true to the republican values outlined in 1776. 1787 was thus another "Founding Moment" of the nation, inaugurating a "second phase" of the Revolution.

Throughout the book, Ellis returns to the tension between 1776 and 1787 as the two most important "founding moments" in American history. Whereas the Declaration of Independence was a decisive, visionary moment, the Constitutional Convention involved the much trickier process of negotiating conflict in order to reach a compromise.

The atmosphere surrounding the Constitutional Convention was one of uncertainty. Many compromises were made in order to appease opposing interests, and some issues were approached in a deliberately vague way to avoid further conflict. At the time, the word "American"—like the word "democrat"—was used as an insult. In 1789, the newly elected federal government met in New York City to discuss the future of the republic. Helpfully, it had essentially been decided that George Washington would serve as the "first chief executive." However, there remained many difficult issues to resolve.

As is made clear throughout the book, some of the problems facing the revolutionary generation are not that different from issues that arise in the US today (for example, the question of balancing federal power against states' rights). On the other hand, the fact that the words "American" and "democrat" were considered slurs at this time shows how different the revolutionary era was from our own.

Again, it was unclear whether it would be possible for a republican government to govern territory as large as the United States, and whether this would violate the principles of the Revolution if such an experiment proved successful. It remained to be seen if a coherent sense of American identity would develop at all. Furthermore, 700,000 of those living in the new American republic were black slaves, most of them in the Chesapeake Colonies and the Deep South.

Ellis emphasizes that the occupation of land and the institution of slavery were challenging in both an ideological and practical sense. Even those who ideologically agreed with expansion and slavery still faced the task of figuring out how these projects would be managed by the government.

The final years of the eighteenth century following the Constitutional Convention were "the most crucial and consequential" decade in American history. Issues ranging from the Civil War to the growth of American imperial domination in the twentieth century all had their origins in this period. People both idolize and vilify the Founding Fathers precisely because we are still "living their legacy."

Ellis' statement that we are still "living their legacy" alludes both to the successes, achievements, and creations of the Founding Fathers as well as their failures. Issues that they were not able to resolve have troubled the country long since the end of the eighteenth century.

Among historians, it has become trendy to avoid focusing on the Founding Fathers and instead tell the story of the revolutionary period by focusing on the lives of ordinary people. Ellis' decision to spotlight the leaders of the time is thus "old-fashioned"; however, he insists that these leaders were unquestionably the most important figures of the era. American institutions that still exist today were built by these leaders, all of whom had close—if tumultuous—personal relationships with one another.

Here Ellis outlines an important aspect of his book's contribution to our understanding of American history. While it is certainly important to understand the lives of ordinary people in history, Ellis believes that in order to understanding the founding of America, we must look to the leaders of the revolutionary moment.

These figures were all white, and essentially all were men. On the other hand, all of them would have been prohibited by the class system from rising to political prominence in England. In this sense, they were very American—"America's first and, in many respects, its only natural aristocracy." One school of thought interprets the Revolution as a radical assertion of liberty against European corruption, which was then corrupted by the Federalists (especially Alexander Hamilton). A different school highlights the origins of the Revolution further back, and proposes that its main principle was "collectivist rather than individualistic" action in service of the nation as a whole.

Here Ellis shows how present-day political divisions are connected to the ideological divide that existed in the revolutionary generation. Although the Federalist Party no longer exists, contemporary historians who believe strongly in states' rights and reducing federal power are likely to adopt the stance that the Federalists corrupted the legacy of the Revolution, just as the Republicans of the era believed.

The different interpretations that exist in the present reflect the debates that raged at the time. Ultimately, both sides "have legitimate claims on historical truth" and both reflect the values of the Revolution. One of the most important legacies of the Revolution was harnessing the energy of disagreement and turning it toward productive ends. This means that "the United States is founded on a contradiction," and that we should accept this. It is important to see that relations among the revolutionary generation were *not* harmonious, but rather "a decade-long shouting match."

Ellis does not explicitly endorse a particular political position or ideological interpretation of the Revolutionary era. Instead, he emphasizes how important conflict, compromise, and collaboration were to the founding of the American republic. In doing so, he emphasizes the importance of diverse political positions operating side by side—even when this causes conflict.

Founding Brothers focuses on the "eight most prominent political leaders" of the time: Abigail and John Adams, Aaron Burr, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington. The book focuses on a series of episodes that illustrate the characteristics of the revolutionary generation, and overall highlights four themes: the Founding Fathers' achievements was a "collective enterprise," their political relations were also highly personal, they took the most challenging issue, slavery, "off the agenda," and the revolutionary generation was aware that they were "making history" and behaved accordingly, with consideration to their own legacies.

Founding Brothers *is full of detailed observation and intricate historical evidence. Yet the overall argument Ellis makes is fairly straightforward, as this passage shows. Each of the four themes are distinct yet related to one another, and ultimately build a coherent picture of the revolutionary generation, including their aims, achievements, strengths, limitations, and failures.*

The episodes in *Founding Brothers* are in chronological order, except for the first one, which portrays the fatal duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton. This appears first in the book because it introduces the themes of the book well. It is also the only instance in which a disagreement among the Founding Fathers led to violence, in part due to the fact that Burr is the "odd man out" among the revolutionary generation. The end of the chapter sets the scene of the duel: a "hot summer morning in 1804," as Burr and Hamilton separately row across the Hudson River to their meeting point.

Here, Ellis suggests that the duel between Hamilton and Burr is both representative and exceptional. It encapsulates the four themes of the book outlined in the passage above, yet is unusual due to the fact that it features violent conflict. In this sense, the duel episode challenges Ellis' point that conflict is productive. While this may be true in some cases, at other times conflict leads to violent destruction.

CHAPTER 1: THE DUEL

A basic summary of the duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton states that both men shot each other, and that Hamilton was fatally wounded, dying the following day. Burr survived, but his political career and reputation did not. However, this does not capture the full story, which should be elaborated considering it is the most famous duel in American history.

Part of the job of historians is to challenge accepted versions of historical events, which can be misleading, oversimplified, or inaccurate. In this case, the accepted version is factually correct, but it does not convey all of the details and nuances of the duel, thus leaving readers with an incomplete picture of the event.

Aaron Burr left his home in Manhattan at dawn on July 11, 1804, having slept in his clothes. His "devoted disciple and protégé, William Van Ness, accompanied him to the duel. Alexander Hamilton, meanwhile, was accompanied by his doctor along with his "loyal associate," Nathaniel Pendleton. Hamilton's military rank, inspector general of the New Army, was higher than Burr's. He was 49 years old, one year older than Burr. The two men had opposite coloring (Burr dark and Hamilton fair) and opposite personalities, with Burr subdued and Hamilton vivacious. Where Burr had an aristocratic heritage, Hamilton was an illegitimate child with "impoverished origins."

This passage emphasizes Burr and Hamilton's similarities as well as their differences. They are virtually the same age, both military men, and—although this isn't explicitly specified—both members of the revolutionary generation. The fact that they both bring a "protégé" with them points to the fact that they are, at this point, of an older generation who will soon give way to new, younger leaders.

Hamilton was born on Nevis, an island in the West Indies. He approached political problems as "personal challenges," and the fact that he chose to accept Burr's invitation to the duel was characteristic of his eagerness to accept challenges. On the evening of July 10, Hamilton drafted his will and noted that he did not harbor any resentment toward Burr. He saw their dispute as purely political and wrote that he intended to "throw away" his first shot, hoping to give Burr a chance to reflect.

Although Ellis asserts that Hamilton saw his disagreement with Burr as purely political, the personal and political factors are clearly difficult to separate here. This is in part due to the fact that Hamilton treated political problems as "personal challenges," and also because the revolutionary generation all had close interpersonal relationships with each other.

Burr arrived at the "narrow ledge" where the duel was to take place around 7:00 in the morning, followed shortly after by Hamilton. Dueling was illegal in New York, so the event had to be called an "interview," and the oarsmen and doctor had to turn their backs so as not to witness it. The duelers used a pair of "custom-made" pistols belonging to Hamilton's brother-in-law, which contained a hair-trigger device that meant only one pound of pressure was needed to shoot. Hamilton chose not to use the hair-trigger, meaning that, as was common at the time, neither participant was likely to be seriously injured in the duel.

Based on these details, it is difficult to assess how seriously either participant took the duel and what they expected to come of it. Hamilton's decision not to use the hair-trigger device on his pistol suggests that his participation in the duel was really just for show, and that he didn't intend to harm Burr in any way. At the same time, the fact that both men went to such lengths to engage in an act that was actually illegal suggests they did take it seriously.

Hamilton was allowed to choose which position to stand in and chose a poor one, in the sun's glare. At the last minute, Hamilton put his glasses on, which—contrary to his own claim—seems to suggest he wanted to hit Burr. What happened next is unclear, and will be explored in detail later in the chapter. Two shots were fired, one striking Hamilton in the side, penetrating his liver. He told his doctor that he was fatally injured before falling unconscious. Burr appeared to immediately be filled with regret, though Van Ness hurried him away in order to avoid legal trouble, refusing to let him speak to Hamilton.

This passage shows that what was apparently supposed to be. a harmless, inconsequential event mysteriously turned into something serious and fatal. Burr's regret and desire to speak to Hamilton after shooting him suggests either that he didn't actually intend to harm Hamilton, or that he did intend to shoot him but immediately realized that it was a mistake.

As Hamilton was being taken home, he advised those around him to be careful with his pistol, claiming it was "still cocked." This suggests he didn't realize that he even fired a shot at Burr. He died the following afternoon, surrounded by his wife, children, and the Episcopal bishop of New York. His funeral was "an extravaganza of mourning" attended by enormous numbers of the country's elite. Burr was vilified in the media; he was so ashamed he fled to Georgia, while Hamilton was memorialized as a martyr.

While on the surface Hamilton obviously lost the duel and suffered the greatest consequences, in truth neither man emerged victorious. Furthermore, from the perspective of history and legacy, Hamilton's tragic death made him seem even more like a hero.

Following the duel, the two witnesses—Pendleton and Van Ness—initially published a "Joint Statement" asserting that the proper rules of dueling were followed (even though the whole thing was illegal). Pendleton and Van Ness agreed that both Burr and Hamilton fired their weapons, and that a few seconds passed between the shots. Yet according to the "Hamiltonian" version of the story, the shots must have occurred almost at the same time, as this version held that Burr's initial shot caused Hamilton to fire back involuntarily as he was hit by the bullet.

Pendleton and Van Ness' initial "Joint Statement" suggests that they originally wanted to put any conflict and antagonism that existed between their mentors behind them. For a moment, it seemed that those involved in the duel had learned their lesson from the tragic, deadly turn of events. Yet sadly this reconciliation did not last long.

Van Ness confidently testified that Hamilton shot first, and that it seemed as if Burr was hit, when in fact, Burr had only sprained his ankle on a rock. Yet this does not align with Hamilton's own assertion that he did not fire (and did not intend to). Also, those returning to the site found a branch that had fallen to the side of Burr, suggesting that Hamilton had shot the branch, intentionally missing Burr. Ultimately, both the pro-Burr side and the pro-Hamilton side likely twisted the truth in order to make the man they supported seem more honorable and less guilty.

In his initial description of the duel, Ellis emphasizes that the actual moment at which both men fired happened so quickly that it is impossible to know exactly what happened. Although the witness testimonies and site of the duel were both carefully scrutinized, the truth of what happened in those brief moments is lost forever.

