

Teaching American History Online Seminar

Jefferson: The Statesman

Saturday, Dec. 13th, 2025

Panelists: Jason Stevens, Joseph Fornieri and David Tucker.

Reading List

- Inaugural Address (1801)
- Letter from Thomas Jefferson to William Henry Harrison (1803)
- Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John B. Colvin (1810)

Link to Event: <https://crowdcast.io/c/h77g1ekm1cpr>



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READING 1: Inaugural Address, Thomas Jefferson | 1801

SOURCE: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/first-inaugural-address-7/>

In 1800, the American people did something no people had done before. They carried out a peaceful transfer of contested political power with a democratic election. This achievement did not follow inevitably from the arrangements for presidential elections established a decade earlier in the Constitution. After the Constitution was ratified and George Washington became president (1789), as everyone assumed he would, differences developed over the policies his administration pursued. The differences centered on the economic policies devised by Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, including the establishment of a national bank. Behind the disputes over economics, however, was the political issue of whether Hamilton's policies benefited some Americans at the expense of others. Beyond even this critical issue lay the fundamental issue of what was the best way for Americans to live with the freedom and equality the revolution had given them.

The differences of opinion on these economic, political, and moral questions gave rise to two parties, the Federalists, who supported Hamilton, and the Republicans, who supported his principal opponent, Thomas Jefferson. During the decade prior to the election of 1800, Republicans and Federalists had waged a bitter partisan contest that split Americans into hostile factions, estranging friends (such as Jefferson and John Adams) and making allies enemies (like Hamilton and James Madison, who had collaborated on *The Federalist*). Each faction accused the other of treachery and treason. Newspapers and pamphlets spread falsehoods and slanders, not sparing even President George Washington. At one point during the decade, threatening partisan crowds gathered outside Washington's home in Philadelphia. As the election approached, the Federalists, the party in control of the federal government, passed a law that limited free speech (the Sedition Act of 1798). Editors were thrown in jail. Even after the election, some partisans claimed the election was invalid, while others sought to change the procedures by which the votes, including electoral college votes, would be counted. Two states even put their militia on alert as partisans talked of a resort to force. Yet on March 4, 1801, Thomas Jefferson peacefully assumed the duties of president, as prescribed by law.

Understanding how and why the peaceful transfer of power occurred (the role of parties and party leader pioneered by the Republicans and Jefferson was critical) leads us to the heart of American politics. One reason that the precedent of a peaceful transfer of power became so well established (broken only twice since, in 1860 and 2020) was the inaugural address that Jefferson gave. The speech mollified Federalists, while continuing the work carried on during the 1790s of turning public opinion toward the Republican viewpoint. The election of 1800 gave the Republicans majorities in both houses of Congress. The Federalists never regained a majority in either house, and eventually their party disappeared. Not only a speech of great partisan rhetorical skill, Jefferson's First Inaugural is an explication of the fundamental principles that must govern democratic politics if it is to survive.

It is one of the profound ironies of American history that Jefferson's election and inaugural address, so important in the history of self-government, were possible only because of the compromise that allowed slaves to be counted for purposes of representation as three fifths of other voters (See [The Three-Fifths Clause](#)). Jefferson won 60 percent, to John Adams' 40 percent, of the popular vote, but won narrowly in the Electoral College. The representation of slaves in the House of Representatives carried over to the Electoral College, where states are given electors equal to their number of representatives and senators. The electoral votes of the South, swollen with slave representation, carried Jefferson to victory in 1800.

—David Tucker

Friends and Fellow Citizens:

Called upon to undertake the duties of the first executive office of our country, I avail myself of the presence of that portion of my fellow citizens which is here assembled to express my grateful thanks for the favor with which they have been pleased to look toward me, to declare a sincere consciousness that the task is above my talents, and that I approach it with those anxious and awful presentiments which the greatness of the charge and the weakness of my powers so justly inspire. A rising nation, spread over a wide and fruitful land, traversing

all the seas with the rich productions of their industry, engaged in commerce with nations who feel power and forget right, advancing rapidly to destinies beyond the reach of mortal eye—when I contemplate these transcendent objects, and see the honor, the happiness, and the hopes of this beloved country committed to the issue, and the auspices of this day, I shrink from the contemplation, and humble myself before the magnitude of the undertaking. Utterly, indeed, should I despair did not the presence of many whom I here see remind me that in the other high authorities provided by our Constitution I shall find resources of wisdom, of virtue, and of zeal on which to rely under all difficulties. To you, then, gentlemen, who are charged with the sovereign functions of legislation, and to those associated with you, I look with encouragement for that guidance and support which may enable us to steer with safety the vessel in which we are all embarked amidst the conflicting elements of a troubled world.

