Where US Politics Came From: Crash Course US History #9

Crash Course: U.S. History
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Hi, my name is John Green, and this is Crash Course U.S. History, and now that we have a Constitution, it's actually United States history. Today we're going to look at the birth of America's pastime (No, not baseball. Not football. Not eating.) I mean politics, which in America has been adversarial since its very beginnings, despite what the founders wanted.

We looked at the first big conflict in American politics last week: Constitution or Articles of Confederation? I hope that I convinced you we made the correct choice, but regardless, we made it. The constitution passed. But immediately following the passage of the constitution a pretty fundamental conflict came up: what kind of a country should we be?

MFTP: Mr Green, Mr Green! The US is supposed to be the policeman of the world and keep the people in the green parts of Not-America from hurting themselves.

Oh, Me From The Past, we don't get into that stuff until 1823.

(Intro)

So, one vision of America was put forward by Alexander Hamilton, who'd served in the war as Washington's top aide and would go on to be his first Secretary of the Treasury and probably would have been President himself, had he not been born in the British West Indies. Hamilton had a strong personality, and as you can see, the beautiful wavy hair of a Caribbean god, and he had very definite ideas about what he wanted the future of America to look like:

First, Hamilton wanted the country to be mercantile, which means that he believed that we should be deeply involved in world trade.

Second, he wanted the U.S. to be a manufacturing powerhouse. We wouldn't just buy and sell stuff; we would make it too. He even invested in a plan to make Patterson, New Jersey, a manufacturing hub, which of course ultimately failed, because New Jersey. But to make a manufacturing giant, he needed a strong government that could build infrastructure and protect patents. But you already knew that he was in favor of a strong government because, of course, he wrote so many of the Federalist Papers.

Hamilton also envisioned an America that was governed primarily by the elite. His party, which came to be known as the Federalist Party, would be the one of "the rich, the able and the well-born." I mean, just think if the federalist party had survived, we might have had a bunch of like, Bushes and Kennedys as president. Hamilton wanted America to be firmly affiliated with Great Britain. Which isn't surprising, given his passion for elitism and trade.

But there was an opposing view of what America should look like, and it is most associated with Thomas Jefferson. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Jefferson wanted an America that was predominantly agrarian, with most people being small scale subsistence level farmers. Maybe they would produce a little surplus for local markets, but certainly not for international consumers. There would be no international trade. And he didn't want manufacturing either.

This small scale local economy could best be served by a small scale, local government. It's not a surprise to find that Jefferson's sympathies lay with the anti-federalists, even though he benefited from the new constitution a little bit, since he eventually got to be President and everything.

Unlike the elitist Hamilton, Jefferson was an avowed democrat, which meant that he distrusted concentrated power and privilege and believed that the masses could basically govern themselves. To him, government and concentrated economic power were greater threats to liberty than a tyrannical majority.

Jefferson was a big fan of the French, and not only because he spent a fair amount of time in Paris as our ambassador there. He also liked the French because they fought with us in the war of independence against the British, and because, after 1789, he liked the way the French treated their aristocrats-- that is, brutally.

In general, Jefferson and his partisans who called themselves Republicans (although some textbooks call them Democratic-Republicans just to make things incredibly confusing) preferred France just as the Hamiltonians preferred Britain, and this was a bit of a problem since France and England were pretty much constantly at war between 1740 and 1815. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So linked to these imagined Americas were the questions of how democratic we should be and how much free speech we should have. Jefferson and the Republicans wanted more democracy and more free speech, well, sort of.

I mean, during Washington's presidency, Democratic-Republican Societies sprang up, the first opposition political parties. And in 1794, the Democratic-Republican society of Pennsylvania published an address which made the point that, "Freedom of thought, and a free communication of opinions by speech or through the medium of the press, are the safeguards of our Liberties."

The Federalists on the other hand saw too much free speech and democracy as a threat. And from this it sounds like the Republicans were "better democrats", but it's more complicated than that. I mean, for one thing many Republicans, including Thomas Jefferson were slaveholders, and slavery is kind of the opposite of Democracy.

And for another, many were supporters of the French Revolution, and supporting the French Revolution after 1793 is pretty of problematic. Because as you'll remember from Crash Course World History, Robespierre was guillotining everyone, up until the point where he himself was guillotined.