Ellis' own interpretation is that Hamilton fired his gun on purpose and did so first, aiming to miss Burr. Burr, not knowing that this miss was intentional, was "perfectly justified" in shooting Hamilton with intent to kill. We can never know whether this was actually Burr's plan, but it is true that he had "nothing to gain and everything to lose" from killing Hamilton, and details of the event suggest that Burr did not seek to seriously hurt his opponent. On the other hand, his hatred for Hamilton might have suddenly led him to act rashly. We will never know what was going on in his mind.

Not only is it impossible to know what occurred in the minds of Hamilton and Burr during the duel, it is possible that even these men themselves were not aware of their own reasoning in the quick, fateful moment in which they fired their shots. They may have approached the duel with a certain plan in mind, but their actions in the moment could have been based on sudden indecision, reflex, or a surge of emotion.

Stepping back, what led Burr to challenge Hamilton to the duel in the first place? The two men had a long history of mutual hostility and hatred. While Burr was running for governor of New York in February 1803, Hamilton publicly expressed his low opinion of Burr's qualifications. In June 1804, Burr confronted him about this. Instead of apologizing, Hamilton refused to confirm or deny what he had said, and gave Burr a patronizing lecture about language and meaning. Burr eventually wrote to demand that Hamilton publicly disavow all the "derogatory" statements he'd made about him.

Up until this point, Ellis has depicted Hamilton and Burr as two well-intentioned, reasonable men who committed a serious mistake in engaging in a duel. However, this passage suggests that both men were more hostile, egotistic, and petty than they might initially seem. Their political ambitions and pride led them to feel threatened and resentful of one another, revealing that their rivalry was both political and personal.

Pendleton got involved, and encouraged Hamilton to make an apology in which Hamilton clarified that all of his criticisms were of a political, rather than personal nature. This should theoretically have ended the dispute, but instead further enraged Burr. Speaking on behalf of Burr, Van Ness demanded a full and unequivocal apology. After Hamilton once again refused to comply, Burr got so frustrated that he invited him to the duel. Following this invitation, both men made arrangements for the event that the duel should end in their death.

Again, confusion between the personal and the political dramatically raised the stakes of the conflict between Burr and Hamilton. Hamilton seemed to think he could use the distinction between the personal and political in order to avoid responsibility for undermining Burr. For Burr, the conflation of these two spheres made him take his political conflict with Hamilton personally.

At the 1804 Independence Day dinner held by the Society of Cincinnati, Hamilton and Burr sat at the same table. While Burr was gloomy and quiet, Hamilton was jolly, and sang a military song whose lyrics eerily foreshadowed his imminent death. The day before, Hamilton had held a dinner party and invited Thomas Jefferson's personal secretary, as well as the daughter and son-in-law of John Adams and Abigail Adams. Jefferson and Adams were both political rivals of Hamilton's, so this dinner suggests Hamilton was demonstrating his ability to put aside political differences. During this time, Hamilton also produced a piece of writing for his eldest son about the dangers of having too many enemies.

Hamilton's behavior suggests that while Burr's duel invitation may have prompted him to reflect on the dangers of having enemies, this reflection was not particularly serious. His joyous singing and desire to show off his ability to have friends across political difference suggests that he remained confident and somewhat unrepentant about his behavior.

Hamilton likely didn't think he was going to die in the duel, but the invitation nonetheless made him pause and reflect. However, he stood by what he had said about Burr, which is why he refused to apologize. The consequence of the duel was that Hamilton came to be seen as "a martyr to the dying cause of Federalism," and Burr was vilified. A new crackdown on dueling in the North also followed. The Burr-Hamilton duel is remarkable in part because it was the exception to the otherwise peaceful post-Revolutionary moment. Across history, revolutions usually end in leaders violently turning on each other. The only time this happened in the American Revolution was the duel.

The events of 1776 were closely followed by two other major revolutions: the French Revolution and the Haitian Revolution. Both of these involved significant violence. As Ellis has established, the American Revolution and its aftermath were not without conflict. So why did this conflict almost never turn violent? This is one of the questions under investigation in the book.

Hamilton and Burr had been undermining one another's political ambitions since 1789. Yet Burr was not even Hamilton's main political enemy—Thomas Jefferson was (followed closely by John Adams). Yet Hamilton's criticisms of Burr were nonetheless exceptionally harsh. He claimed that Burr was "unprincipaled, both as a public and private man" and that he only cared about advancing his own career. He declared that Burr was "beyond redemption," comparing him to Caitiline, a notorious figure whose wicked betrayal "nearly destroyed the Roman Republic."

This passage demonstrates that Hamilton had a flair for drama. Despite his late-in-life expression of regret over having so many enemies, his list of powerful nemeses suggests that on some level he enjoyed maintaining hostile relations with political opponents.

It is hard to know if Hamilton's accusations were justified, as Burr had a habit of giving vague answers and destroying his own correspondence. Burr was enormously skilled at maneuvering disputes without choosing a side, and was adamantly non-partisan. He would only ever pick the side that offered him "the bigger tribute." When Burr learned that the Republicans planned to drop him as the vice presidential candidate during Jefferson's run, he ran for governor as a Federalist, which was the incident that led Hamilton to call him unprincipled. Yet a group of Federalists actually recruited Burr as part of their plan for northern states seceding from the rest of the nation (a plan Hamilton opposed).

Hamilton and Burr represent two extremes, and comparing them suggests that it is best to be neither too rigid in one's principles nor too adaptable. While flexibility and non-partisanship can be a positive thing in politics, Burr's trajectory suggests that this can veer too far into self-interest. Meanwhile, as we have seen, Hamilton's intensely partisan nature led him to have many enemies.

There were some similarities between Hamilton and Burr's personalities, insofar as they were both talented, energetic, and ambitious. In fact, Hamilton's fear was that Burr's talent would be put to use in a way that would endanger the republic. In this sense, it is true that Hamilton did not attack Burr's personality traits (such as his overspending and womanizing)—it *was* Burr's politics than Hamilton worried about.

Here, Ellis suggests that it is possible but difficult to make any clear distinction between the personal and political in the context of Hamilton and Burr's rivalry, as there is a great overlap between those two spheres.

Hamilton's reaction to Burr may have seemed paranoid and extreme, but that is because we, unlike Hamilton, know the United States survived and flourished after this period. Both Burr and Hamilton knew that they were part of a remarkable generation. Yet by 1804, both of their political careers were behind them. Their duel was "a dramatic final statement" about the era in which they lived. Soon the United States would develop institutions robust enough to override human corruption, trickery, and clumsiness. Yet for now "it still required honorable and virtuous leaders to endure."

Again, Ellis emphasizes the importance of viewing events in their proper historical context in order to understand why the figures of the time behaved as they did. We should not judge Hamilton's behavior from our own contemporary perspective, but rather seek to understand Hamilton's own view of the world around him before reaching conclusions about whether his treatment of Burr was reasonable.

CHAPTER 2: THE DINNER

In June 1790, Thomas Jefferson ran into Alexander Hamilton by chance outside George Washington's office. Jefferson wrote that he remembered Hamilton looking "dejected beyond comparison," and that Hamilton told him that the financial plan he'd given to Congress in January was stuck in a gridlock. Hamilton felt that he had to resign, and that the whole nation would surely collapse thereafter. Jefferson offered to help by hosting a dinner party where key figures could hash out their views on the financial plan in private. Jefferson's account of the dinner party is the only one that survives today.

Although this chapter has taken us back in time fifteen years, the themes introduced in the first chapter are just as relevant. The difficult balance of conflict and compromise, the close proximity of the personal and the political, and fears over the future of the young and fragile republic are all apparent in this description of the scene outside Washington's office.

According to Jefferson, at the dinner James Madison agreed that Hamilton's proposal regarding the assumption of the state debts should be brought to the House again, with an amendment to appease the South: that the nation's **capital** be placed on the Potomac River. If this decision was truly reached at the dinner, then it could rightly be lauded as "The Compromise of 1790." Historians tend to agree that Jefferson's version of the story is basically true, as Hamilton and Madison did indeed meet at Jefferson's home in June 1790, and the agreements they supposedly made there were put into effect shortly after.

Historians generally require as much evidence as possible in order to verify the truth of historical events. The fact that only Jefferson's account of the dinner party survives makes it difficult to make any definitive conclusions about what happened. At the same time, the context surrounding the dinner can help us to make educated guesses about what transpired.

On the day the deal was made, Jefferson wrote to James Monroe, his "loyal Virginian disciple," explaining the necessity of the compromise. Monroe responded that the bargain was terrible, as Virginians cared far more about assumption than they did the **capital**'s location. Two years later, Jefferson admitted to Washington that the deal had been "the greatest political mistake of his life." The fact that Jefferson came to regret the bargain makes his account of the dinner party seem more believable, as it would be strange to make up a story that put himself in a bad light.

Another way we can assess the validity of historical evidence is by thinking about the incentives of those who created the evidence, as Ellis does here. Like all the members of the revolutionary generation (and most people in general), Jefferson was concerned about his reputation. The likelihood of him fabricating evidence that he facilitated a deal he later considered to be a mistake is very small.

While Jefferson's account is thus likely true, it is only partial, as other meetings and discussions about the future of the nation were happening simultaneously. What is clear is that leaders at the time were nervous about the fate of the republic, feared that assumption was "threatening," and that the Potomac was a highly meaningful location for the **capital**. Why? Different leaders would have given very different answers to this question.

Assumption involved the federal government "assuming" outlying state debts. It required the introduction of increased taxation and gave more authority and power to the federal government, which is why several leaders opposed it.

Ellis begins by focusing on James Madison, who at the time was 39 years old, the "favored son of Virginia," and an exceptionally skilled politician. His contribution to organizing the Constitutional Convention earned him the nickname "Father of the Constitution." Following this, he co-wrote *The Federalist Papers* with Alexander Hamilton. After further political victories, he drafted the Bill of Rights and successfully passed it in Congress. As a result, Madison was "at the peak of his powers" in 1790.

Ellis' quick sketch of James Madison's biography illustrates the staggering number and range of achievements for which the Founding Fathers could claim responsibility. Both collectively and as individuals, the Founding Fathers did extraordinary work.

This was not obvious from Madison's looks: he was small and weak, and (wrongly) predicted that he would die young. He was also shy, with none of the public speaking skills that many of the other Founding Fathers possessed. However, his quiet gentleness actually worked in his favor, as it gave the impression that his arguments were serious and thoughtful, rather than brash. Madison is often thought of as Jefferson's "loyal lieutenant," however his shyness arguably made him seem more subservient to Jefferson than was actually the case.

Here, Ellis demonstrates how personal qualities (such as physical weakness and shyness) can obscure the vision and power of political leaders. Rather than arguing that Madison's personal characteristics had no effect on his political career, Ellis shows how they worked in surprising ways to influence how Madison operated as a political figure and how he interacted with his fellow Founding Fathers.

In 1790, the truly "great collaboration" was between Madison and Hamilton following their work together on *The Federalist Papers*. At this moment in time, Jefferson and Madison's political views were not in fact closely aligned. However, in the leadup to Jefferson's dinner, Madison switched from believing in nationalism to "the old revolutionary faith of Virginia." He had become concerned by Hamilton's proposed method for the recovery of public credit, and gave a long speech in the House of Representatives framing it as a betrayal of the Revolution.