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. Let us restore to social intercourse that harmony and affection without which liberty and even life itself are but dreary things. And let us reflect that, having banished from our land that religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered, we have yet gained little if we countenance a political intolerance as despotic, as wicked, and capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions. During the throes and convulsions of the ancient world, during the agonizing spasms of infuriated man, seeking through blood and slaughter his long-lost liberty, it was not wonderful that the agitation of the billows should reach even this distant and peaceful shore; that this should be more felt and feared by some and less by others, and should divide opinions as to measures of safety. But every 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 know, indeed, that some honest men fear that a republican government cannot be strong, that this government is not strong enough; but would the honest patriot, in the full tide of successful experiment, abandon a government which has so far kept us free and firm on the theoretic and visionary fear that this government, the world's best hope, may by possibility want energy to preserve itself? I trust not. I believe this, on the contrary, 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.

Let us, then, with courage and confidence pursue our own federal and republican principles, our attachment to union and representative government. Kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe; too high-minded to endure the degradations of the others; possessing a chosen country, with room enough for our descendants to the thousandth and thousandth generation;

entertaining a due sense of our equal right to the use of our own faculties, to the acquisitions of our own industry, to honor and confidence from our fellow citizens, resulting not from birth, but from our actions and their sense of them; enlightened by a benign religion, professed, indeed, and practiced in various forms, yet all of them inculcating honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man; acknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here and his greater happiness hereafter—with all these blessings, what more is necessary to make us a happy and a prosperous people? Still one thing more, fellow citizens—a wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, 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. This is the sum of good government, and this is necessary to close the circle of our felicities.

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, from which is no appeal but to force, the vital principle and immediate parent of despotism; 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. These principles form the bright constellation which has gone before us and guided our steps through an age of revolution and reformation. The wisdom of our sages and blood of our heroes have been devoted to their attainment. 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.

I repair, then, fellow citizens, to the post you have assigned me. With experience enough in subordinate offices to have seen the difficulties of this the greatest of all, I have learnt to expect that it will rarely fall to the lot of imperfect man to retire from this station with the reputation and the favor which bring him into it. Without pretensions to that high confidence you reposed in our first and greatest revolutionary character, whose preeminent services had entitled him to the first place in his country's love and destined for him the fairest page in the volume of faithful history, I ask so much confidence only as may give firmness and effect to the legal administration of your affairs. I shall often go wrong through defect of judgment. When right, I shall often be thought wrong by those whose positions will not command a view of the whole ground. I ask your indulgence

for my own errors, which will never be intentional, and your support against the errors of others, who may condemn what they would not if seen in all its parts. The approbation implied by your suffrage is a great consolation to me for the past, and my future solicitude will be to retain the good opinion of those who have bestowed it in advance, to conciliate that of others by doing them all the good in my power, and to be instrumental to the happiness and freedom of all.

Relying, then, on the patronage of your good will, I advance with obedience to the work, ready to retire from it whenever you become sensible how much better choice it is in your power to make. And may that Infinite Power which rules the destinies of the universe lead our councils to what is best, and give them a favorable issue for your peace and prosperity.

READING 2: Letter from Thomas Jefferson to William Henry Harrison | 1803

SOURCE: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-39-02-0500>

Dear Sir

While at Monticello in August last I received your favor of Aug. 6. and meant to have acknowledged it on my return to the seat of government at the close of the ensuing month. but on my return I found that you were expected to be on here in person, & this expectation continued till winter. I have since received your favor of Dec. 30.

