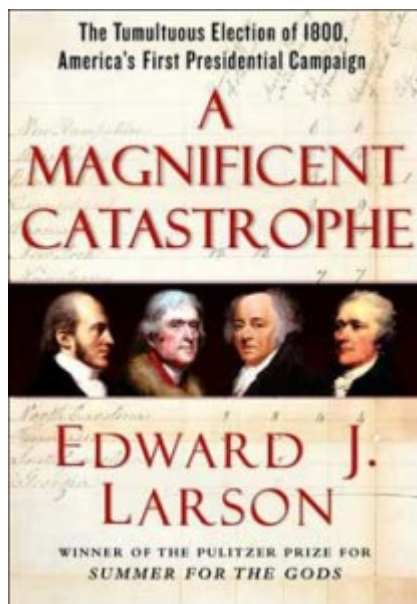
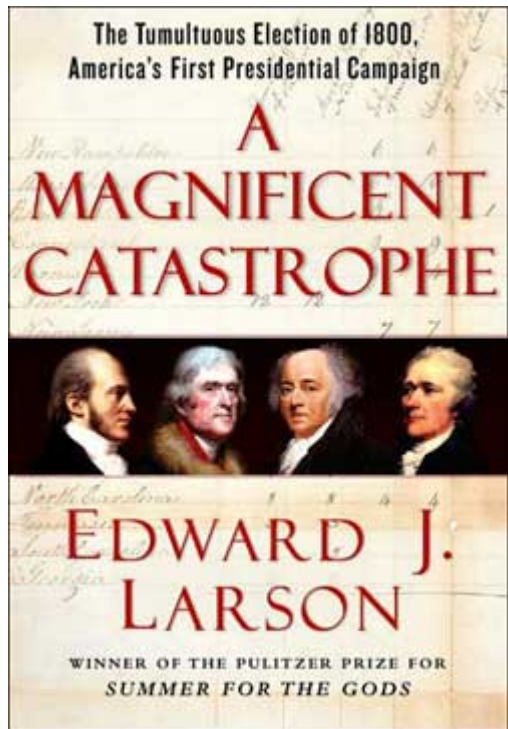


Freedom from High Federalism



Edward J. Larson, *A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election of 1800, America's First Presidential Campaign*. New York: Free Press, 2007. 333 pp. + illustrations, hardcover, \$27.00.

What did the election of Thomas Jefferson in 1801 mean for American democracy? What ideas and values followed him to the executive mansion, and what ideas and values departed with John Adams—or, more accurately, with Adams's nemesis, Alexander Hamilton? Given the number of historians who have asked these questions before, Edward Larson's achievement in *A Magnificent Catastrophe* is all the more impressive. He manages to make this familiar event both new and

absorbing by appreciating its dire stakes and breathless contingencies. Through no fault of its own, Larson's book is also very timely, because it reminds us that authoritarian government is rarely as popular as authoritarians say it is.

In some respects, this is a traditional political history that focuses on the major founders. Larson appreciates and even admires his characters, especially Jefferson and Adams. Indeed, with these two icons, he sometimes loses his critical edge: he claims, for instance, "Both men preferred farming to law or politics" (1), though they were both intensely ambitious politicians, and Jefferson was a plantation owner, not a farmer. But Larson is no hagiographer. Indeed, one of his great feats is to introduce his characters in all their flawed humanity: Jefferson, the sanguine philosopher-statesman who knew how to get past his own hypocrisies; Adams, the vain conservative who cussedly insisted on doing the right thing; Hamilton, the hot-tempered elitist who tried to bully the wrong people; and Aaron Burr, the talented playboy who dazzled some and disgusted others. More than a matter of style, the biographical pathos that Larson brings to each page enables him not only to describe but also to explain what happened during this election.

The engaging narrative works at two speeds: first, as a sequential play-by-play of the election year in each battleground state, and second, as a broader sweep over the postrevolutionary age and nation. We get a close-up look of early "electioneering" in Philadelphia and of street-by-street canvassing in New York City and then draw back to observe the fitful construction of Washington, D.C., and the aborted slave rebellion of Gabriel Prosser. We learn a great deal about the political peculiarities of each state while surveying the political landscape of the entire republic. We also learn how, when, and where High Federalism began to alienate Americans with its disturbing encroachments on the most basic forms of democracy and dissent.