Throughout the book, there are many examples of the Founding Fathers changing their minds, switching allegiances, and even undoing their own previous work. Yet as the case of Madison shows, this does not necessarily indicate a lack of principles. Madison was an ardent believer in his principles, yet these beliefs shifted over time.

The House voted against Madison's suggestion of an alternative plan, which was his first legislative failure after so much success. After, there was a debate about assumption. Hamilton's plan was to have the federal government take on state debts; Madison criticized this plan for being an overly simplistic solution to a complex problem. Because most southern states had already paid off most of their debt, Madison argued that the plan was unfair. Beyond his economic objections, however, Madison was also concerned by how much power this plan would give the federal government.

This passage shows that ideological and practical (in this case, economic) issues are always inextricably tied together. Sometimes, making the argument that a particular policy is implausible is easier or more persuasive than taking an ideological stand against it. However, the book shows that ideological debates were also a big feature of the political culture of the time.

The assumption debate became increasingly heated, with Madison as a calm presence in the midst of the warring sides. Virginians were horrified by the idea that the states would be consolidated into the federal government, a fear that echoed previous objections to the distant, arbitrary power of the British Imperial government. While Madison shared these fears, he encouraged those around him to remain calm, patient, and rational. He reminded his fellow Virginians that the state's interests would be defended by Washington, Jefferson, Edmund Randolph, and himself. He was certain that "assumption would never pass."

Throughout the book, there are many examples of figures having an outlandish reaction to politics. As Ellis argued in the previous chapter, this is because no one knew if the republic would survive or what its future would be—the stakes were unimaginably high. While the behavior of some figures may to us look like needless hysteria, we must remember that they were fighting for the future of the country, which was completely unknown.

Hamilton, meanwhile, was headstrong, determined, and hyper-productive during this period. He argued that Madison's critiques of his plans were unfounded, irrelevant, and hypocritical—particularly given that not long ago, he and Madison had written *The Federalist Papers* together. Hamilton was shocked that Madison was now arguing that the assumption was a plan designed to undermine the integrity of the states. Instead, he saw it simply as a way to "nationalize the economy for the benefit of all."

Madison's change of heart illustrates the significant extent to which hatred and fear of European-style centralized authority influenced the decisions of American political leaders in this era. Madison's initial support for allocating power to the federal government ended up crumbling due to anxieties that the US would resemble a European monarchy.

Hamilton was not afraid of copying the financial institutions of England in order to stimulate economic growth. Nor was he worried about the centralized concentration of economic power (and didn't seem to understand why others would be). He believed that putting money under the control of a select few was the best way to stimulate the economy, and had faith that the "urban elite" of bankers and businessmen were the future of America. Virginians like Madison and Jefferson were suspicious of this financial class, seeing land ownership as the only true, reliable form of wealth. Many Virginians were also in debt to British bankers, which made them even more suspicious of Hamilton's plan.

This passage shows that while there are continuities between the political culture of the Revolutionary era and the present, there are also major differences. Nowadays, Republicans who support states' rights over federal power are also likely to trust that financial elites will stimulate economic growth in general (referred to as "trickle down" economics). Yet in the late eighteenth century, these positions did not align.

Jefferson, the host and third member of the dinner party, admitted that he didn't understand the issues under discussion as well as Hamilton and Madison did. Jefferson had just returned from five years in France, was dealing with other matters both political and personal, and was suffering from terrible migraines at a time when many other members of the American political elite were also in ill health. At six feet, two inches tall and 47 years old, Jefferson was both much taller and older than Hamilton and Madison, making him "an older brother" figure to the men.

Here, we return to the ways in which personal factors are connected to the political sphere. Jefferson's self-proclaimed limitations in understanding the issue of assumption did not emerge from a lack of skill or information, but rather from personal issues that were preventing Jefferson from fully engaging with the issues at hand.

At the same time, Jefferson's time spent abroad in France meant that he was not properly caught up on the main issues facing the United States in this moment, and his views on the contentious debates of the time were not publicly unknown. He had moved to New York reluctantly, and had a habit of public "reticence." He was not yet recognized as the author of the **Declaration of Independence**, which was at the time viewed as a totally collective effort.

Here, Ellis contrasts the image we have of Jefferson in the present with his public reputation in the eighteenth century. Jefferson is now recognized as one of the most important political figures in American history, but this was not the reputation he enjoyed in the 1790s.

Jefferson had been the governor of Virginia during the Revolutionary War, a role that had ended in disaster. He was reluctant to enter public office after that, but accepted the role of Minister to France in order to get away from the memories of the death of his wife in childbirth. He hated partisanship and was "endlessly polite and accommodating"—hence his eagerness to facilitate a discussion between Hamilton and Madison. Moreover, Jefferson's time abroad made him aware that the United States needed to pay its debts in order to be taken seriously in Europe. This made him less skeptical of assumption than he otherwise might have been.

Here, Ellis paints a picture of Jefferson as a natural arbitrator and collaborator. This challenges the idea that being a great leader means having a singular vision and determination to stick to one's principles. Although Jefferson was hardly unprincipled, he was exceptionally willing to work collaboratively and negotiate compromises, which is part of what made him an extraordinary politician.

In September 1789, Congress was faced with the task of purchasing a hundred square mile-large plot of land to serve as the nation's "seat of government." Yet the question of *where* that land would be—known as the "residency question"—was difficult. It had been agreed that there would first be a temporary location, where the **capital** would exist for ten to twenty years, followed by a permanent location. By March 1790, sixteen sites were under consideration, and it seemed most likely that the capital would be somewhere in Pennsylvania. Madison described the decision of choosing a location as "a labyrinth."

Again, it is easy, in the present, to take for granted that the American capital is located between Virginia and Maryland. The placement of Washington, D.C. in this location feels natural and thus somewhat inevitable. However, at the time there was no consensus over where the capital would be. It could easily have ended up in another location, thereby drastically changing American history.

Madison himself was fighting for a location on the Potomac River. Arguments about which location would be most central were contested from different sides. Because people did not yet know how big the republic would get or in which direction it would stretch, it was hard to know for sure where was most "central." While Madison and other Virginians insisted that the Potomac was an ideal location for the **capital**, boasting of qualities that were either exaggerated or completely mythical, northerners scoffed that they were delusional. In June 1790, Madison concluded it was highly unlikely that the Virginians would get their way.

The size and diversity of the American republic—even in 1790, before it had expanded to the full territory it occupies today—means that it has never really had a "center." Different people from different parts of the nation would locate the center in very different places, which is part of what made choosing a location for the capital so difficult.

Jefferson's dinner was surely not the only secret political meeting held during the spring and summer of 1790. There were likely many others, only some of which have been recorded in history. The most significant of these was a meeting on June 15, during which it was agreed that Philadelphia would be the temporary **capital** and the Potomac location the permanent one. (The Pennsylvanians probably agreed to this on the assumption that the capital would never actually move.) Jefferson's dinner was thus not a singular occasion, but rather "the final chapter in an ongoing negotiation."

While history is sometimes told as a series of major, world-altering events, in reality these events usually come after a long accumulation of smaller, similar moments. Ellis argues that this is true of Jefferson's famous dinner party, which—although it was likely a very pivotal moment—was not alone in altering the course of American history through negotiating the placement of the capital.

Jefferson's description of his dinner party leaves out these other negotiations, making his own dinner seem more fateful and important. Likely the most important thing decided that evening concerned the recalculation of Virginia's debt. Madison achieved his goal of "settlement before assumption," though it is likely that Hamilton had always planned to adjust the amount of Virginia's debt in order to win over Virginians. In the end, the amount of debt assumed and federal taxes Virginia owed was worked out to be the same, 3.5 million dollars, such that they cancelled each other out. The Potomac site was an added bonus.

There are many occasions in the book during which Virginia is shown to exercise outsize influence on American political culture, with the interests of the state being prioritized over others. While the political culture of the Revolutionary era may have been defined by collaboration, this does not mean that every party and player had an equal voice.

The time following the dinner was challenging. People were surprised by the Potomac decision, and many were furious. Jefferson and Madison ensured that the "residency question" would never be raised in Congress, where it would be debated to death. This required handing the decision over to Washington. Jefferson and Madison traveled to Maryland and Virginia, surveying the area and sending a report back to the president. Washington made the final decision in January 1791. He knew it would be controversial, and perhaps named the **capital**'s main street Pennsylvania Avenue in order to appease disappointed Pennsylvanians.

This passage serves as a reminder that a political crisis isn't solved as soon as a decision is reached. Rather, after a decision occurs, leaders must work to ensure that their progress is not undone by further outrage and conflict. Jefferson and Madison's decision not to bring up the residency question in Congress, meanwhile, suggests that some decisions cannot be made by consensus, but must be entrusted to a few individuals.

At the same time, a group of antifederalists built a vicious opposition to assumption, claiming that the proposal violated Virginia's independence and made agriculture subordinate to business. It was clear that there was a threat of secession. Hamilton confided in John Jay about his fears of the republic breaking apart, but did not speak to Madison as Madison's loyalties were now uncertain.

During the Revolutionary era, allegiances were constantly shifting. Sworn allies turned into enemies very quickly, despite the fact that the leaders of the time were in some ways all a close "band of brothers."

Looking back, it is obvious that the Compromise of 1790 temporarily dodged a major crisis, but that the fundamental issues at hand were not resolved. Before the Revolution, America's leaders had been united against a common enemy. Now that the Revolution had been successfully executed, differences between the leaders came into focus in a rather dramatic way. Jefferson and Madison's efforts meant that Virginia continued to have an outsize role in the ongoing discussions about the nation's future.

One advantage of hindsight is its ability to show us whether a problem was only temporarily or permanently solved. In the present, a solution can appear solid and conclusive, but sometimes this belies enduring issues that remain unresolved and that will surface again in future conflicts.

For many years, **Washington, D.C.** was "not really a city at all," which symbolized the difference between the American government and European political regimes. Banks and other business institutions were located in Philadelphia, New York City, and other places, which meant that business and government were separated. On a personal level, the compromise meant that Jefferson and Madison were working together again after five years. Together, they responded to Hamilton's fiscal program by taking control of the federal government (rather than abandoning it).

The end of this chapter points to a source of irony within the Republican position. In order to champion the cause of decreasing federal power, Republicans must exercise federal power. This contradiction surfaces again and again in the book as the leaders of the era negotiate this careful balance.

CHAPTER 3: THE SILENCE

In February 1790, two Quaker delegations presented petitions to the House demanding that the federal government immediately abolish the slave trade. Many representatives found this "interruption" ludicrous, refusing to believe the government should take the question of abolition seriously. They dismissed the Quakers as anti-patriotic pacifists. In any case, the Constitution contained a stipulation preventing Congress from restricting the slave trade in any way until 1808. Nevertheless, certain congressmen expressed fears about the Quakers' demand, suggesting that a desire for the total abolition of slavery would surely follow.

The beginning of this chapter introduces another paradox. The reaction to the Quaker interruption was generally hostile. Many congressmen did not want to consider restricting the slave trade, and there was even a clause technically making that impossible until 1808. Yet many representatives were still greatly disturbed by the Quaker intrusion, despite the fact that it was caused by a relatively powerless minority.

Madison reassured his colleagues, saying that the Quakers' petition would be reviewed by the committee but only "as a matter of course." He advised the best thing to do was stay calm and the whole matter would go away, as no congressman would seriously entertain the idea of restricting the slave trade. However, the next day the Pennsylvania Abolition Society sent yet another petition to Congress, this time advocating abolition. The petition argued that slavery violated the values of the American Revolution and challenged the constitutional ban on restricting the slave trade. It was signed by Benjamin Franklin.