In the former you mentioned the plan of the town which you had done me the honour to name after me, and to lay out according to an idea I had formerly expressed to you. I am thoroughly persuaded that it will be found handsome, & pleasant, and I do believe it to be the best means of preserving the cities of America from the scourge of the yellow fever which being peculiar to our country must be derived from some peculiarity in it. that peculiarity I take to be our cloudless skies. in Europe, where the sun does not shine more than half the number of days in the year which it does in America, they can build their towns in a solid block with impunity. but here a constant sun produces too great an accumulation of heat to admit that. ventilation is indispensably necessary. experience has taught us that in the open air of the country the yellow fever is not only not generated, but ceases to be infectious. I cannot decide from the drawing you sent me, whether you have laid off streets round the squares thus or only the diagonal street therein marked. the former was my idea, and is, I imagine, most convenient.



You will receive herewith an answer to your letter as President of the Convention: and from the Secretary at War you receive from time to time information & instructions as to our Indian affairs. these communications being for the public records are restrained always to particular objects & occasions. but this letter being unofficial, & private, I may with safety give you a more extensive view of our policy respecting the Indians, that you may the better comprehend the parts dealt out to you in detail through the official channel, and observing the system of which they make a part, conduct yourself in unison with it in cases where you are obliged to act without instruction. our system is to live in perpetual peace with the Indians, to cultivate an affectionate attachment from them, by every thing just & liberal which we can do for them within the bounds of reason, and by giving them effectual protection against wrongs from our own people. the decrease of game rendering their subsistence by hunting insufficient, we wish to draw them to agriculture, to spinning & weaving. the latter branches they take up with great readiness, because they fall to the women, who gain by quitting the labours of the field for those which are exercised within doors. when they withdraw themselves to the culture of a small piece of land, they will perceive how useless to them are their extensive forests, and will be willing to pare them off from time to time in exchange for necessities for their farms & families. to promote this disposition to exchange lands which they have to spare & we want, for necessities, which we have to spare & they want, we shall push our trading houses, and be glad to see the good & influential individuals among them run in debt, because we observe that when these debts get beyond what the individuals can pay, they become willing to lop th[em off] by a cession of lands. at our trading houses too we mean to sell so low as merely to repay us cost and charges so as neither to lessen or enlarge our capital. this is what private traders cannot do, for they must gain; they will consequently retire from the competition, & we shall thus get clear of this pest without giving offence or umbrage to the Indians. in this way our settlements will gradually circumscribe & approach the Indians, & they will in time either incorporate with us as citizens of the US. or remove beyond the Missisipi. the former is certainly the termination of their history most happy for

themselves. but in the whole course of this, it is essential to cultivate their love. as to their fear, we presume that our strength & their weakness is now so visible that they must see we have only to shut our hand to crush them, & that all our liberalities to them proceed from motives of pure humanity only. should any tribe be fool-hardy enough to take up the hatchet at any time, the seizing the whole country of that tribe & driving them across the Missisipi, as the only condition of peace, would be an example to others, and a furtherance of our final consolidation.