Okay, so in the first real American presidential election there weren't any political parties. There wasn't even a campaign. The election was uncontested and George Washington won. He didn't even have to run for office; he stood for it.

Washington's presidency is important for a number of precedents that he set, including the notion that a president should only serve two terms and the idea that even if he was a general the president should wear civilian clothing, but he wasn't the real policy brains. Hamilton was. Washington probably wouldn't have called himself a Federalist, but he backed Hamilton's plan for a stronger nation.

And to that end, Hamilton began the great American tradition of having a 5 point plan:

Point 1: Establish the nation's credit-worthiness Hamilton realized that if the new nation wanted to be taken seriously it had to pay off its debts, most of which had come during the war. And to do this Hamilton proposed that the U.S. government assume the debt that the states had amassed.

Point 2: Create a national debt – that's something you don't hear politicians say these days – Hamilton wanted to create new interest bearing bonds, hoping to give the rich people a stake in our nation's success.

Point 3: Create a Bank of the United States – This bank would be private and it would turn a profit for its shareholders but it would hold public funds and issue notes that would circulate as currency. And the bank would definitely be needed to house all the money that was expected to be raised from…

Point 4: A Whiskey tax. Then, as now, Americans liked to drink. And one sure way to raise money was to set an excise tax on whiskey, which might reduce drinking on the margins or cause people to switch to beer. But what it would definitely do is hurt small farmers, who found the most profitable use of their grain was to distill it into sweet, sweet whiskey. So the Whiskey Tax really upset small farmers, as we will see in a moment.

Point 5: Encourage domestic industrial manufacturing by imposing a tariff. For those of you who think that the U.S. was founded on free trade principles, think again.

Now you'll remember that the Republicans wanted an agrarian republic with freer trade, so they disliked Hamilton's plan. They also argued that none of this was in the Constitution, and they were right. This position of expecting government to be limited by the text of the constitution came to be known as strict construction.

But the Republicans lacked a five point plan of their own, so their only hope of success was to shave Hamilton's five point plan down to four points, which is what they did.

In 1790, many of the Republicans, who were Southerners like Jefferson, struck a bargain. They agreed to points 1-4 of Hamilton's plan in exchange for a permanent capital on the Potomac (in the South as opposed to the first two temporary capitals of the US in New York and Philadelphia). So the Hamiltonian economy won out. For a while.

Probably the most immediately controversial aspect of Hamilton's program was the whiskey tax, and not just because people loved to drink. But also because farmers love to turn their rye into whiskey, into profits. In 1794, western Pennsylvania farmers even took up arms to protest the tax; and that clearly could not stand.

Washington actually led (at least for part of the way) a force of 13,000 men to put down this Whiskey Rebellion, becoming the only sitting president to lead troops in the field, and America continued to tax booze, as it does to this day.

On the subject of foreign affairs, there was much more agreement just kidding. Hamilton wanted the U.S. to have close ties to Britain for commercial reasons, but Britain was perpetually at war with France, which whom the U.S. technically had a perpetual alliance. You know, because they helped us with the American Revolution, they gave us the Statue of Liberty, and Marion Cotillard, etc.

And the French revolution made things even more complicated, because Republicans liked it but Federalists, being somewhat conservative and elitist, were afraid of it, This was especially true when French emissary Citizen Genet showed up in 1793 and started hiring American ships to attack British ones.

Britain in response began impressing American sailors, which sounds fun, but isn't. It doesn't mean the British sailors wowed Americans with their awesome mermaid tattoos, it means they kidnapped them and forced them to serve in the British navy.

Washington dispatched secretary of state John Jay to deal with the impressment issue and he negotiated the boringly named Jay Treaty which, improved trade relations between the U.S. and Britain and said absolutely nothing about impressment or American shipping rights. For the rest of his term, Washington just tried to ignore the problem, thereby inaugurating another presidential tradition: kicking big foreign policy problems down the line for future presidents.

By the end of his presidency, George Washington was somewhat disillusioned by politics. His famous call for unity said that "with slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits and political principles," Washington warned against the "baneful effects of the spirit of party generally," saying that "it agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms; kindles the animosity of one part against another; foments occasionally riot & insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption."

