AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM

VOLUME I: STRUCTURES OF GOVERNMENT

Howard Gillman • Mark A. Graber • Keith E. Whittington

Supplementary Material

Chapter 4: The Early National Era – Introduction

*Thomas Jefferson*, **First Inaugural Address** (1801)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Jefferson’s ascension to the presidency marked the first peaceful transition of power in a modern republic. Washington voluntarily set aside the office in 1796, and Adams was his favored successor. By contrast, the election of 1800 was extremely bitter and hard-fought, and passions ran high. The country had taken an important step toward becoming a stable democracy, but it was not clear what the future would bring.

Jefferson’s inaugural address was designed to celebrate that milestone, reassure nervous Federalists, and announce the principles that would guide his administration and unite his followers. On the one hand, the speech emphasized national reconciliation and respecting majority rule, a common “attachment to union and representative government.” On the other hand, it laid down the new public philosophy. The “sum of good government,” Jefferson intoned, was a government that “shall restrain men from injuring one another,” but “shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned.”*[[2]](#footnote-2)*

. . . .

During the contest of opinion through which we have passed the animation of discussions and of exertions has sometimes worn an aspect which might impose on strangers unused to think freely and to speak and to write what they think; but this being now decided by the voice of the nation, announced according to the rules of the Constitution, all will, of course, arrange themselves under the will of the law, and unite in common efforts for the common good. All, too, will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will to be rightful must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal law must protect, and to violate would be oppression. Let us, then, fellow-citizens, unite with one heart and one mind. . . . [E]very difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it. . . . I believe this . . . the strongest Government on earth. I believe it the only one where every man, at the call of the law, would fly to the standard of the law, and would meet invasions of the public order as his own personal concern. Sometimes it is said that man can not be trusted with the government of himself. Can he, then, be trusted with the government of others? Or have we found angels in the forms of kings to govern him? Let history answer this question.

. . .

About to enter, fellow-citizens, on the exercise of duties which comprehend everything dear and valuable to you, it is proper you should understand what I deem the essential principles of our Government, and consequently those which ought to shape its Administration. I will compress them within the narrowest compass they will bear, stating the general principle, but not all its limitations. Equal and exact justice to all men, of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political; peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none; the support of the State governments in all their rights, as the most competent administrations for our domestic concerns and the surest bulwarks against antirepublican tendencies; the preservation of the General Government in its whole constitutional vigor, as the sheet anchor of our peace at home and safety abroad; a jealous care of the right of election by the people—a mild and safe corrective of abuses which are lopped by the sword of revolution where peaceable remedies are unprovided; absolute acquiescence in the decisions of the majority, the vital principle of republics . . . ; a well-disciplined militia, our best reliance in peace and for the first moments of war till regulars may relieve them; the supremacy of the civil over the military authority; economy in the public expense, that labor may be lightly burdened; the honest payment of our debts and sacred preservation of the public faith; encouragement of agriculture, and of commerce as its handmaid; the diffusion of information and arraignment of all abuses at the bar of the public reason; freedom of religion; freedom of the press, and freedom of person under the protection of the habeas corpus, and trial by juries impartially selected. . . . They should be the creed of our political faith, the text of civic instruction, the touchstone by which to try the services of those we trust; and should we wander from them in moments of error or of alarm, let us hasten to retrace our steps and to regain the road which alone leads to peace, liberty, and safety. . . .

1. Excerpt taken from A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, ed. James D. Richardson, vol. 1 (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1897), 309. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)