From Deference to Democracy: The Transformation of American Society, 1789-1815

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Gordon S. Wood’s Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic: 1789–1815 is an impressive and magisterial survey of one of the most complex and written-about eras in American history by one of the leading historians of the early republic. This extraordinary new book, the eighth and latest volume in the Oxford History of the United States, complements and amplifies the author’s arguments in two of his earlier books, the Bancroft Prize-winning The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787 (1969) and the Pulitzer Prize–winning The Radicalism of the American Revolution (1992). In Empire of Liberty, Wood has skillfully navigated the twenty-six–year critical period when the future of republicanism and the union were in doubt.

The periodization of Wood’s new work, however, is unlike that in two earlier series: The American Nation: A History, published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and its successor, The New American History Series. While both earlier series had separate volumes dealing with the Federalist and Jeffersonian eras, Wood’s covers both periods. This more comprehensive approach has put a burden on Wood to analyze, explain, and conceptualize the multifaceted forces that were at work in the United States from 1789 to 1815. Henry Adams, for example, took nine volumes to deal only with the period from 1800 to 1816. This also puts a burden on the reviewer, even one who has been allotted extra space, to attempt to do justice to such a large, sweeping, and detailed account.

Wood has chosen to meet this imposing challenge by organizing his book in two different ways. For the most part, the first eight chapters deal chronologically with the period up through the election of 1800. In contrast, the remaining eleven chapters are primarily arranged topically. Topical arrangement, however, sometimes means that events with a specific and timely significance
Wood begins his book where he left off in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, stating that, by 1815, the “central impulses of the Revolution had run their course” and “Democracy and equality were no longer problematic issues to be debated; they had become articles of faith to be fulfilled” (p. 4).

In the 1780s, however, that was far from the case. The elites of the country were becoming increasingly troubled by the radicalism of various state legislatures, with the “middling sort,” especially in the Northern states, gaining considerable political power and challenging the classical ideas of an elitist deferential authority. Consequently, it was this concern that led to the writing and ratification of the Constitution, with James Madison hoping that the new structure of government “would be a kind of impartial super-judge over all the competing interests in the society.” It would, anticipated Madison, create a “disinterested & dispassionate umpire in disputes between different passions & interests” in the different states (p. 32).

Many Federalists who had enthusiastically supported the ratification of the Constitution and the new government were losing faith in the Revolutionary dream that the American republic could survive with a government of limited powers. These Federalists, the author claims, were pessimistic about the future of republicanism but had no desire to return to a monarchical form of government, which they believed was impossible even if they had desired it. Thus, President George Washington and Secretary of Treasury Alexander Hamilton, Wood maintains, were determined to transform the country into an integrated nation with a national government that had the power “to act energetically in the public sphere” (p. 53).

Although eventually adopted, Hamilton’s financial plan faced great difficulty in overcoming state and local loyalties. It would not be easy, as Wood styles it, to build this “monarchical republic” that Hamilton had in mind—for this Walpolean vision of government ultimately failed to gain traction in post-revolutionary America because it was anachronistic and poorly adapted to the emerging capitalistic and democratic society.

The Republican opposition led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison was slow to develop since the only alternative to Washington’s administration seemed to be chaos and anarchy at a time when there was no acceptance of the idea of a loyal opposition. Hamilton’s financial plan, however, was the organizing catalyst for a loosely formed opposition to develop. Madison, Wood contends, became a leader in this effort to oppose the creation of a new national government that seemed radically at odds with the structure he had imagined at the time the Constitution was written. Instead of the government becoming “a judicial-like umpire” that Madison had supposed, Hamilton was creating “a modern European-type state with an elaborate bureaucracy, a
standing army, perpetual debts, and a powerful independent executive” (pp. 148–49). Hamilton, for his part, feared the developing Virginia-based opposition, especially since that state was the largest and most powerful one in the Union and its opposition threatened the existence of the republic itself.

These emerging divisions, however, did not, Wood explains, mark the emergence of modern party politics. Instead, he says, politics “retained much of its eighteenth century character” (p. 158). In the South, the slaveholding gentry holding on to power through a deferential political system was unthreatened by an increasingly democratic politics. The North, though, was a different case, as “the Republican party was the political expression of new egalitarian-minded social forces released and intensified by the Revolution” (p. 167).

