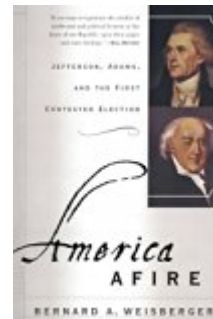


Bernard A. Weisberger. *America Afire: Jefferson, Adams, and the Revolutionary Election of 1800.* New York: William Morrow and Company, 2000. 345 pp. \$26.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-380-80651-5.



Reviewed by James J. Kirschke

Published on H-SHEAR (November, 2001)

Life as Usual: Storm and Stress: a View of the Fourth Presidential Election in the United States

Bernard Weisberger's book is an old-fashioned electoral history in the best sense of the term. His exposition aims above all to indicate how and why the turbulence developed which led to "the crucial [U.S.] election of 1800," and how this election "preserved the Revolution and the infant American republic" (p. 9). These complicated tasks the author accomplishes ably. *Pari passu*, Weisberger also provides many interesting and revealing glimpses of life in the Republic from the Constitutional Convention through the painful, extended election of the third President of the United States.

As he clearly establishes his theme, the historian narrates well the simple inaugural ceremonies that accompanied the early March 1801 peaceful "transfer of power by popular vote" (p. 9). The body of *America Afire*, however, begins at the 1787 Convention in Philadelphia (Chapter 1). Here Weisberger examines the development of the roots of the first two-party system in the United States; namely, the James Madison planned Re-

publican Party and the Federalist Party. The author believes Alexander Hamilton proved the most influential member in the initial stages of the latter party's gestation (pp. 14-21).

Chapter Two emphasizes clearly the ways the demographics of the United States in 1790 colored deeply the political climate. Weisberger here also efficiently delineates the interconnections among such factors as geography, slavery, U.S. southern crop growth, and the British economy. As the historian explains these links, he compares the American South with the New England of John Adams, and underlines the extent to which the New Englanders of the time depended overall on their access to the Atlantic. Along the way, Chapter Two, while focusing on "the Nation in 1790," sketches a great deal concerning the American transportation and communication systems, such as they were at the time. Here, too, the narrative indicates some of the major ways that these systems helped lead to the rough and tumble political contest ultimately enacted in the election of 1800 (pp. 36-40).

Chapter Three's focus is on George Washington's first term. Weisberger, alas, like many other scholars, rhapsodizes too uncritically on the self-control, steadiness and so forth and so on of the Virginian who became the first U.S. President. In this Chapter, also, the author first begins in earnest his word portrait of John Adams (pp. 46-51). His sketch of Adams's early life and career constitutes the best brief essay this reviewer has seen on the second President of the United States.

This Chapter, too, shows clearly how the Ninth and Tenth Amendments did much to neutralize the "Anti-Federalist opposition" (p. 54). *America Afire* explains clearly the three legs of Hamilton's fiscal plan; nonetheless, Weisberger places somewhat more importance than seems deserving on the weight Hamilton's views carried on the political scales in the Early Republican era. Within the Federalist Party, most of Hamilton's contemporaries considered him to be one of the most politically radical individuals: a long, sharp, beacon light, perhaps, but not a reliable standard bearer of substance.

In Chapter Four, "The Curse of Faction," Weisberger articulates with admirable economy how rapidly the two-party system developed in the brief period from 1791 to 1792. This Chapter also presents a lucid picture of Philadelphia in 1800, at the same time that it sketches fascinatingly the Yellow Fever's deadly presence in The City of Brotherly Love in the prior decade.

In Chapter 6 Weisberger trains his narrative on the highlights of American sectionalism, and indicates some of the ways that this sectionalism influenced the development of party ties in the Early Republic. Chapter 7 and early Chapter 8 cleverly delineate the ways the inter-party American rivalry during the period played itself out in ways which led to the United States' prompt return to the strong commercial embrace with Great Britain.

In the sections of *America Afire* where the historian examines the elections of 1796 (pp.

164-169) and of 1800 (pp. 228-231) the clarity of the exposition helps greatly to illuminate these contests. In the latter Weisberger rightly emphasizes "the central importance...of the contests to win the state houses." In the 1800 election, although the numbers voting proved small, the author shrewdly observes why he believes that "the stakes were even higher than the contestants realized" (p. 231).

In reviewing a book with so many outstanding aspects, presented in such an economic fashion, the reviewer feels churlish to quibble about several small flaws. Nevertheless, *America Afire* could have profitably asserted its main subject earlier in the narrative. By the time the author announces his primary topic (p.9), some readers not formally committed to peruse the book may dismiss this fine narrative history prematurely.

In addition, some of the subjects treated might have been more trenchantly examined had Weisberger devoted more attention to the primary documentation, as well as to the secondary literature in periodical form. The development of the first U.S. Constitutional mechanism for electing the Vice President, for instance, might have been better illuminated by recourse to the primary records eventually available from the Convention in Philadelphia, and from the correspondence by some of the Delegates. Also, some of the periodical publications on the Bank of the United States and on the "Midnight Judges" could have served to clarify and deepen the analysis of these subjects in Weisberger's already admirable history.

In light of the surfeit of fine detail and interesting narrative the historian provides, nevertheless, his title, *America Afire*, seems hyperbole. Many elections in the United States have been surprising affairs, strangely contested, and having surprising results. Four of the U.S. Presidents, for instance--John Q. Adams, Rutherford B. Hayes, Benjamin Harrison, and George W. Bush--have lost the popular vote by fairly large margins. The

title of the book under review would perhaps lead many readers to feel that the period from 1787 to 1801 proved much more turbulent than any other era in United States history. Such a prejudgment would not necessarily be so.

On balance, however, *America Afire* is an outstanding book--clearly conceived, lucidly written, and satisfyingly informative. Once the author engages his theme, the narrative proves stimulating and education through the last page.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

Citation: James J. Kirschke. Review of Weisberger, Bernard A. *America Afire: Jefferson, Adams, and the Revolutionary Election of 1800*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. November, 2001.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5680>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.