Madison's reaction is typical of a figure who trusts the processes of government, believing that they form a natural barrier to extremes. Regardless of whether such a position is ethical, this passage suggests that it might also be inaccurate. Simply letting the petitions fizzle out by submitting them through official processes seemed less plausible after it was revealed that Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers, was supporting them.

Franklin's support meant that Madison was wrong; the problem would not go away simply by ignoring it. Instead, the House spent four to six hours debating the petitions. Never before had this issue received such treatment on a national level; discussions of how slavery was to be handled usually occurred either in secret or within a firmly local context. Several congressmen insisted that the discussion was paving the way for civil war. Representatives from the Deep South implied that the Constitution prevented slavery from even being *discussed* in Congress, let alone altered or abolished.

For a variety of reasons, slavery was a taboo subject in Congress at this time. Northerners, who mostly considered slavery an "evil" yet who were concerned about restricting or abolishing it, refused to talk about it out of anxiety and shame. Most representatives from the Deep South support the continuation and expansion of slavery, and didn't want to discuss it because they worried this would lead to abolition.

The petitioners suggested that the Constitution limited Congress' ability to end the slave *trade*, but not slavery itself. James Jackson of Georgia replied with a long "sermon" filled with religious justifications for slavery. Another Georgia congressman, William Loughton Smith, chimed in with a pro-slavery argument based on economics and white supremacy. He then emphasized that the Constitution forbade Congress from taking action to curtail slavery. Some northern representatives disagreed that the Bible or the Constitution supported slavery, while conceding that slavery could be "tolerated" for the moment because it certainly would eventually be abolished.

This passage demonstrates that slavery carried very different meanings for different people. There were social, economic, political, religious, and practical issues to consider, and different figures tended to emphasize different aspects of the institution in their discussion. It is notable that outside of the abolitionists, few representatives framed slavery as a major human rights violation or institution of extreme injustice or brutality that needed urgent attention.

Elbridge Gerry, a representative from Massachusetts, expressed sympathy with slaveholders, whom he saw as having inherited the problem of slavery through no fault of their own. He suggested that the government could buy all living slaves, calculating that this would cost 10 million dollars (in reality, it would have cost significantly more). Instead of raising this money through taxes, he suggested it be obtained through the sale of western land.

Gerry's position represents the perverse thinking that was prevalent at this time regarding slavery. Even those who recognized slavery as a problem often viewed it as a problem for slaveholders, hardly paying attention to the experience of enslaved people themselves.

Virginian representatives were divided on the matter. One warned that the government ought to begin curtailing slavery because if enslaved people knew Congress was refusing any thought of abolition, they would violently rebel. Madison, meanwhile, was adamant that Congress could not act before 1808 but that there was no problem in discussing the issue. In the end, those present voted 43 to 11 to forward the petitions to a committee. Most of the negative votes came from South Carolina and Georgia.

The beginning of this passage reminds us that many of those who supported abolition did not do so for noble or ethical reasons. Rather, they were concerned about the practical issues slavery presented, including the threat of rebellion and the question of where freed slaves should live.

In hindsight, we know that the divide over slavery would not go away, but instead grow so significant that it eventually led to the Civil War. However, those living in 1790 did not know this, and thus based their decisions on the past, trying to figure out what the legacy of the Revolution meant in the context of slavery. The answer tended to change greatly depending on whether one considered 1776 or 1787 to be the most important founding moment in the history of the republic.

The inability to see that slavery would eventually become an enormous threat to the unity of the nation can, in hindsight, seem like willful ignorance. Yet so much about the future of the nation was undetermined at this period that it is unsurprising that many could not predict slavery would eventually tear the country apart.

In Jefferson's first draft of the **Declaration of Independence**, he included a paragraph characterizing slavery as a way in which the evil English monarchy corrupted the innocent project of American settlers. This paragraph was deleted, but the final draft of the Declaration, with its profound statements about human equality and rights, arguably indicated that slavery could not last in the new nation. Indeed, the Declaration could be read as "an unambiguous tract for abolition." During the Revolutionary War, several key figures made efforts to curtail the slave trade and begin freeing enslaved people. However, these gestures ultimately achieved little.

In hindsight, we know that the Declaration of Independence became a key document in the quest for abolition and is still cited today as evidence that the US is dedicated to preserving human rights and equality. Yet at the time, there was a powerful refusal to admit that this is what the document meant. Furthermore, Jefferson's original argument characterizing slavery as corrupting the innocent settlers does not exactly hold up considering that mass murder of Native people was inherent within the settler project.

Right after the war, many northern states abolished slavery. Meanwhile, Jefferson laid out a plan in *Notes on the State of Virginia* for the gradual emancipation of enslaved people in his home state. He also proposed a bill in Congress prohibiting slavery in the western territories, but no one voted in favor of it. At times it seemed like slavery was on the decline, but in fact this was an illusion. Even if slavery contradicted the ideals of the Revolution, it was deeply enmeshed in the realty of America as a nation. Ideas themselves were not enough to fight it.

The end of this passage conveys a key point about the issue of slavery in the early American republic. Slavery may have theoretically been antithetical to the values on which the country was founded, but at the same time it was impossible to imagine the reality of an America without slavery.

During the drafting of the Constitution, the problem of slavery became much more pronounced. Madison observed that the most severe division during this process was between slaveholding and non-slaveholding states. Many northerners demanded an immediate end to the slave trade and plan for gradual emancipation, arguing that slavery was evil and incompatible with the principles of the Revolution. Representatives from the Deep South, meanwhile, argued that slavery was essential to the survival of their states. They demanded support for the expansion of the slave trade and assurance that their "property" rights would not be put in jeopardy.

Those on the proslavery side used both practical and ideological arguments in order to justify their cause. Opponents of slavery, meanwhile, had to rely on ideological arguments alone not only because slavery was immensely profitable, but because abolition would be challenging in practice. The antislavery side was of course in the ideologically and morally superior position, but this often seemed to matter little in the face of pragmatic issues.

Both sides were somewhat disappointed by the final draft of the Constitution, which neither committed to emancipation nor explicitly supported slavery. The document was noncommittal when it came to slavery in order to ensure that it would be ratified. In July 1787, the Confederation Congress passed an act banning slavery in area north of the Ohio River, a move that, on the one hand, suggested slavery would be forbidden in new states, while also suggesting slavery would be allowed to proliferate in the southwestern territories.

Ellis often observes that certain figures or policies were noncommittal or avoidant when it came to slavery. While this is technically true, the fact that this avoidance was taking place while slavery was already being perpetrated meant that it was not neutral, but rather a tacit endorsement of the continuation of slavery.

The most significant compromise achieved by the Constitutional Convention, meanwhile, was a bargain in which New Englanders agreed to support the expansion of the slave trade for twenty years in exchange for making the federal regulation of commerce a majority, rather than supermajority (2/3) vote in Congress. Both sides assumed they had "won," and conflicting opinions remained over whether the end of slavery was inevitable or unimaginable.

This passage shows that to many representatives (and particularly northerners), slavery was simply one political issue among many, and could be used as a bargaining chip. While many leaders at the time may have opposed slavery in theory, in reality they were happy to make compromises which allowed slavery to flourish.

Virginia had the largest populations of both enslaved people and free black people in the country. It was the only southern state where there was a significant level of opposition to slavery and desire for emancipation. At the same time, many Virginians also did not want the federal government to have any control over slavery and its future in the state. The reality was that Virginians had intense economic investment in the continuation of slavery. They may have "talked northern," but they "thought southern."

People sometimes assume that in this period of American history it was so rare to consider slavery morally wrong that it is unsurprising that leaders allowed it to continue. In reality, many people (even in Virginia) claimed to oppose slavery—yet their actions did not align with their stated position.

On March 8 1790, the committee that had reviewed the petitions was ready to submit their report. Representatives from the Deep South objected to hearing the committee's report before they even knew what it contained. Two such representatives, Loughton Smith and James Jackson, launched a tirade attacking the Quakers and defending slavery in strikingly explicit terms. Jackson denied that slavery was "a crime," instead framing it as a "necessary evil." He read passages from the Bible that sanctioned slavery, as well as quotes from *Notes on the State of Virginia* in which Jefferson declared that white and black people would not be able to live alongside one another as free citizens due to mutual resentment and hatred.

This passage demonstrates just how intense and insidious the opposition to abolition was. Jackson's words show that people were able to accept an institution that they believed was "evil"; his distinction between a "necessary evil" and a "crime" highlights a perverse respect for law above morality. The fact that he was able to use Jefferson's own writing to support his proslavery argument reminds us that most white people who supported abolition were nonetheless still deeply racist.

Jackson stoked fears about interracial marriage and asked where a population of freed black people could be forced to settle, arguing that neither locations in Africa nor the American West were plausible. The next day, Smith spoke for two hours, mostly repeating Jackson's arguments. It was the first time that the proslavery argument had been explicitly articulated in Congress. Before this, slavery had been treated as the "unmentionable family secret" by the nation's political leaders.

Looking back on this time from the present, it is hard to assess who had less moral integrity: those who may have theoretically opposed slavery but would not even allow it to be discussed in Congress, or those who supported slavery but at least took the responsibility of owning up to this position.

Another novel factor was the data gathered by the census of 1790, which confirmed that slavery was "flourishing" in the South while steeply declining in the North (with the exception of New York and New Jersey). Meanwhile, the Upper South (Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina) had large populations of both enslaved and free black people. Overall, the number of enslaved people in America was, like the settler population, increasing at a staggering rate. The sheer number of enslaved people meant that gradual emancipation was appearing less and less plausible, and 1790 may have been the last possible moment at which it could have taken place.

While America's political leaders refused to discuss the issue of slavery, preferring to adopt a tactic of willful ignorance, in the meantime thousands of slaves were being forcibly transported to the United States. The decision not to act may look like neutrality, but in fact it served as support for the continuation of the slave trade and the expansion of slavery.

The most persuasive element of the proslavery argument was its focus on the practical difficulties of abolition. The threats of secession that came from South Carolina and Georgia convinced many of those who were otherwise sympathetic to abolition that it would tear the nation apart. In 1790, no one actually presented a plan for emancipation to Congress. Those who advocated gradual emancipation generally agreed that slaveholders would have to be compensated and that most of the freed population would have to be deported, either to African, the American West, or the Caribbean.

Again, even those concerned about the moral dimension of slavery could subsume these concerns if it meant holding the nation together. Slavery could be justified in the name of national unity; indeed, this argument was made right until the point when the end of the Civil War finally extinguished this threat.

Because of this, gradual emancipation was thought to be a highly expensive endeavor, wildly exceeding the federal budget. On the other hand, a gradual emancipation scheme could theoretically mean that the costs of abolition was spread out over many years, rather than hitting the country in one go. Gradual emancipation may have been "daunting," but it was not "fiscally impossible." Yet the issue of relocation remained. Many historians do not discuss this in depth, instead focusing only on the racist ideology that convinced many at the time that relocation was necessary. Yet Ellis insists that without a relocation plan, no emancipation proposal would have had a chance of being passed.

Here, Ellis again stresses that the actions of historical figures should be judged in their proper context. We might now consider relocation as a product of racism, but, according to Ellis, at the time it would have been an absolutely vital component of any plan for emancipation. This strategy is not shared by all historians. Yet regardless of one's personal position, it is clear that many figures at the time used the problem of relocation as a justification for their own inaction on slavery.

