

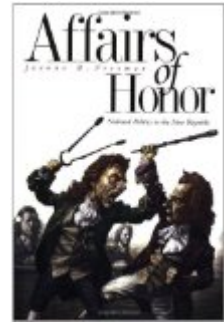
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joanne B. Freeman. *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. xxiv + 376 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-08877-9.

Jeffrey L. Pasley. *"The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*. Jeffersonian America Series. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001. xviii + 517 pp. \$37.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8139-2030-6.

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Making Politics Work: New Insights into the Political Culture of the Early Republic – 18th century; United States – Social conditions – To 1865;

Making Politics Work: New Insights into the Political Culture of the Early Republic

In 1789, the people of the United States put into operation what Richard Hofstadter once accurately described as “a Constitution against parties.”[1] Little more than a decade later, the same people went to the polls in unprecedented numbers to choose representatives from between two surprisingly well-organized parties. The election of 1800 had many of the earmarks of a modern political contest: caucuses, platforms, coordinated campaigning, and extensive use of media[2]—steps taken by men who most certainly would have deplored them when they wrote and ratified the Constitution. And, indeed, no one was pleased by these developments, which contradicted deeply-held convictions about how good republicans behaved. Yet such convictions did not stop America’s leaders from organizing for political combat, and they kept right on organizing until, by mid-century, party politics had become an indispensable, indeed celebrated, feature of American government.[3]

Historians have struggled for decades to explain this remarkable turnabout. Standard accounts emphasize political tensions between Jeffersonian agrarians and Hamiltonian capitalists, or between Francophiles and Anglophiles.[4] Yet disagreements over political econ-

omy or foreign policy hardly seem sufficient to explain the exceedingly odd politics of the 1790s. How to account for the contest’s savage quality, which brought the country to the brink of civil war by 1801? How to explain the overwrought behavior of those involved: their unhinged paranoia, their extravagant fury, the unexpected overtures and rejections among supposed allies and former friends? Most important, how to decipher the willingness and ability to organize parties in the face of a political philosophy that condemned them?

The two books under review do much to unlock these mysteries. Both offer fresh and important insights into early American political culture. Along the way, they expand our knowledge not just of how parties first emerged, but also of how political actors in the late 18th and early 19th centuries saw their world and why they acted as they did.

Even non-historians know that the past is not the present, that context and culture matter, and that the context and culture of an earlier time were different from our own. The trick has always been to spot how things were different. We take so much for granted about our own context and our own culture that we easily miss differences whose signs are too subtle for any but the most perceptive reader to catch. Fortunately for us, Joanne B.

Freeman, an assistant professor of history at Yale, is such a reader. Her delightful book, *Affairs of Honor*, elucidates the central role of honor in the politics of the Early Republic. Through trenchant readings of representative texts, she uncovers what might be called the “emotional economy” of America in its formative years: the ways in which concern for honor and reputation shaped the perceptions and reactions of key actors and in this way shaped politics itself.

Of course, it is not news that a culture of honor existed in early America or that this culture affected how gentlemen of the period behaved. Everyone knows that Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton fought a duel, and that their duel was but one of many fought during this period, with all the elaborate cultural trappings such activities imply. But no one before Freeman seems to have thought to ask how and to what extent this honor culture shaped the political actions of men in the Early Republic. Once such questions have been posed, moreover, the answers turn out to be as surprising as they are important.

Freeman’s considerable achievement is twofold. First, she successfully shows the extent – the very great extent – to which one can properly understand how and why political leaders acted as they did only through a lens of honor. In her hands, men like Jefferson, Hamilton, Burr, and Adams, indeed, the whole panoply of leaders in the Early Republic, no longer appear as wise statesmen carefully crafting strategies to accomplish considered political ends. Instead we find a group of anxious, fretful boys – worried about how their actions will appear to others and desperately concerned lest they fail to live up to the rather stringent demands of an unwritten social code. The shift may seem startling at first, but only because we tend unconsciously to confer an exaggerated air of gravity and seriousness on everything associated with the late 18th century. The alternative world portrayed by Freeman, in which a gentleman’s handling of serious matters is hopelessly entangled with common social insecurities, is completely authentic and believable. (This is hardly surprising, as anyone could attest who recognized how seamlessly the film “Clueless” mapped the social world of Jane Austen’s *Emma* onto a modern high school.)