Combined with these views, & to be prepared against the occupation of Louisiana by a powerful & enterprising people, it is important that setting less value on interior extension of purchases from the Indians, we bend our whole views to the purchase and settlement of the country on the Missisipi from it's mouth to it's Northern regions, that we may be able to present as strong a front on our Western as on our Eastern border, and plant on the Missisipi itself the means of it's own defence. we now own from 31.° to the Yazoo, & hope this summer to purchase what belongs to the Choctaws from the Yazoo up to their boundary, supposed to be about opposite the mouth of Acanza. we wish at the same time to begin in your quarter, for which there is at present a favorable opening. the Cahokias being extinct, we are entitled to their country by our paramount sovereignty. the Piorias we understand have all been driven off from their country, & we might claim it in the same way; but as we understand there is one chief remaining, who would, as the survivor of the tribe, sell the right, it will be better to give him such terms as will make him easy for life, and take a conveyance from him. the Kaskaskias being reduced to a few families, I presume we may purchase their whole country for what would place every individual of them at his ease, & be a small price to us. say by laying off for each family wherever they would chuse it as much rich land as they could cultivate, adjacent to each other, inclosing the whole in a single fence, and giving them such an annuity in money or goods for ever as would place them in happiness. and we might take them also under the protection of the US. thus possessed of the rights of these three tribes, we should proceed to the settling their boundaries with the Poutewatamies & Kickapoos; claiming all doubtful territory, but paying them a price for the relinquishment of their concurrent claim, and even prevailing on them if possible to cede for a price such of their own unquestioned territory as would give us a convenient Northern boundary. before broaching this, and while we are bargaining with the Kaskaskias, the minds of the Poutewatamies & Kickapoos should be soothed & consiliated by liberalities and sincere assurances of friendship. perhaps by sending a well qualified character to stay some time in Decoigne's village as if on other business, and to sound him & introduce the subject by degrees to his mind & that of the other heads of families, inculcating in the way of conversation all those considerations which prove the advantages they would recieve by a cession on these terms, the object might be more easily & effectually obtained than by abruptly proposing it to them at a formal treaty. of the means however of obtaining what we wish you will be the best judge; and I have given you this view of the system which we suppose will best promote the interests of the Indians & of ourselves, & finally consolidate our whole country into one nation only, that you may be enabled the better to adapt your means to the object. for this purpose we have given you a general commission for treating. the crisis is pressing. whatever can now be obtained must be obtained quickly. the occupation of New Orleans, hourly expected, by the French, is already felt like a light breeze by the Indians. you know the sentiments they entertain of that nation. under the hopes of their protection, they will immediately stiffen against cessions of land to us. we had better therefore do at once what can now be done.

I must repeat that this letter is to be considered as private & friendly, & is not to controul any particular instructions which you may recieve through the official channel. you will also percieve how sacredly it must be kept within [your] own breast, and especially how improper to be understood by the Indians. [for] their interests

& their tranquility it is best they should see only the present age of their history. I pray you to accept assurances of my esteem & high consideration. TH: Jefferson

READING 3: Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John B. Colvin | 1810

SOURCE: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/letter-to-john-b-colvin/>

Jefferson's letter to John B. Colvin is one of the most important statements by a president about what the English philosopher John Locke called the prerogative power. According to Locke, the prerogative power is the power to act "without the prescription of the law, and sometimes even against it," for the public good. Jefferson wrote his letter in response to Colvin's question whether sometimes officers in high trust had to act beyond the law. Colvin had also notified Jefferson that he was writing the memoirs for General James Wilkinson who had violated the law in order to put down the Burr Conspiracy, so it is likely that Jefferson knew his words would find their way to print. The Conspiracy was and remains somewhat hazy with respect to all of the facts, but it turned on some scheme by Aaron Burr to either incite an insurrection among enslaved persons in Louisiana and or start a new republic in present day Texas. Burr was captured and tried for treason. Somewhere along the way, Burr was denied key rights of the accused. Because the Burr Conspiracy was a controversial event in Jefferson's second term, it is also likely that Jefferson chose his words with great care.

Jefferson's answer begins with several examples that are meant to lead to an easy answer: when necessary for self-preservation, the unwritten law of survival must be paramount to the written law. But Jefferson complicates his answer with a "hypothetical," which no longer seems to be about self-preservation. Having thus prepared the way with these examples, Jefferson answers Colvin's question about Wilkinson and Burr. Importantly, Jefferson never asserts a constitutional basis for the prerogative. Rather, he requires that the officer come clean and accept judgment by Congress or the people after the fact.

—Jeremy D. Bailey

Your favor of the 14th has been duly received, and I have to thank you for the many obliging things respecting myself which are said in it. If I have left in the breasts of my fellow citizens a sentiment of satisfaction with my conduct in the transaction of their business it will soften the pillow of my repose thro' the residue of life.