In 1790, almost 90 percent of the black population of the US lived south of the Potomac. All of the possible resettlement locations (the West, the Caribbean, Africa) were difficult, and thus relocation was actually a bigger roadblock than compensation. It was extremely unlikely that an emancipation plan would have successfully passed in 1790. At the same time, the achievements of 1776 and 1787 seemed unlikely (even impossible) before they occurred. In both cases, extraordinary leadership was able to overcome these unlikely odds. Yet in 1790 such an act of leadership, while it would have properly fulfilled the values of the revolution, would have torn the country apart.

Here, Ellis arguably undermines his earlier point that it would have been impossible to pass an emancipation proposal without a resettlement plan. It is certainly right to say that such an outcome would be highly unlikely, but as Ellis points out, the American Revolution itself seemed impossible to many—until it actually happened.

In March 1790, Benjamin Franklin was weak and unwell, though had lived so long that he seemed "immortal." He had been present at every major event in the founding of the American republic. Franklin was a truly extraordinary person, in some ways akin to a god on earth, with an incredible knack for being in the right place (and on the right side) at the right time. In 1787, Franklin became president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, having decided to dedicate the final years of his life to abolition. (In the past he had owned a few house slaves and had not given much time to antislavery efforts.)

Like several other Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin was both strongly committed to his principles and unopposed to changing those principles over time. Such flexibility was an important aspect of the political culture of the Revolutionary period, during which everything was in flux, and politicians generally had to be adaptable in order to survive.

Franklin argued that slavery violated the ideals of the revolution, and wrote a scathing parody of Jackson's proslavery speech. Some people reacted to Franklin's arguments by accusing him of having a "senile" moment, while others suggested that Franklin was one of the few voices staying true to revolutionary principles. In hindsight, we can see that Franklin's support for abolition was prophetic, anticipating the change in public opinion about slavery that would eventually take place. Yet in 1790, he stood out among the Founding Fathers, most of whom personally opposed slavery but failed to actively support abolition.

The evolution of Benjamin Franklin's position on slavery shows that it is not necessarily true that people always become more cynical and conservative with age. In many cases, age endows people with experience and knowledge that leads to greater compassion and optimism, rather than the other way around.

Madison's position was representative of many other Virginians. He rejected any explicit proslavery stance and expressed a desire for slavery to end soon. However, he also claimed that he could not fully "embrace" abolition. He called slavery "evil" yet said it would be "improper" to introduce a plan for emancipation in Congress. Essentially, Madison did not have a position on slavery. His most explicit opinion was that the issue should be pushed to the side because it was so controversial and threatening to the republic.

Again, Ellis arguably conflates not having a position on slavery with being willing to tacitly support slavery while publicly claiming to be against it. As Desmond Tutu famously argues, "To be neutral in situations of injustice is to side with the oppressor." Was it really possible for any political figure to be "neutral" about slavery in the late eighteenth century?

While some northern representatives had initially been sympathetic to the Quaker petition, after a while they began claiming that the whole thing had grown out of control. Many sided with those from the Deep South who argued that the committee's report should be tabled. However, Congress voted 29 to 25 to accept the report, which consisted of seven resolutions, each of which appeased a different party. While it included vague references to "justice" and "humanity," overall the report confirmed that Congress was prohibited from curtailing slavery or setting up an emancipation plan until 1808.

Just as fear of authoritarian, monarchical-style government led figures such as Madison to reject the cause of federalism, fear of the consequences of abolition led those who initially sympathized with the petitioners to withdraw their support. In the end, Congress decided to play it safe, which meant sacrificing the lives of the enslaved in order to appease slaveholders and their allies.

Ultimately the report was reduced to only three resolutions, which focused on Congress' inability to interfere with slavery. Washington expressed his relief, writing to a friend that the slavery issue "has at last [been] put to rest." This set a precedent used by future proslavery advocates, who would defer to the 1790 decision even after it technically expired in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Perhaps 1790 would already have been too late to institute gradual emancipation. Yet it is beyond question that when Franklin died on April 17, 1790, the possibility of gradual emancipation died with him.

Setting ideological and moral issues aside, the decision to defer any federal decision-making on slavery until (at least) 1808 had dire practical consequences for the republic, as it helped pave the way for the Civil War. Some might argue that the Civil War was inevitable, and that it is better that it happened in the 1860s than in 1790. Of course, this does not morally justify the continuation of slavery in the intervening period.

CHAPTER 4: THE FAREWELL

George Washington was "a legend in his own time," and was described as "the Father of the Country" as early as 1776. He became president in 1789, at a time when he was the only realistic candidate for the role. After Franklin's death in 1790, Washington was alone at the top of the "Mount Olympus" of American political leadership. At this time, images of his face were already everywhere; he was "the American Zeus, Moses, and Cincinnatus all rolled into one." It thus came as a major shock when, in September 1796, Washington announced that he would not seek a third term as president.

Ellis' description of the Founding Fathers as god-like does not mean that these men were superhuman or without flaws. Rather, it illustrates the extent to which the extraordinary reputation that they enjoy in contemporary times was also present in their own lifetimes. In the midst of all the chaos and turmoil of the Revolutionary era, people trusted figures such as Washington as sources of strength and hope.

It was not long before Washington's Farewell Address became legendary, but when it was first published most people focused on the fact that it simply meant the American people were "now on their own." Those close to Washington had presumed that this announcement was coming for around six months. Madison accurately predicted that the first contested American presidential election would be Thomas Jefferson versus John Adams.

While some of the events of the American Revolution and the period that followed were unforeseeable to those living at the time, this was not always the case. Figures such as Madison were able to accurately predict future political events due to the fact that the Founding Fathers were all closely connected.

Washington had expressed his wish to retire since before his initial election as president. He had always been an energetic, physically imposing presence, particularly due to his height of six feet, four inches. Yet by the late 1780s his usually robust health began to decline, and he craved a more peaceful life. At the same time, there were other reasons why he chose to retire after two terms. During his second term, his detractors became more vocal and vicious in their critiques, and some accused him of turning himself into a "King." This was a major insult as revolutionary principles insisted that all kings were evil.

It is striking that even Washington, who Ellis depicts as being intensely and almost universally beloved, had vicious critics who accused him of being too powerful. Of course, the fact that such criticism existed is perhaps a sign of a healthy democracy—thereby somewhat disproving the critics' point.

Washington's resignation was a response to these criticisms. His Farewell Address was the final message from "America's first and last benevolent monarch." Following the announcement that he would retire at the beginning of the Address, Washington called for unity and neutrality in foreign affairs. Over time, the Address has emerged as a major historical document subject to much analysis, though at the time Washington could have no idea how his points would be interpreted by future generations. In order to properly understand the Farewell Address, it is thus necessary to read it in its original historical context.

By examining historical documents in their proper context, we can fight the problem of the misappropriation of history to questionable political ends. Many people today use the legacy and authority of the Founding Fathers to boost their own political agenda—for example, in arguments for isolationism. Yet isolationism meant something very different in 1790 than it does today.

Washington had always been skilled at knowing when to abdicate positions of power, which made him a trustworthy leader. He also understood that achieving victory in a broad sense often involves losing individual battles. His support for American neutrality emerged from his preference for realism over idealism. He understood that being in the right did not guarantee that one would win a fight. He was also cautious about any form of extremism. For example, he warned that excessive hatred of England could make Americans too trusting of France. Washington's conclusion was that America would only thrive by prioritizing its own interests.

Here, Ellis demonstrates the qualities that made Washington an ideal first president. He was balanced, realistic, pragmatic, and dedicated to putting the US first. Many people would argue that such qualities are what people should seek out in a president today, too. At the same time, the US was a very different place in 1790 than it is now, and occupied a different relation to the rest of the world.

Washington was one of the few members of the revolutionary generation who had never been to Europe. His focus was squarely on the US and on the project of western expansion. As president, his foreign policy was encapsulated by the Proclamation of Neutrality of 1793, in which Washington advised the US to stay out of foreign conflicts for its own sake. In 1794, Washington sent Chief Justice John Jay to London in order to find a way of avoiding war with England. Jay's Treaty (1795) "endorsed a pro-English version of American neutrality," which gave England special privileges and promised that the US would pay its debts.

Washington's isolationist policy must be understood in its historical context. In the 1790s, the US was not even close to being the major world power it is today. It remained heavily in debt, was at risk of further war, and was not (as Jefferson's anxieties reveal) "taken seriously" by Europe. Although Jay's Treaty was a capitulation to England, this was arguably necessary given the US's relative lack of power.

In a sense, Jay's Treaty reversed the Franco-American alliance of 1778. Although the treaty was more favorable to England, it was still recognized at the time as a strategic move for the US. In fact, the treaty ended up being far more beneficial than anyone at the time could realize. Washington tried to keep the treaty's term secret but failed, and found himself harassed by detractors furious about his apparent deference to England. This in turn triggered a constitutional crisis, as Jefferson—who opposed the treaty—claimed that the House had power to veto any treaty.

This passage makes a simple but important point: sometimes policy decisions that are widely criticized and treated as disastrous when they are passed later turn out to be highly advantageous. Only with hindsight can we know the full consequences of a particular historical decision and therefore evaluate it accurately.

Madison, meanwhile, argued that the treaty required approval from the House only for the stipulations that required funding. He hoped that this would block the treaty in a way that didn't undermine Washington's power as president. A fierce debate lasted until the spring of 1796. When Jay's Treaty passed, Jefferson blamed it on the extreme power of Washington's will, which was such that it could outweigh the will of the people. In hindsight, this reaction seems excessive, particularly considering that we know Jay's Treaty ultimately served America's interests.

Jefferson, Madison, and other opponents to Jay's Treaty were clearly expecting it to trigger a massive disaster. In reality, no such crisis transpired, which shows how difficult it can be to predict the consequences of policy decisions. This was particularly true in the early days of the republic, when there was little precedent to which American leaders could turn.

Jefferson was adamant that any capitulation to England was a betrayal of the Revolution. Ever since returning from France in 1790, Jefferson was paranoid about the legacy of the Revolution being corrupted (as was revealed through his opposition to Hamilton's financial plan). His suspicion of urban financial elites turned into a "full-blooded conspiracy theory." Washington did not fit the description of the villain that Jefferson had in mind, and Jefferson instead characterized the president as ignorant of the evil forces surrounding him. This intensified during the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794, during which Washington deployed a militia to attack protestors who he believed were threatening the federal government's authority.

As if often the case with conspiracy theories, Jefferson discounted information that conflicted with his theory. He chose to believe that urban financial elites were corrupting the legacy of the Revolution, and manipulated the evidence in favor of this belief. Of course, this then meant that Jefferson viewed subsequent events with a paranoid mindset instead of giving Washington the benefit of the doubt.

A horrified Jefferson now framed Washington as a man too old and senile to do his job properly. Jefferson's Federalist conspiracy theory began to spread. Although Jefferson agreed with American neutrality, his understanding of this policy was very different from Washington's. Jefferson believed that the ideals of the American Revolution were destined to spread across the globe, and expressed his conviction that the French Revolution would "triumph completely." He even dismissed critiques of the violence of the French Revolution, arguing that such violence was necessary in order to change the global order.

Again, Jefferson was highly committed to his theory, which meant dismissing evidence that contested his beliefs. He decided that the French Revolution was evidence that the values of the American Revolution were spreading around the world. Although there were certainly important ideological connections between the two movements, many Americans were rightly reluctant to believe that the brutality of the French Revolution embodied American values—but not Jefferson.