Freeman’s second achievement is related to this first one. For she not only shows how central the culture of honor is to understanding the actions of America’s Founding Fathers, but she also describes the terms of that culture in considerable and illuminating detail. Freeman’s book uncovers and delineates many of the partic-

ular rules guiding the behavior of politicians, and she reconstructs the grammar underlying their conduct in ways that enable us to appreciate their actions in a new and better light. Our understanding of the Early Republic will never be the same.

The book begins with a chapter establishing Freeman’s central claim about the importance of the personal and performative side of politics to America’s early leadership. Using Senator William Maclay’s diary, she demonstrates the pervasive concern for form and appearance that obsessed politicians in the Early Republic, an understandable obsession given the absolute centrality of personal reputation for any claim to leadership. Passages in Maclay’s diary that earlier readers have passed over as idiosyncratic or unimportant turn out, in Freeman’s hands, to provide compelling evidence of the intricate dance that preoccupied the minds and actions of everyone in the capital. At one point, for instance, she highlights a brief passage in which Maclay refuses Washington’s invitation to sit beside him (p. 55). Already moving toward a different seat, Maclay experiences intense anxiety as, in the instant, he must choose between his desire for public attention from the Great Man and his concern that changing directions will make him look like a obsequious courtier. Nor was Maclay unique in this respect, as Freeman persuasively demonstrates. Appearances mattered. A lot.

Subsequent chapters illuminate the canons and codes by which appearances were judged, together with the tools through which perceptions were shaped. There is a chapter on gossip, followed by one on the more formal “art of paper war” and, naturally, one on dueling. The book concludes with a long chapter on the Election of 1800, which Freeman offers as a case study of honor and reputation in action. Each chapter makes interesting and substantial contributions on a number of levels. To begin with, each offers provocative rereadings of familiar texts, such as Jefferson’s “Anas,” Hamilton’s “Letter Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams,” Adams’s decade-delayed reply to Hamilton in the pages of the *Boston Patriot*, and Burr’s memoirs. Also, each chapter offers perceptive, detailed descriptions of the network of applicable rules. The rules of engagement in American politics in the 1790s were neither loose social conventions nor casual guidelines for civilized behavior. There were, in fact, precise standards about who could say what to whom, in what way, when, and under which circumstances.

The level of detail, as recounted by Freeman, can be

astounding. Gossip required proper forms of evidence and particular earmarks of credibility, and even then had to be phrased properly. It mattered whether you called someone a rascal, a villain, a coward, or a liar – the former typically leading only to a reply in kind, the latter most likely to prompt a formal challenge. It similarly mattered whether information was disseminated to the public through a letter discreetly circulated among gentlemen, a pamphlet, a newspaper, or a broadside. The wrong choice could have serious consequences, as Alexander Hamilton discovered when a letter in which he accused John Francis Mercer of lying found its way into a broadside and almost provoked a duel (p. 123). Hamilton's response to the outraged Mercer consisted not of denying the slander, but rather of an explanation that Hamilton had authorized only "a free personal communication" of his letter, with instructions not to permit it to be placed in a newspaper (much less a broadside).

Using such material, Freeman presents new and convincing explanations of critical events in American political history. Her account of the Burr-Hamilton duel is the most plausible to date, as is her description of how the election deadlock of 1801 was eventually broken. Indeed, she explains Burr's behavior on both occasions in terms that make it not only comprehensible, but almost admirable. (Would that the contestants in our most recent election had acted half so honorably!)