The question you propose, whether circumstances do not sometimes occur which make it a duty in officers of high trust to assume authorities beyond the law, is easy of solution in principle, but sometimes embarrassing in practice. A strict observance of the written laws is doubtless *one* of the high duties of a good citizen: but it is not *the highest*. The laws of necessity, of self-preservation, of saving our country when in danger, are of higher obligation. To lose our country by a scrupulous adherence to written law, would be to lose the law itself, with life, liberty, property and all those who are enjoying them with us; thus absurdly sacrificing the end to the means. When, in the battle of Germantown, General Washington's army was annoyed from Chew's house, he did not hesitate to plant his cannon against it, altho' the property of a citizen. When he besieged Yorktown, he levelled the suburbs, feeling that the laws of property must be postponed to the safety of the nation. While that army was before Yorktown, the Governor of Virginia took horses, carriages, provisions and even men, by force, to enable that army to stay together till it could master the public enemy; and he was justified. A ship at sea in distress for provisions meets another having abundance, yet refusing a supply; the law of self-preservation authorizes the distressed to take a supply by force. In all these cases the unwritten laws of necessity, of self-preservation, and of the public safety control the written laws of *meum* and *tuum*. Farther to exemplify the principle I will state an hypothetical case. Suppose it had been made known to the Executive of the union in the autumn of 1805, that we might have the Floridas for a reasonable sum, that that sum had not indeed been so appropriated by law, but that Congress were to meet within three weeks, and might appropriate it on the first or second day of their session. Ought he, for so great an advantage to his country, to have risked himself by transcending the law, and making the purchase? The public advantage offered, in this supposed case was indeed immense: but a reverence for law, and the probability that the advantage might still

be *legally* accomplished by a delay of only three weeks, were powerful reasons against hazarding the act. —But supposed it foreseen that a John Randolph would find means to protract the proceeding on it by Congress until the ensuing spring, by which time new circumstances would change the mind of the other party. Ought the Executive, in that case, and with that foreknowledge, to have secured the good to his country, and to have trusted to their justice for the transgression of the law? I think he ought, and that the act would have been approved.—

After the affair of the Chesapeake, we thought war a very possible result. Our magazines were illy provided with some necessary articles, nor had any appropriations been made for their purchase. We ventured however to provide them and to place our country in safety, and stating the case to Congress, they sanctioned the act.

To proceed to the conspiracy of Burr, and particularly to General Wilkinson's situation in New Orleans. In judging this case we are bound to consider the state of the information, correct and incorrect, which he then possessed. He expected Burr and his band from above, a British fleet from below, and he knew there was a formidable conspiracy within the city. Under these circumstances, was he justifiable[:]

1. In seizing notorious conspirators? On this there can be but two opinions; one, of the guilty and their accomplices; the other, that of all honest men.
2. In sending them to the seat of government when the written law gave them a right to trial in the territory? The danger of their rescue, of their continuing their machinations, the tardiness and weakness of the law, apathy of the judges, active patronage of the whole tribe of lawyers, unknown disposition of the juries, an hourly expectation of the enemy, salvation of the city, and of the Union itself, which would have been convulsed to its center, had that conspiracy succeeded, all these constituted a law of necessity and self-preservation, and rendered the *salus populi* supreme over the written law.

The officer who is called to act on this superior ground, does indeed risk himself on the justice of the controlling powers of the Constitution, and his station makes it his duty to incur the risk. But those controlling powers, and his fellow citizens generally, are bound to judge according to the circumstances under which he acted. They are not to transfer the information of this place or moment to the time and place of his action: but to put themselves into his situation. We knew here that there never was danger of a British fleet from below, and that Burr's band was crushed before it reached the Mississippi. But Gen. Wilkinson's information was very different, and he could act on no other.

From these examples and principles, you may see what I think on the question proposed. They do not go to the case of persons charged with petty duties, where consequences are trifling, and time allowed for a legal course, nor to authorize them to take such cases out of the written law. In these the example of overleaping the law is of greater evil than a strict adherence to its imperfect provisions. It is incumbent on those only who accept of great charges, to risk themselves on great occasions, when the safety of the nation, or some of its very high interests are at stake. An officer is bound to obey orders: yet he would be a bad one who should do it in cases for which they were not intended, and which involved the most important consequences. The line of discrimination between cases may be difficult; but the good officer is bound to draw it at his own peril, and throw himself on the justice of his country and the rectitude of his motives.

I have indulged freer views on this question on your assurances that they are for your own eye only, and that they will not get into the hands of newswriters. I met their scurrilities without concern while in pursuit of the great interests with which I was charged, but in my present retirement no duty forbids my wish for quiet.

Accept the assurances of my esteem and respect. TH: Jeferson