Jefferson saw England as the "counterrevolutionary villain" in his vision, which was why he was so staunchly opposed to Jay's Treaty. While Jefferson assured Washington that he was not behind the Federalist conspiracy rumors, we know that in fact he was. Washington responded in a way that superficially asserted he believed Jefferson was innocent, but in fact conveyed that he knew the truth. Shortly after this exchange, the men stopped speaking entirely. This was not only a bitter personal divide, but also a significant political one. Washington and Jefferson represented opposite sides concerning the legacy of the Revolution.

As we have seen, some political conflicts between the Founding Fathers remained political only, and didn't ruin the friendship of those involved. In other cases, such as this dispute between Jefferson and Washington, there was no chance of their friendship surviving such an intense and deeply felt ideological split.

Jefferson's protégé James Monroe, the minister to France, promised the French that Jay's Treaty would not pass. He told them to ignore Washington (who would not be president for much longer) gave them permission to retaliate against American ships. Meanwhile, back in the US, Virginian politicians were so swept up by the Federalist conspiracy theory that they similarly "lost all perspective." In writing the Farewell Address, Washington needed to confirm his authority in the midst of this treachery and confusion. He also needed to strike a middle ground between warring sides and to reiterate his own interpretation of the principles of the revolution.

It is quite extraordinary that James Monroe defied Washington in such an extreme fashion, instead following the lead of his mentor, Jefferson. Of course, such betrayal looks even more extreme in the present, at a time of universal, instant global connection. Now, presidents are immediately aware of what their foreign ministers are doing, but in the 1790s it took a long time for news to travel between different countries, and such news was always partial.

The writing of the Farewell Address was a joint effort between Madison, Hamilton, and Washington. Madison had previously assisted Washington in writing a valedictory address in 1792, and it was his idea for the Farewell Address to be published in a newspaper rather than delivered in Congress. Washington was keen to make it clear that his resignation was not a spontaneous decision designed to dodge potential defeat, but rather something he had planned for many years. Following Madison's initial efforts, Hamilton worked on the Address for two months before sending it to Washington.

Washington may have been stepping down, but he was still concerned about preserving his pride, ego, and reputation. He did not want people to think he was an overly powerful "King," but neither did he want them to think that he was simply bowing to political pressure or that he couldn't handle critique.

Washington and Hamilton continued to send drafts back and forth to each other for another month. Hamilton was so skilled at imitating Washington's rhetorical style that, without seeing these drafts, it would be impossible to tell who wrote which part of the final product. Hamilton did carefully edit out moments in which Washington made himself seem weak, flawed, and regretful, thereby ensuring that the Address maintained a dignified tone. They had a disagreement over whether Washington should mention the university that was to be built in the nation's **capital**; Washington wanted to, but Hamilton thought this should be announced later. Eventually Hamilton gave in—yet the university was never built.

This passage illustrates one of the greatest advantages of collaboration. Not only does collaborating with someone else provide another perspective that would be impossible to access alone, but collaboration allows politicians to stop themselves being overly self-critical without giving into ego. It was natural that Washington would feel some regret and embarrassment about his own shortcomings, but working with Hamilton meant these feelings were not exposed to the public.

Despite the criticisms of Washington's detractors, it was necessary for the new American republic to have a "republican king" during its first years of existence. In his final speech to Congress, Washington warned about the coming "quasi war" with France and argued that federal powers would need to be intensified, rather than decreased, after he left office.

Antifederalists wanted to seize the end of Washington's presidency as a chance to reduce federal power—yet Washington himself was in a strong position to argue that such a move would be unwise.

Washington failed to mention slavery in the Farewell Address; as we have seen, such silence was typical of the revolutionary generation. Any mention of slavery would have undermined his advocation of national unity. On a personal level, Washington ensured that all the enslaved people he owned would be freed after the death of himself and his wife. He also arranged for his estate to be sold off in order to support the newly freed people and their families. He was also one of the only Virginians who didn't support a relocation policy in the event of emancipation.

Again, Washington was typical in his contradictory approach to slavery. In the last chapter, Ellis noted that Washington was relieved when the question of emancipation was tabled until 1808, showing that he was happy to personally remain complacent on the issue in service of the unity of the republic. On a personal level, Washington was fairer than other slaveholders, but a slaveholder all the same.

In August 1796, Washington wrote an "Address to the Cherokee Nation" in which he expressed a desire for white and Native people to live harmoniously in one American country. He argued that this would only be possible if Natives stopped opposing the expansion of white colonization, abandoned their traditional way of life, switched to farming, and assimilated into settler culture.

Again, what could be interpreted as a progressive position is actually not very progressive in reality. In hindsight we know that Native people have been assimilated into the US, but at the terrible and unjust price of being forced to abandon their own cultures, faiths, and languages.

The reaction to the Farewell Address was mostly positive. The majority of people lamented Washington's departure and expressed support for his message, while his critics continued to loudly voice their condemnation. Until the end of his life, Washington remained convinced that his convictions were right, even as the tide of opinion in Virginia clashed with his own. Virginians were especially suspicious of the significant role he played overseeing the construction of the **capital** city named after him. Yet Washington was confident they would be proven wrong. He died on December 14, 1799; his final words were: "'Tis well."

One of the characteristics for which Washington is most admired is unwillingness to be swayed by the tide of political opinion. While flexibility is important, self-assuredness and self-reliance are often signs of a healthy ability to reason and rely upon one's own internal moral compass.

CHAPTER 5: THE COLLABORATORS

In 1796, America had its first contested presidential election. It still seemed necessary that the next president would have to be someone who played a key role in 1776 and 1789. The four people who stood out were George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson; because Washington had already served and Franklin was dead, this left the final two. Adams and Jefferson were opposites. Adams was a short, candid, vigorous New Englander who was always talking and loved to argue; Jefferson was tall, elegant, mysterious, and disliked disagreement. Yet despite these differences, the Revolution had made them a unit.

While Ellis unequivocally asserts that conflict was a productive part of political life in the Revolutionary era, not all the Founding Fathers would have agreed with him. As this passage shows, Jefferson and Adams had completely opposing views on this matter. Whereas Adams relished debate, Jefferson was highly disturbed by it.

Jefferson was "an unofficial member of the Adams family," and Abigail Adams commented on the unique relationship between Jefferson and John Adams. While their political differences remained, they were "soulmates," part of the brotherhood joined together by their involvement in 1776. Theirs was "the greatest collaboration" in a time of many great collaborations.

Ellis' almost flamboyant language here speaks to the very special relationship between Jefferson and Adams—one that far exceeded the political realm and was a much deeper, more profound connection.

John Adams was born in Braintree, south of Boston, in 1725. He attended Harvard, which his father—who was a farmer and shoemaker—hoped would help him become a minister. After working as a teacher and apprentice lawyer, Adams married Abigail. His leading role opposing the Stamp Act shot him to prominence, and in the Continental Congress Adams was nicknamed "the Atlas of independence." He played a vital role in setting the Revolution in motion, helped to secure French allegiance, and in the midst of all this wrote the Massachusetts Constitution "almost single-handedly."

While hardly born in poverty like, for example, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams' rise from fairly humble beginnings to Founding Father shows the unique possibility that America and the revolutionary moment provided. Luck, talent, and commitment to the American Revolution allowed Adams to become one of the great political leaders of his era.

John Adams was also key in arranging the postwar peace treaty and securing loans for America from Dutch bankers. He served as the first American minister in England's Court of St. James, and during this time also wrote a three-volume work of political philosophy. Upon his return to America, he was elected as the country's first vice president. He found this post, despite its superficial prestige, to be frustratingly insignificant. Adams was extremely close to power but personally had almost no power at all. He found this particularly infuriating considering how important he had been during the Revolution.

Adams may have had a sensitive ego, but serving as George Washington's second-in-command is also not a job that anyone who wishes to exert influence or authority would likely enjoy. Washington was a man of singular vision and power, and thus the position of vice president rendered Adams fairly impotent.

John Adams loyally supported all of Washington's key initiatives, but was privately perturbed by the fact that he was never consulted about them. He was further humiliated by an incident in which the Senate discussed how members of Congress should address the president. Adams suggested "His Majesty" or "His Highness," assuming no one would question his "revolutionary credentials." However, those present—including Jefferson—viciously mocked him. His subsequent writing about the monarchy intensified people's suspicions that he was secretly a monarchist.

The incident of Adams being mocked and accused of being a monarchist conveys an important lesson about reputation. Adams assumed that no one could doubt his commitment to the anti-monarchical cause considering the role he played in the Revolution. However, he was ultimately judged by his actions in the present, not by his behavior in the past.

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson first fell out when Jefferson wrote a blurb for *The Rights of Man* which mentioned "the political heresies" of the *Davila* essays that Adams penned. Adams was furious, but after Jefferson assured him that their friendship was above political differences, Adams agreed. Despite being on opposite sides of the Federalist/Republican rift, the two remained cordial, although Adams privately admitted to Abigail that their friendship was barely surviving.

This passage makes clear that the origins of Adams and Jefferson's fallout was squarely political. They found themselves on opposite sides of an ideological disagreement, and although they theoretically remained friends, in reality it was difficult for them to do so. At the same time, at this point their conflict did not yet have a strong personal element.

In the end, Jefferson's support for the now brutally violent French Revolution led John Adams to deem him a dangerous idealist. When Jefferson resigned from his role as Secretary of State in 1793, Adams told Abigail that Jefferson's mind was "poisoned" and predicted that his retirement would not last long. He suspected that Jefferson was eyeing the presidency.

Adams' opinion about Jefferson's idealism may have been subjective, but his prophecy about the presidency was correct. Here, the competitive aspect of their conflict becomes more apparent.

Jefferson also had a close relationship with Madison, who tended to behave in a subordinate way to the older and more experienced Jefferson. The two had none of the clashes of Jefferson's collaboration with John Adams. When Jefferson retired to Monticello in 1794, Madison sent him letters keeping him abreast of the political drama in Philadelphia. Even long after everyone knew that Jefferson was going to run for president, he claimed to have no idea that a campaign supporting him existed. Meanwhile, now that Jefferson and Adams' friendship had become tense, Abigail was Adams' closest collaborator. Even when they disagreed, Adams expressed gratitude for Abigail's insight and intelligence.

Of all the close personal-political collaborations depicted in the book, none is more intimate than that between John and Abigail Adams. Although Abigail did not receive formal education and was, as a woman, considered unsuitable for political office at the time, John nonetheless trusted her to be his closest confidant and collaborator. The fact that they were married only strengthened their political "alliance."

John Adams claimed that he wanted to stay out of the presidential race, yet guiltily admitted that he was also tempted by the whole thing. Abigail gently assured him that he had earned the position of president, yet as the election came closer, she correctly anticipated that Jefferson had the upper hand. Still, she confidently dismissed any worries. When the votes began to be counted in December, Adams was unsurprised that New England supported him and the South supported Jefferson. Yet he was furious that, thanks to Hamilton's support, a Federalist called Thomas Pinckney from South Carolina had a chance of winning. Adams declared Pinckney a "nobody" and said he would refuse to serve as his vice president.

Again, it becomes clear that Adams was somewhat egotistical and sensitive. Although his relationship with Jefferson had become strained, he nonetheless respected Jefferson as a key member of the revolutionary generation who had the credentials (if not, in Adams' mind, the proper ideological framework) to be president. For Adams, serving under someone who was not a major participant in the country's founding would have been a personal insult.