At the heart of Freeman's book lies the question of party formation. Although in her introduction Freeman suggests that there were no parties and that sharp political formations became clear "only in hindsight" (p. xix), the book actually establishes a quite different proposition – as Freeman herself recognizes in later chapters and in her epilogue. The impetus for party organization was, as previous scholars have argued, the emergence of substantial disagreement over policy within an expanded and newly democratized polity. With political authority conferred explicitly and directly on an enlarged electorate, pressures to "collect the will the people" became virtually irresistible. Yet the size and complexity of the national electorate complicated this task, calling forth a new style of politics and new forms of politicking. The problem was that no rules existed for such a politics: there were, as yet, no reference points to distinguish permissible from impermissible forms of opposition or proscribed from proscribed means of organizing assent. The rules of honor were familiar, however, and they filled the desideratum as parties started to form. The bonds that made parties possible were, Freeman shows, bonds of honor and friendship, and initial efforts to organize sup-

port for or opposition to the government were conducted within and refracted through this older cultural overlay. Among the most intriguing aspects of the book, then, is watching how the emerging parties both absorbed and changed honor culture, distorting many of its rules and practices even as these shaped and limited the direction of political organization. Some of the most puzzling aspects of early party practices—including how men who believed that parties were evil nevertheless found themselves creating them—are thus made clear.

Of course, politicking on a national scale required actions that honor and reputation forbade to a proper gentleman. So someone else had to be found to do the actual campaigning. Someone else had to print and circulate the pamphlets and tickets. Someone else had to organize the caucuses, write the scurrilous editorials, manage the petition campaigns, serve as secretary at the town meetings, monitor the committees of correspondence, and do all the other dirty work required actually to win an election. Activities such as these were beneath the elite who constituted America's early political leadership; had the country depended on its leaders alone, it might never have survived its first decade.

There was, however, a group of men willing to perform these crucial if unpleasant tasks. A very few were gentlemen themselves, like Aaron Burr – whose open and active politicking definitely contributed to the mistrust he engendered among other members of the elite. Others were men from less respectable backgrounds hoping to improve their prospects by working closely with gentlemen; for example, John Beckley attached himself to the Virginians' coattails and served as an early Republican party manager.^[5] But most—and by far the most important—of these early professional politicians were, as Jeffrey L. Pasley shows in his fine book, newspaper printers and editors.

Editing and printing a newspaper qualified as an artisan's trade, though as Pasley explains in an illuminating chapter on actual working conditions, printing was hard labor. The hours were dreadful, the work tedious and backbreaking, and the financial payoffs minimal at best. Many editors may have dreamed of following in the footsteps of Benjamin Franklin, who made his fortune early enough to abandon the profession for a life of more refined activity, but few succeeded. In the meantime, their position in society—outside the elite, yet literate and able to work with it—left them ideally situated to provide the kinds of services needed to make the new politics work. The result was the emergence of what Pasley calls "news-

paper politics”: a system in which “the newspaper press was the political system’s central institution, not simply a forum or atmosphere in which politics took place. Instead, newspapers and their editors were purposeful actors in the political process, linking parties, voters, and the government together, and pursuing specific political goals” (p. 3).

Pasley’s description of how this system developed can be divided into two parts. The first part (Chapters Two through Eight) describes the beginnings of newspaper politics in the political struggles that culminated in Jefferson’s election in 1800. The basic outline of this story is familiar, but Pasley adds enormously to what we know, filling out the picture (and in the details) in ways that make his book indispensable reading. He explains, for example, why the economics of printing and the structure of postal regulation doomed Jefferson’s initial effort to establish a truly national newspaper, while encouraging instead the emergence of a decentralized confederation of allied printers. More interestingly, Pasley confronts the intriguing question of why the Sedition Act failed. Earlier efforts to muzzle the press, whether by imperial authorities or revolutionary mobs, had successfully cowed American printers—as did similar attacks on the English press during the same period. Why, then, did the Federalists fail? Why did they instead produce a massive increase in opposition newspapers, together with a calamitous political loss?

The spread of Republican papers and the success of Republican candidates, Pasley argues, were not a product of Jefferson’s alleged tactical leadership, much less of the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions. They were, rather, a product of changes taking place from the bottom up, of a new generation of printers more resilient and ideologically committed than their predecessors. This new resilience, in turn, was partly a product of the American Revolution, with the younger generation more committed to the egalitarian ideals of the Revolution than their elders. But even more, it was a product of party formation itself. Unlike earlier printers, who entered the trade solely to make a living, and who genuinely believed that they should be impartial and apolitical, the new generation self-consciously viewed themselves as political actors—an image ironically boosted by Federalist efforts to shut them down. Rather than stifling these committed young editors, the Federalist campaign encouraged and reinforced their sense of mission (while at the same time providing some of their best material).