Other than the date (December 3) on which the Electoral College met, there was no actual election day in 1800. Some states trusted their legislatures to choose electors; others allowed a popular vote; still others switched their method during the election year to favor the Federalist candidates, Adams and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, or the Republican challengers, Jefferson and Burr. The nascent parties thus locked horns in different ways in New York, and then Pennsylvania and South Carolina, and then Maryland, and then Rhode Island. As the results trickled in during the spring, summer, and fall of 1800, both sides kept a running tally of likely electoral votes. And all the while, Hamilton and other High Federalists conspired to dump the maddeningly moderate Adams.

The finest chapters reveal Larson's keen eye for anecdotal detail and his deep knowledge of American religious history. His portrait of the New York City elections perfectly captures the inner culture and daily dramas of a partisan campaign: the exhausted operatives, the harried campaign headquarters, the incessant glad-handing and exhorting. Defeated in Hamilton's backyard, the High Federalists then learned that Adams had *pardoned* John Fries, a Pennsylvania tax rioter they wanted to hang. As the Jeffersonians made startling gains in

Pennsylvania and Maryland, as well, Federalists realized that the political center had shifted under their feet. Their fear of Jeffersonian rule grew vivid and often hysterical. If the Virginian was elected, one editorial warned, "the temples of the most high will be profaned by the impious orgies of the Goddess of Reason, personified as in France by some common prostitute" (94). Presumably, a vote for the Federalists would forestall such outbreaks of Gallic carnality.

But the outcome was always in doubt, and Larson wisely avoids a simple or synthetic explanation for Jefferson's victory. By its very nature, this election was a series of discrete, close-run contests that played out within a general context of experimentation. The rules of the game were neither fixed nor certain, and even when Jefferson prevailed he really hadn't; locked in a dead heat with his putative ally, Burr, the Virginian had to sweat through another round of backroom politicking before the Federalists in Congress relented in March 1801. Larson draws the curtain with a moving account of inauguration day and the divergent paths of the main figures. While the new president built a winning majority upon a broad middle ground of republican principle, Hamilton and Burr skulked to the sidelines, where they remained until the latter shot the former in 1804. Adams retired with his pride wounded but his integrity intact. He later explained himself to his old friend from Virginia before they both passed away on July 4, 1826. "It is a great day," the New Englander noted of the nation's jubilee. "It is a *good* day" (276).

Which brings us back to the question: *what* did Jefferson win? I should say that I read Larson's book just after reviewing Terry Bouton's *Taming Democracy*, which persuasively argues that most citizens, at least in Pennsylvania, were sorely disappointed by the ultimate outcome of the Revolution. They wanted a government dedicated to the good of the people, not the power of the nation or the wealth of the wealthy. They lost. By the mid-1790s, American statesmen agreed on a political economy that favored moneyed men in hopes of attracting investments from home and abroad. To be sure, Jefferson and his allies moderated the regressive policies of Hamilton, Robert Morris, and other trickle-down enthusiasts. But when Jefferson declared in the midst of the campaign that he was "religiously principled in the sacred discharge of [the debt] to the uttermost farthing," we wonder if the range of political choices had already narrowed to the point where his victory did not threaten those who counted most (157). We wonder what sort of freedom there was to win.

Yet the cumulative lesson of Larson's book is that Jefferson prevailed because he offered an alternative to the authoritarian and militaristic style of governance that the High Federalists had tried to impose. In New York City, the motivating issue for the hardscrabble immigrants who turned out to vote Jeffersonian was Federalist persecution of "enemy aliens." In Maryland, the challengers got a late boost when the Federalists tried to wrest the power to choose electors from voters. In Virginia, the show trial and imprisonment of republican scandalmonger James Callender backfired on Federalist judges and their Sedition Act. And everywhere, the Hamiltonian tendency to wear dress

swords and review soldiers ran counter to a popular spirit whose animating soul was impertinence. An unsteady amalgam of the competing desires for liberty and equality, that spirit implied a diversity of wills. It imperiled all forms of subordination and complicated each and every public measure; it was frustrating and inefficient. But it was also democratic, and that mattered then as it matters now.

This article originally appeared in issue 8.3 (April, 2008).

J. M. Opal is assistant professor at Colby College. He is the author of *Beyond the Farm: National Ambitions in Rural New England* (2008) and is now working on a project tentatively titled, *To Heal the Nations: The Search for Peace in the Early United States*. He lives in Maine with his wife Holly.