On December 30, it was revealed that John Adams had narrowly beaten Jefferson 71 to 68, with Pinckney a close third and Aaron Burr a distant fourth. Jefferson had predicted this exact result and wrote a letter of congratulations to the jubilant Adams in which he claimed that he'd never wanted to president in the first place. He said he would be happy to serve as vice president, claiming to be Adams' natural "junior." Adams and Jefferson faced a daunting task in succeeding Washington. It would arguably be one they could only meet only by working closely as a team.

Despite Jefferson's self-effacement in claiming to be Adams' natural "junior," this passage also suggests that he had a somewhat sensitive ego too. His claim that he never wanted to be president seems more like an effort to heal his pride than a representation of the truth (particularly considering that he did eventually go on to serve as president).

For John Adams, a close personal relationship could trump ideological differences; many of his closest friends were Republicans. Around this time, Adams developed a bipartisan plan to send either Jefferson or Madison to France to negotiate a Jay Treaty-style deal. As partisanship grew ever more intense, the question was whether Adams and Jefferson would stand together—even if this meant being perceived as betraying their respective parties. Jefferson wrote a letter promising to "renew the old partnership," but instead of sending it straight to Adams he passed it by Madison first. Madison insisted that Jefferson must choose between his leadership of the Republican party and his friendship with Adams.

This passage explores different kinds of loyalty and how these come into conflict with one another. To some, loyalty to one's friends—especially across political differences—is the most important type of loyalty, demonstrating significant moral virtue. For others, however, willingness to be friends with people of opposite political persuasions is highly suspect. As America's partisan culture was still developing, Jefferson was forced to choose between party and friendship.

Madison advised that, instead of sending the letter, Jefferson leak certain parts of it to mutual friends (and Madison had in fact already done this, ensuring the letter reached John Adams). Eventually, Jefferson chose to avoid collaborating with Adams' bipartisan strategy, but framed this decision as more of a personal than political choice. Adams did not learn of this decision until March 1797, when he and Jefferson had dinner with Washington in Philadelphia. Shortly after, Jefferson was sworn in as vice president—but not as Adam's partner.

Looking at this moment from the present, it is extremely difficult to imagine a president and vice president serving together from two opposing parties—let alone working together in a bipartisan arrangement. Although this wasn't what ended up happening, the fact that it was even possible shows how much has changed since 1797.

The problems John Adams inherited as president—along with the difficulty of filling Washington's shoes—arguably meant that his presidency was doomed from the start. When Adams came into office, the US was in the midst of an "undeclared war" against the French. Adams chose the "only realistic" option of trying to resolve the matter with the French diplomatically, and building the US Navy in case that didn't work out. Meanwhile, a different kind of war raged at home, between Federalists and Republicans. It was a scene of "political chaos." Adams reacted by ignoring his whole cabinet, confiding only in Abigail.

Just as Ellis emphasizes the importance of studying events in their proper historical context, so too must we evaluate political choices and careers in the context of the available options. Ellis argues that it would basically have been impossible for Adams to have a successful presidency; the problems he inherited were too great, the precedents too few, and in comparison with Washington, anyone would look like a poor leader.

Early on in his presidency, John Adams controversially sent Elbridge Gerry, a personal friend who was both a Republican and a fanatical supporter of the French Revolution, to France for the treaty negotiation. Adams also appointed his son, John Quincy Adams, as American minister to Prussia, despite John Quincy's own worries that this would look nepotistic. While contentious, both decisions ended up paying off. Abigail, meanwhile, kept a close eye on the press and reported what she read to her husband.

Just like his predecessor, Adams made controversial decisions based on his own, singular vision (or, to put it more accurately, his and Abigail's vision) that was unpopular at the time but ultimately proved advantageous. Again, this shows the benefit of having such a singular vision in a chaotic political climate.

There is "considerable evidence" to suggest that Abigail's advice was pivotal in persuading John Adams to make the biggest mistake of his presidential career: supporting the Alien and Sedition Acts. These acts disenfranchised foreign-born settlers (most of them French) and made it a crime to publish "false, scandalous and malicious writings against the Government." Adams' support for this legislation was somewhat reluctant, but Abigail's was enthusiastic. The most successful decision Adams made as president came in 1799, when he sent another peace delegation to France. Although this horrified many of Adams' own cabinet, it successfully ended the war with France.

Regardless of whether one considers Abigail's support for the Alien and Sedition Acts as an ethical and ideological failure, it was certainly a misreading of the post-Revolutionary political climate. In this historical moment, many were (rightfully) fearful about authoritarianism, political suppression, and xenophobia. The Alien and Sedition Acts blatantly stoked each of these fears; it is unsurprising that it was wildly unpopular.

John Adams' decision to send another delegation alienated him from the Federalist party. He likely did it in part to undermine Hamilton's goal of leading troops into battle against the French. He had also received information from John Quincy Adams that the French would react well to another delegation. Finally, Adams was also fond of taking singular action that revealed his own strength of mind in the face of other influences, particularly partisan loyalty. He deeply believed that what was best in the long term often clashed with what was politically strategic in the present.

This passage establishes parallels between Adams and his predecessor, Washington. Both men were suspicious of partisanship and resolutely confident in their own beliefs—even if these beliefs conflicted with the public tide of opinion at the time. Overall the book suggests that these are admirable qualities, although they can also cause conflict and prevent collaboration.

Madison was a staunch critic of John Adams, even going so far as to claim that Adams *wanted* war with France—a claim Jefferson came to believe also. When Jefferson defended Adams' "revolutionary principles," Madison replied that Adams was a monarchist and thus "a traitor." Despite knowing better than to believe all this slander, Jefferson embraced it, along with a host of other Republican rumors about Adams. In 1798, Jefferson even commissioned a "notorious scandalmonger" to write a book about Adams. The book, *The Prospect Before Us*, was full of slander about the president.

Jefferson's commission of the libelous book is a surprisingly petty move from a man otherwise described as reticent, elegant, and fearful of conflict. Perhaps the reason behind this out-of-character move is Jefferson's susceptibility to the paranoid mindset generated by his antifederalist "conspiracy theory." This led him to believe rumors about Adams against his better judgment.

When the Alien and Sedition Acts were passed, Jefferson feared he would be personally targeted. At this point, Jefferson truly believed that the Federalists had engineered a traitorous and destructive takeover of the government. During this time, Jefferson and Madison wrote the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions together. They argued against the Alien and Sedition Acts and in favor of states' rights. Whereas Jefferson originally attacked the authority of the federal government, Madison chose the more diplomatic route of appealing to the rights laid out in the Constitution.

Madison's approach of appealing to the Constitution rather than directly attacking his political enemies shows the enormous benefit that the Constitution provided. Without such a foundation, the American government might have torn itself apart in the midst of the chaos of the early years of the republic. The Constitution at least provided some stability and a sense of ethical, nonintrusive authority.

In the end, the Alien and Sedition Acts proved so self-destructive to the Federalists that the Republicans only needed to sit back and watch as their enemies imploded. Alarmed by the Alien Act, Irish and German immigrants began flocking to the Republican party. Although John Adams' second peace delegation had been a success, news of this success arrived too late to help him in the upcoming presidential election. When Napoleon declared himself military dictator, Jefferson reversed his long-held habit of emphasizing the similarities between France and America. Now, he insisted that the two nations were very different. He also suddenly switched to an isolationist position.

This passage suggests that the relief of knowing that the Federalist cause was self-destructing allowed Jefferson to let go of some of his more delusional beliefs at the time. There was no longer any need to discount evidence in order to have the world conform to the "conspiracy theory" he had devised. As a result, his political position became better informed and more reasonable.

Although John Adams did better in the election than many expected, he still lost to Jefferson and Burr. Just before the election, Hamilton published a pamphlet accusing Adams of being unfit for office. Adams was surprisingly unbothered by this, correctly predicting that it would harm Hamilton's reputation more than his own. Both Hamilton and the Federalist party itself were permanently damaged in this period. So too was Adams' belief in a way of conducting politics above partisanship.

This passage shows that many people lost in the 1800 presidential election—not just Adams. Overall, this was a turning point at which it became clear that the Federalist project was dying. At the same time, partisanship was also on the rise. These two facts together heralded a watershed moment in American politics.

John Adams was dismayed by this turn of events, yet he at least left the presidency satisfied that he was able to achieve peace with France. When Jefferson took office as president, Abigail demanded that Adams invite Jefferson to tea and cake. Adams did so, but after that point he and Jefferson did not speak for twelve years.

This is the final moment at which Jefferson and Adams made an effort to make their friendship at least seem *alive, even if in reality it had died long ago.*

CHAPTER 6: THE FRIENDSHIP

John Adams returned home to John Quincy Adams looking forward to a peaceful life. However, it was difficult for him to let go of his political grievances and bitterness toward his enemies. Adams was especially resentful of Hamilton and Jefferson. In 1804, Jefferson's youngest daughter died in childbirth, and Abigail decided to write with her condolences. Jefferson misinterpreted Abigail's choice to reach out, thinking this meant she and John were ready to resume their friendship. Jefferson replied with a long account of his relationship with John, and said that throughout their ups and downs there was only one time when he found John cruel on a personal level.

Jefferson and Adams clearly carried differing levels of bitterness toward one another. Whereas Adams retired to Quincy filled with bitterness about his political career, Jefferson was now president. Even if he did hold a major grudge against Adams, which did not seem to be the case, Jefferson would have been too occupied with his current role to give it much thought.

This one occasion was John Adams' decision to appoint Federalists to judgeships after the election, just before Adams left the presidency. Still, Jefferson told Abigail that he forgave Adams. Abigail was furious and sent a passionate reply in which she defended her husband's actions and condemned Jefferson for decisions such as commissioning the libelous book. In response, Jefferson claimed that both he and Adams had acted badly in their time, but Abigail replied with further condemnations of Jefferson. She accused him of being a "party man," something Jefferson himself strongly denied.

Jefferson's misjudgment of this situation again points to the imbalance in his and Adams' feelings about one another. Jefferson may have been slightly embittered about the judgeships, but he was clearly not deeply affected by this decision. Abigail's reaction, on the other hand, shows just how furious and hurt both she and John were about Jefferson's actions.

In reality, Jefferson's opposition to partisanship, like his condemnation of slavery, was deeply felt yet contradictory to how he often behaved. Jefferson insisted that there was no contradiction between his professed beliefs and his behavior, and "probably came to believe his own lies." Abigail also accused Jefferson of vilifying her husband, an especially terrible crime considering John Adams and Jefferson had once been such good friends. Jefferson probably assumed that Abigail was sharing all their correspondence with John, but in fact John did not see any of it until months later. At this point, Adams sent a short, tense clarification that he had not been aware of Abigail's correspondence, and the silence between him and Jefferson lasted another eight years.

Unlike Adams, who believed in voicing political disagreements in the open, Jefferson disliked conflict and even convinced himself that his own contradictory behavior was actually not contradictory at all. It must have been highly disturbing to receive letters from Abigail detailing all his hypocritical and disloyal behavior. It's no wonder that all communication ceased between the Adams' and Jefferson for another eight years.