Still, by the time the diminutive John Adams took over as the second president, Americans had already divided themselves into two groups, elitist Federalist and Republicans who stood for freedom and equality and… Oh, It's time for the Mystery Document?

The rules here are simple. I guess the author of the mystery document, and if i am right, I do not get shocked. If I am wrong, I do get shocked. Alright, let's give it a go.

"Yes, ye lordly, ye haughty sex, our souls are by nature equal to yours; the same breath of God animates, enlivens, and invigorates us; Were we to grant that animal strength proved any thing, taking into consideration the accustomed impartiality of nature, we should be induced to imagine, that she had invested the female mind with superior strength as an equivalent for the bodily powers of man. But waiving this however palpable advantage, for equality only we wish to contend."

So the author of the Mystery Document is a badass woman. So we have here an argument, and a bit of a snarky one, for equality between men and women. Alright, I can do this. Elizabeth Cady Stanton is too young. Also, probably not funny enough. Ahhh, bleergh, Stan, my official guess is Sarah Grimké.

DANG IT! AHHHH! JUDITH SARGENT MURRAY? ARRGH. Well, you know, as part of the patriarchy I probably deserve this anyway.

So Judith Sargent Murray reminds us that once unleashed, ideas like liberty and equality spread to places where neither the male Federalists nor the male Republicans wanted them to go. But back to Adams.

His election in 1796 exposed a big flaw in our electoral system: because the vice presidency went to whomever had the second highest number of electoral votes, and that person happened to be Thomas Jefferson, we ended up with a situation where the president and vice president were on opposite sides of the political spectrum, which is not good.

So they changed the constitution, but not until after the next election which featured another screw up. We're awesome at this. Side note: The electoral college system would continue to misrepresent the will of the American voters, most notably in 1876, 1888, and 2000, but also in every election.

Domestically, Adams continued Hamilton's policies, but Adams' presidency is best known for foreign problems, especially the way Adams' administration totally overreacted to problems with France. Because we were trying to maintain good commercial relationships with England, and England was perpetually at war with France, France ended up in a "quasi-war" with the United States despite our eternal alliance.

They disrupted our shipping, we felt nervous about their increasingly violent revolution, and then, after three French

emissaries tried to extort a bribe from the U.S. government as part of negotiations – the so called “X,Y,Z affair” because we didn’t want to give the names of these bribe-seeking French scoundrels.

The American public turned against France, somewhat hysterically, as it will. Taking advantage of the hysteria, Adams pushed through the Alien and Sedition Acts. The Alien Act lengthened the period of time it took to become a citizen, and the Sedition Act made it a crime to criticize the government.

Among the more famous people prosecuted under the Sedition Act was Matthew Lyon, a Congressman from Vermont who was jailed for saying that John Adams was maybe not the best president ever. And while in jail, Lyon won reelection to Congress, which might indicate just how popular this law wasn’t.

It was so unpopular that Virginia and Kentucky’s legislatures passed resolutions against it, claiming that it violated Americans’ liberties and that state legislatures had the power to overturn or nullify any federal law that they found to violate the constitution. This whole business of nullification and states rights? It will return.

The Alien and Sedition acts were allowed to lapse under Jefferson, and they didn’t lead to widespread arrests of everyone who called Adams a tyrant or expressed admiration for the French Revolution. And even though they weren’t popular, they didn’t doom the Federalist party either, even though no Federalist was elected president after Adams.

But the Alien and Sedition Acts and the response to them from Virginia and Kentucky are important, because they show us how unsettled American politics were in the first decade of the country’s existence. Even something as basic as freedom of speech was up for grabs as America tried to figure out what kind of country it was going to be.

That’s important to think about when studying American history, but it’s also important to think about when looking at new democracies. You might think that Jefferson’s winning the presidential election in 1800 settled that issue, but wasn’t so simple. It never is, really. Thanks for watching, I’ll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko, the associate producer is Danica Johnson, and the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Café.

If you have questions about today’s video, particularly if they’re actual questions, and not passive-aggressive attempts to impose your ideology upon other people, leave them in comments, where they will be answered by our team of historians. We’re also accepting your submissions for Libertage captions.

Thanks for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my home town, Don’t Forget To Be Awesome.