One of the best chapters in the first half of the book is “John Adams and the Few and the Many.” Adams believed, Wood maintains, that there was “an inevitable social division between the few and the many, between gentlemen and commoners, between ‘the rich and the poor, the laborious and the idle, the learned and the ignorant’” (p. 214). And while Adams’ solution to curb the “unruly and dynamic social circumstances” of the 1790s by a constitutional remedy of bicameralism was “simple-minded,” he was correct, Wood argues, in his analysis of the divisions in American society. In order to illustrate the “social feelings . . . between the Federalists and the Northern Republicans,” Wood discusses the backgrounds of three “middling” Northern Republicans: William Findley, who became an articulate spokesperson for the debtor–paper money interests in Pennsylvania; Jedediah Peck of New York, who appealed for popular support by railing against the wealthy and privileged; and Matthew Lyon, who, as a newspaper editor and congressman from Vermont, vituperatively attacked the elites. These men, Wood contends, were representative of a new kind of boisterous democratic politics. And it was this “clash between an older aristocratic world of honor and the emerging new democratic world of political parties and partisan newspapers [that] lay behind much of the turbulence and passion of the 1790s” (p. 238).

The climatic chapter of the first half of the book is “The Jeffersonian Revolution,” which Wood describes as the sweeping away of the Federalists who “stood in the way of popular democracy as it was emerging in the United States” (p. 276). The election of 1800, he writes, as Jefferson later characterized it, as “real a revolution in the principles of our government as that of 1776 was in its form.” And, as Wood notes, it was one of the first popular elections in modern history that resulted in the peaceful transfer of power from one party to another.

What is the significance of this election? The author argues that:

Perhaps the most radical change resulting from the Jeffersonian election of 1800 was in politics. Popular voting took on a significance that it had never quite had
before, and the increased numbers of contested elections for both federal and state officials sent the turnout of voters skyrocketing. In many places, especially in the North, the participation of eligible voters went from 20 percent or so in the 1790s to 80 percent or more in the first decade of the nineteenth century (p. 302).

For Wood this “radical change” was due in part to the Republicans creating the idea of a “plebiscitarian principle” of the presidency—the notion that the presidency rightfully belongs to the candidate whose party has won an electoral mandate from the voters” (p. 283). Yet it is questionable whether this concept is very helpful in understanding how Jefferson and the Republicans viewed presidential power; in fact, it is a modern concept that misrepresents the very nature of early American politics. What did Jefferson’s victory represent? It could hardly be called an outpouring of democratic sentiment, with voters in only five of sixteen states directly voting to choose electors by general ticket or district in 1800, in contrast to eight of sixteen states in 1796.

In addition, Wood’s “radical change,” was more centered in the states. As one historian has pointed out, state politics were characterized by robust, competitive contests that generally had significantly higher voter turnouts than national ones, at least until the 1820s and 1830s.1

After 1800, Wood contends, the Federalists’ political power began to decline and they never again threatened the Republicans’ control of the presidency. By “1820 their party had become too weak even to nominate a presidential candidate, although the cultural authority of the Federalists, especially in New England, had grown substantially” (p. 313).

Eventually, however, the stresses and strains of being too successful took their toll on the Republicans. Ideological factions increasingly arose within the party around questions of the role and scope of the federal government, with a states’ rights wing becoming more and more frustrated with those who were more nationalistic. And in the election of 1824, these fractures within the party led to five Republican candidates contending against one another to become Monroe’s successor.

But despite this fragmentation, the Republican coalition that had won power in 1800 dominated the political life of the nation for the next quarter century. Compared “to the consolidated heroic European-like state that the Federalists tried to build in the 1790s,” Wood insists, “what Jefferson and the Republicans did after 1800 proved that a real revolution—as real as Jefferson said it was—had taken place” (p. 286).

The second half of Wood’s book, which has to do with the period after Jefferson’s election in 1800 up to 1815, is more topically focused. It includes chapters on the social transformation of the country after 1800 as the result of the rise of a robust democratic spirit; the settlement and exploration of the West and degradation of the Indian; the judiciary; Chief Justice Marshall and
the origins of judicial review; American reform efforts; repressive attitudes toward African Americans in the North; cultural aspirations of Americans with painting and the arts; republican religion and the reconciliation of Christianity with American democracy; Republican diplomacy and the War of 1812; and the transformation of the United States from a Europe-oriented classical republic state at the end of the American Revolution to an inward-looking “unprecedented kind of democratic republic” (p. 737).

In his chapter on “Republican Society,” Wood brilliantly describes the almost breathtaking revolutionary shift of America from an eighteenth-century deferential, gentlemen-led society to one characterized by a wide-open scramble for wealth that brought in its wake a kind of social anarchy and chaos in the early nineteenth century. William Cooper of Otsego, New York, is used as an example of a Federalist who “imagined becoming a genteel patriarch” but was rudely awakened from this idea by the transformation of his village, Cooperstown, into a larger, more diverse town “racked by lawsuits, bankruptcies, disobedient servants, vandalism, thefts, and incidents of violence and arson” (p. 319).