In the meantime, Jefferson had a highly successful first term as president, the crowning achievement of which was the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. His second term, however, was disastrous. John Adams claimed not to care about Jefferson, but in reality he was obsessed with him and his own reputation. Adams had a lot of time to stew over his troubles and anxieties as he attempted to write his autobiography at home. When a friend of Adams' read these efforts, he declared that they were a mess of nonsense. Adams went on to publish autobiographical writing in the *Boston Patriot*, which was also overlong, incoherent, and full of bitterness.

Although Adams was desperately concerned with his own reputation, he didn't seem to care about massacring it by publishing writing that revealed him to be sullen, childish, and bitter. In some ways, this denotes an admirable quality in Adams. He spoke openly and honestly, even if this meant further damaging his own image in the public eye.

John Adams also began writing to Benjamin Rush again. The two men produced a surreal correspondence filled with details of their dreams. Reflecting on the legacy of the Revolution, Adams came to realize that the romanticized, oversimplified account of the Revolution belied the messiness of those years. He set about figuring out his own, "deconstructed" version of the Revolution. He clarified that the "heroic portraits" of the revolutionary generation were exaggerated, and made a point of identifying the men's flaws. This reveals that while Adams did think his deconstructed account was more accurate, he was also motivated to write it out of bitterness.

Ellis' reference to Adams' "deconstructed" account of the Revolution suggests that the way Adams thought about history anticipated the historical scholarship that emerged in the late twentieth century under the influence of Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. This kind of history challenged grand, stable, coherent narratives in favor of contradictory, minor, and partial representations of historical moments.

John Adams at first denied that he had much knowledge or opinion of Jefferson in his letters to Rush. However, he eventually came to talk more about his former friend. As an idealist and someone who denied the contradictions within himself, Jefferson was predisposed to be the perfect character in the romanticized versions of history that Adams rejected. Adams concluded that whereas he himself told the truth, Jefferson "told people what they wanted to hear."

Jefferson was both a perfect character and perfect creator *of the kinds of historical narratives Adams was critiquing. Jefferson smoothed over contradictions in favor of serving a simple, visionary narrative—whether than be a utopian ideal or a conspiracy theory. Adams thought this was highly dangerous.*

In 1809, Rush wrote that he'd had a dream in which John Adams and Thomas Jefferson resumed their correspondence, forgave each other of their mistakes, reflected on the Revolution together, and were friends again. The two men then died at almost exactly the same time. Adams replied that Rush's dream "may be prophecy." He expressed a desire for the bitterness between him and Jefferson to end, but concluded that Jefferson would have to reach out first. Meanwhile, Rush wrote to Jefferson encouraging him to do so, falsely claiming that Adams was on his deathbed and was desperate to reconcile with his old friend. Still stung from the incident with Abigail, Jefferson refused to comply.

The surreal turn in this chapter underlines the mystical, sacred quality of Adams and Jefferson's friendship. Rush's desperation to facilitate resumed communication between the men reveals his belief in the profound importance of their relationship. This was no ordinary friendship, but rather one that had changed the world, and would continue to do so if it were allowed to resume.

This impasse lasted two years. Then, on the first day of 1812, John Adams sent a short, friendly letter to Jefferson, enclosing two pieces of homespun fabric. Rush was thrilled and credited himself for this development. Jefferson sent a long letter in response, enclosing John Quincy Adams' *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* as gift. This began what is now considered the most important correspondence between two political figures in American history, which lasted from 1812 to 1826. The letters have an "elegiac tone," as the two friends look back on the events of the Revolution and its aftermath.

Both gifts that the men enclosed had important symbolic meaning. In the Revolutionary era, homespun fabric was worn by American settlers who wanted to boycott British goods, and thus this gift was a reminder of the bond the men formed during the Revolution. Meanwhile, by enclosing a work by John Quincy, Jefferson perhaps indicated an end to the accusations that Adams was nepotistically grooming his son to run the country.

The correspondence revitalized Jefferson and John Adams' friendship, including the deep trust that had been lost. Strangely, even the part of Rush's prophecy about the two men dying at the same time came true: they died five hours apart, on the fiftieth anniversary of American Independence. It is clear from reading the letters that Jefferson and Adams imagined them being read by future generations of scholars, leaders, and citizens. The men were "the most accomplished letter writers of the era," giving their correspondence a special eloquence. Overall, Adams' letters were more abundant, in part because Jefferson received around 1,200 letters a year (and answered them all).

Although much of the future was unknown and mysterious to them, one extraordinary aspect of the revolutionary generation was their ability to accurately predict certain things that happened in the future. This was true of Rush's eerie prophecy about Jefferson and Adams' deaths, and it was also true of Jefferson and Adams' more abstract prediction that their letters would be read by people living many years in the future.

Whereas Thomas Jefferson was typically elegant and restrained in his writing, John Adams was vigorously argumentative. They mostly avoided topics that would be too contentious. Things got touchy in 1813, when an English scientist published a private letter he'd received from Jefferson years before in which Jefferson implied that Adams was backwards and unmodern. Jefferson attempted to excuse himself to Adams in part by shifting blame to partisanship and the Hamiltonians (who Adams hated). Adams' response showed that he was riled up by the whole matter.

The episode involving the scientist shows that even when people choose to put the past behind them, there is never a guarantee that it won't resurface and destroy the peace of the present. At the same time, by this point Adams and Jefferson had regained one another's trust, and thus one incident was less likely to destroy their renewed friendship.

However, this incident ended up meaning that all the previously unmentionable topics were now out in the open, which ultimately deepened the trust between the friends. When Abigail added her own note to one of John Adams' letters, this served as confirmation that the friendship between all three was well and truly repaired. It was clear that Jefferson still maintained a romanticized, even melodramatic version of history which did not necessarily reflect reality. Yet because this version was a *story*, it was destined to become triumphant, beating Adams' "deconstructed," partial, contradictory version. Their correspondence at least gave Adams the chance to critique Jefferson's account.

While Jefferson's historical narrative may be the one preferred by most people, the advantage of correspondence is that it is a way of capturing disagreement and laying two conflicting accounts of historical events side by side. This is one of the many ways in which the book demonstrates that conflict can be productive.

Between 1813 and 1814, the correspondence focused on the topic of social equality and to what extent governance of the republic should be entrusted to elites. John Adams was fond of asserting that since ancient times, it was elites who tended to shape history, and that this reality was preordained by God, the human condition, and "the Fabric of the Universe." He argued that it was futile to try and fight this fact. Jefferson responded that there *was* a hierarchy among men, but that it was not an aristocratic system but one produced by "virtue and talents." He believed that the aristocratic system of hereditary power that flourished in Europe would not survive in America.

Whereas Jefferson and Adams' ideological disagreements severely damaged their friendship in the past, once they were both retired they could treat these disagreements as more abstract issues (rather than urgent questions that needed to be addressed through policy). This allowed them to discuss their conflicting ideas in a productive and collaborative rather than dangerous or threatening way.

John Adams responded that there was more continuity between Europe and America than Jefferson was allowing. He held that Jefferson's hope for "a classless American society" was little more than "a pipe dream." In a letter to another friend, Adams observed that it was ironic that he, the son of farmer and shoemaker, was being accused of elitism by a wealthy slaveholder who had inherited wealth and power from his wife's family. Adams never raised this with Jefferson directly.

Adams' decision not to make this observation explicit to Jefferson suggests that he may have developed more tact in old age. Perhaps he was also aware that his friendship with Jefferson, while revitalized, remained fragile.

The two also argued about the French Revolution. Jefferson admitted that he had been wrong to dismiss the extraordinarily amount of violence that the Revolution caused and even apologized to John Adams about this. The subtext of this message was another apology, as Jefferson had also used the French Revolution to sabotage Adams' presidency. Adams responded that Jefferson had been led astray by ideology.

Clearly, painful memories between the men remained. Yet at this point in their lives, they could also look at these memories as learning experiences, rather than just unfortunate incidents. Jefferson in particular demonstrates significant growth in this passage.

Neither man predicted the close relationship that England and America would eventually form, although both anticipated that the tensions between the North and South of the US would threaten the unity of the nation. However, in all their correspondence, slavery was scarcely mentioned. The one exception came in their discussion of the Missouri Compromise of 1819. Jefferson suggested that abolition was a problem for the next generation to deal with. John Adams disagreed, saying that slavery needed to be debated immediately. In his correspondence with Jefferson, however, he mostly stayed silent on the topic.

At this point, Jefferson seemed resigned to the fact that slavery would remain an unresolved problem during his lifetime. Adams appeared to view it as a more urgent issue, yet his unwillingness to discuss it with Jefferson again typifies the abdication of responsibility that the revolutionary generation engaged in when it came to the issue of slavery.

In 1819, a document was printed in the newspapers resembling the **Declaration of Independence** that was supposedly authored by a group of people in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, in May 1775. Jefferson told John Adams that the document was "a fabrication," and Adams responded that he believed him. However, in letters to others, Adams said the opposite. Adams enjoyed the affair because it supported his "deconstructed" theory of the Revolution, which clashed with the idea that the Declaration of Independence could have been written in one moment by one man.

Adams' behavior here reads as rather deceitful. At the same time, it seems that by at this point he had learned when to let a contentious topic lie rather than starting an argument that would ultimately be without consequence. Perhaps deep down Adams knew that even though he preferred to believe the Declaration of Independence was a collective effort, in reality it was Jefferson's work.

In October 1818, Abigail died. Shortly after, Jefferson observed that both he and John Adams had outlived most of their contemporaries. They reminisced about the past together, and spoke warmly about the afterlife as a time when they would reunite with their "band of brothers." Part of the reason why the genuine friendship between the two men was revived later in life was because they no longer had to "pose" as political partners. Their political differences remained, but in retirement this didn't really matter. While in 1812 Adams was still furious about the slander Jefferson had spread about him, by 1823 he cheerfully joked about it.

Here, Ellis suggests that it is genuinely difficult to maintain friendships across political divides when people have to work together, but that if this pressure is relieved then such friendship is possible. This subject is certainly up for debate, yet it is clear that in old age, Adams and Jefferson found themselves with more in common than what was dividing them. Their relationship was not without conflict, but was defined by a powerful, almost mystical bond.

As the fiftieth anniversary of American Independence neared, Jefferson was very ill with an intestinal disorder that prevented him from attending the celebration in **Washington**. In a letter to the committee organizing the ceremony, he repeated his lifelong view that the American Revolution would inspire a global movement of liberation. John Adams, meanwhile, quibbled with organizers, insisting that the Fourth of July was actually not the correct date (and that there was no "correct" date). He was less optimistic about the future of America, which he warned could go in any direction.

Jefferson and Adams' reactions to the fiftieth anniversary of American Independence humorously represents their differing views on history and how it should be memorialized. Even as an old and sick man, Jefferson remained an optimistic visionary, whereas Adams was argumentative, cynical, and absorbed by detail.

Jefferson's interpretation of the meaning of the fiftieth anniversary was given power by his and John Adams' deaths. Late on July 3, 1826, Jefferson went into a coma. His last words were: "Is it the Fourth?" Although it wasn't at the time, he died on the "magic day." On the same morning, Adams collapsed in his reading chair, at almost exactly the same moment as his friend died. Adams passed that afternoon. His final words, according to witnesses, were either "Thomas Jefferson survives" or "Thomas Jefferson still lives."

The story of Jefferson and Adams' deaths on the Fourth of July is almost too surreal to believe. It lends a poignancy not only to the lives and deaths of these two enormously influential leaders, but also to the friendship they resumed in old age. The details of their deaths suggest that they really were "soulmates," as Ellis argues earlier in the book.

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