Pasley makes these (and many other interesting)

points through well-crafted biographical accounts of critical figures, such as Benjamin Franklin Bache, Charles Holt, William Duane, and many others. This method may leave some readers uncertain, though I found it both convincing and wonderfully readable. Biography has its limitations, of course, and a more rigorous quantitative analysis or a more thorough canvassing of newspapers might be useful. In the meantime, Pasley has presented a powerful account of the day-to-day dynamics of early party formation.

Among the many ironies that emerge in Pasley’s account is how the Federalists seemed to win every battle while still losing the war. Each of the printers depicted by Pasley was targeted by local Federalists, who seemed in every case successfully to marginalize them or to drive them out of business. Yet somehow there were always new men willing to take the field—men (in one case, a woman) angrier, more radical, and more committed to denouncing Federalism and its aristocratic pretensions. This same irony persists in the second half of Pasley’s story, told in Chapters Nine through Fourteen, which addresses the years after Jefferson’s victory and describes how newspaper politics became institutionalized by the late 1820s.

Unlike the first half, this portion of Pasley’s book tells a story that has been largely neglected by historians. Much here is surprising and enormously interesting. It has been common, for example, to deride the Jeffersonians for pursuing their own libel and sedition actions against Federalist papers in the years after 1800. Pasley offers a detailed account of these actions that, while not quite acquitting the Republicans, casts their efforts in a different light. Among other things, he shows how the Federalist attack on Republican papers continued unabated, since Federalists retained control of the courts and of many local governments. At the same time, Federalists mimicked the Republicans by establishing their own papers that adopted more extreme tactics and used more extreme rhetoric. Yet even so, Pasley shows, the Republicans’ legal responses were generally milder, more hesitant and conflicted, and more lenient than those of the Federalists.

Perhaps the most striking and important contribution of Pasley’s discussion of the years after 1800 is the evidence he offers that attitudes toward party formation began shifting earlier than has generally been supposed. Even as President James Monroe attempted to dismantle parties during the misnamed “Era of Good Feelings,” printers and editors around the country resisted – offer-

ing an explicit and thoughtful defense of parties as necessary and desirable institutions. Monroe's efforts failed while those of the editors succeeded, and within a decade a system of political parties in which newspaper editors were the major power brokers had been established.

Hence the final irony. Freeman notes in her book that newspaper editors were frequent caning victims because politicians in the 1790s "considered them too low to merit a challenge" (p. 172). It was, indeed, this very lack of status that enabled printers to perform all those functions necessary to make a democratic system workable. In doing so, they gradually took the system over, and within a generation the tables had turned completely.

Notew

[1]. Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 40-73.

[2]. The single best account remains Noble Cunningham, *The Jeffersonian Republicans: The Formation of Party Organization, 1789-1801* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1957).

[3]. See Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era*

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966).

[4]. See, e.g., John C. Miller, *The Federalist Era, 1789-1801* (New York: Harper, 1960); Stanley Elkins and Eric L. McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); James Roger Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

[5.] Beckley has long fascinated historians of the early party struggles. See, e.g., Philip M. Marsh, "John Beckley, Mystery Man of the Early Jeffersonians," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 72 (1948): 54; Noble Cunningham, "John Beckley: An Early American Party Manager," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 13 (1956): 40. See also Gerald Gawalt, ed., *Justifying Jefferson: The Political Writings of John Beckley* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1995), and Edmund Berkeley and Dorothy Smith Berkeley, *John Beckley: Zealous Partisan in a Nation Divided* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1973 - *Memoirs*, vol. 100). The most useful recent contribution to the literature on Beckley is Jeffrey Pasley's dissertation, the first third of which is devoted to an exceptionally useful biographical sketch. See Jeffrey Langan Pasley, "'Artful and Designing Men': Political Professionalism in the Early American Republic, 1775-1820" (unpub. Ph.D. diss., Harvard Univ., 1993), 2-164.

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