But despite increased violence, rioting, and licentiousness in the early republic, Wood argues, Americans “continued to remain extraordinarily confident and optimistic about the future” (p. 469). And it was this optimism that provided the energy for the modernization of transportation as well as for a number of reforms, including ones to improve education, promote morality, reform the punishment of criminals, and further women’s rights. Wood also points to the flood of printed material being generated, including the circulation of 22 million copies of 376 newspapers annually, giving the United States the distinction of having “the largest aggregate circulation of newspapers of any country in the world” (p. 479).

The antislavery movement in the early republic was the “greatest republican reform,” he asserts, although “only a fraction of the nearly half a million slaves in the colonies in 1776” were freed as a result of it. Wood takes issue with “many modern historians [who] have called the Revolution’s inability to free all the slaves its greatest failure.” Rather, he argues, the “Revolution did accomplish a great deal” in creating the “cultural atmosphere that made African American slavery abhorrent to many Americans” (p. 508).

Specifically, Wood’s conclusions here differ with those of Gary Nash, who contends that one of the failures of the American Revolution was the failure to abolish slavery. “Very seldom in history,” Nash writes, “do a people imagine a new world, see it within their grasp, and then give it up.” But one of the main differences between Wood and Nash is one of timing. Wood sees the Revolution as beginning a process that eventually led to liberation, while Nash believes that it had been possible during the Revolutionary era, but that opportunity to achieve it had been squandered.
Unfortunately, the topical organizational strategy that Wood uses in the second half of the book, and occasionally in the first part, diminishes and sometimes obscures the significance of various events. For instance, in his chapter discussing the emergence of a Republican opposition, he has a small section on the Democratic Republican societies, who were the first to raise important questions about the nature of representation in the new republic and “challenged the older world of deferential political leadership and called for the people’s participation in the affairs of government beyond merely periodically casting their votes” (p. 163). The significance of these societies, however, cannot be fully understood unless they are placed in the larger context of the impact the French Revolution had on American society, which is not discussed until the next chapter. Even then, most of Wood’s attention is centered around larger national political and diplomatic issues such as “Citizen Genet,” Washington’s proclamation of neutrality, the Jay Treaty, Pinckney’s Treaty, the growth of American prosperity in the 1790s, and Washington’s Farewell Address.

By isolating the French Revolution in its own chapter, he makes it difficult for the reader to appreciate that great upheaval as a crucial part of the process of politicizing the American electorate. Initially, the French Revolution and the successes of its armies were avidly toasted and celebrated by Americans of all social classes. And indeed, it provided a polarizing ideology that profoundly fueled the intensifying and escalating political divisions in the United States in the 1790s.3

In addition, Wood’s treatment of Jefferson’s victory in 1800 does not include a discussion of Gabriel’s Rebellion in Virginia in the summer of 1800 nor of the importance of the 3/5ths clause in securing Jefferson’s victory. These come much later in the book. The former is significant because the failed slave revolt in Virginia substantially raised the apprehension level of Virginians and other Southerners and increased their sense of vulnerability at the same time that a critical election was about to take place.

The infamous 3/5ths clause in the Constitution that counted slaves as 3/5ths of a person for allotting representation in Congress, as well as for levying taxes, played a crucial role in Jefferson’s election. According to one historian, Jefferson would have lost twelve votes in the election of 1800 and Adams two without the 3/5ths clause. This would have given the election to Adams, sixty-three to sixty-one.4 This imbalance given to the slave South was resentfully acknowledged by Federalist opponents in the Northeast and contributed to a dangerous sectional polarization. The Boston Columbian Centinel, for example, complained in early January 1801 that the Republican victory was due to the “suffrages of a minority of the free citizens [and] the weight of about half a million black cattle thrown into their scale.”5
To separate these events from the election prevents a fuller appreciation of the sense that many Americans had in 1800 of the precariousness and fragility of the Union. More than two decades ago, Wood wrote that most contemporary Americans would take for granted “a strong national government.” But in making that assumption we would “tend to miss the radicalness of the Constitution.” Further,

from the vantage point of the late twentieth century, allegiance to the nation, to the union, seems a matter of course; we can scarcely conceive of the United States without a powerful central government. . . . But if we change our vantage point and stand in 1776, then a strong national government is not something we can take for granted.6

The topical organization of parts of Wood’s book, however, tend to obscure and diminish the significance of that “vantage point” that Americans had during the years of the early republic.

This observation, however, should not be seen as detracting from this marvelous and important work. Empire of Liberty is a tour de force and a monumental achievement of research and synthesis by one of our finest historians.

James Roger Sharp is a professor of history at Syracuse University. His The Deadlocked Election of 1800: Jefferson, Burr, and the Union in the Balance (2010) is part of the presidential election series of the University Press of Kansas.