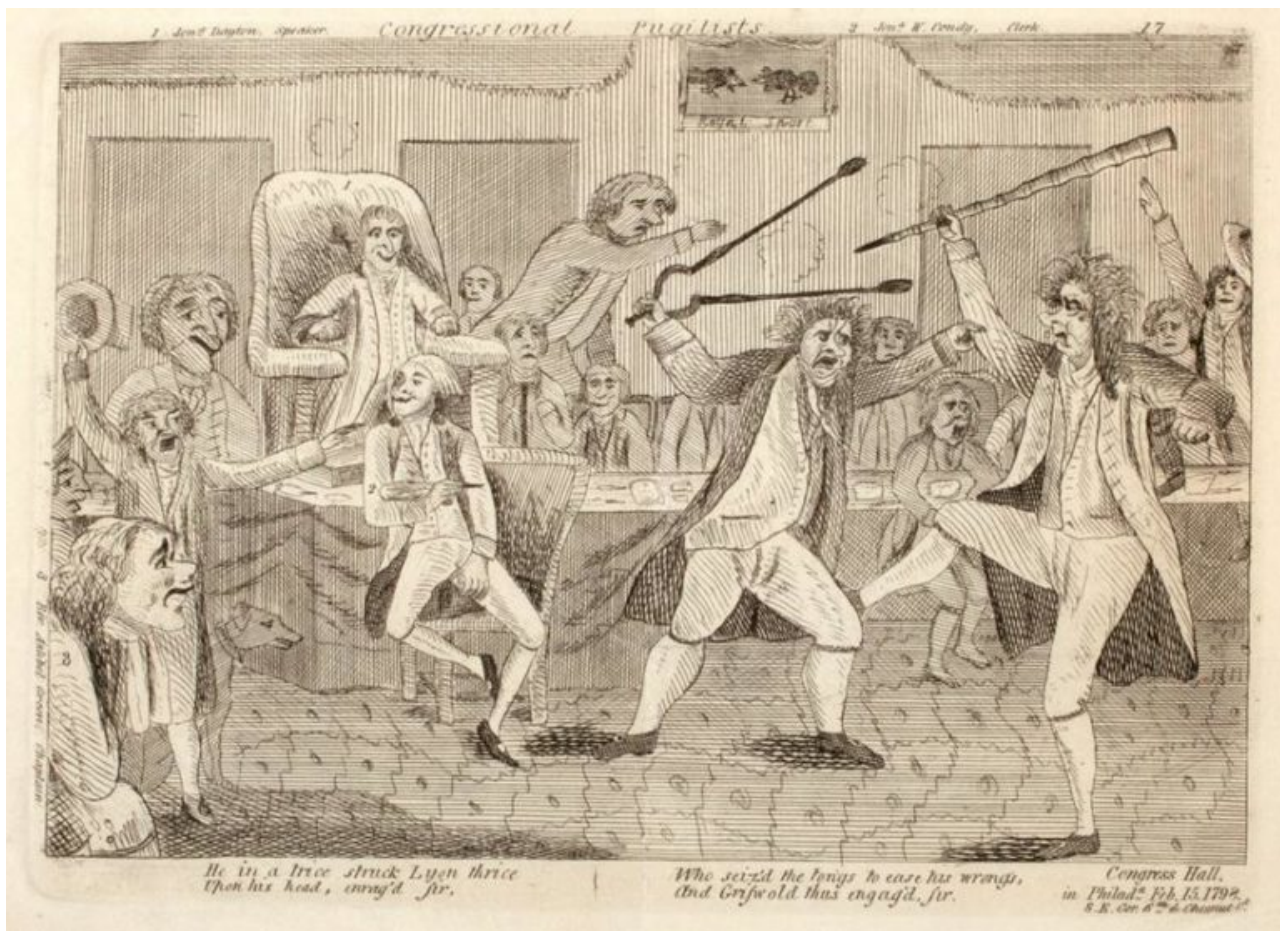


# Were Jeffersonian Charges of Monarchism Really Just Sleazy, Hysterical Smears?



## MYTHS OF THE LOST ATLANTIS

Every recent presidential election cycle, about the time a campaign goes negative, newspapers run [a story like the one in the Sunday New York Times, August 17, 2008 "Week in Review."](#)<sup>[1]</sup> These articles suggest that while we should deplore Swift-Boating and innuendoes about Barack Obama's possible Al-Qaeda sympathies, modern political tactics are mild compared to those of the founding era. Such pieces will often mention the Matthew Lyon/Roger Griswold House floor brawl or the Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemings scandal before proceeding to the ultimate proof: Jeffersonian accusations that George Washington, John Adams, and the Federalists planned to reimpose monarchy.

The charge sounds absurd to modern ears, and no serious historian credits the claim that any Federalist literally planned to reintroduce a hereditary executive. Thus how could the supporters of Jefferson have been doing anything other than indulging in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century version of the attack ad when they claimed that John Adams wanted "the presidency [to] be made hereditary in the

family of Lund Washington" (cousin of the childless President) and that his desire was part of Adams's plot "to set up and establish hereditary government"? The scheme was not confined to Adams, insisted Jeffersonians, for his monarchism was symptomatic of the Federalists' fundamental purpose. Virtually their every action since placing a military chieftain at the head of a republican government stood "in favor of the general cause of monarchy and of aristocracy; a cause in which these gentlemen in some degree partook, and too probably hope still more to partake." The Federalists were, in short, power-mad aristocrats hostile to republican institutions and values. They abused the people's rights and gathered together to plot the end of republican institutions with "the levee-room their place of rendezvous." [2]

Such ripe language should at least leave us contemptuous of the unimaginative negative campaigning that assaults every swing state today. But the news articles precisely miss the point when they imply that nothing changes all that much over time and that modern negative campaigning, among other things, connects us with a venerable political past and with behavior that just might be the price we pay for free speech and democracy. Jeffersonian charges of monarchy, in fact, don't reveal how connected recent campaigns are to the politics of the early national period. Rather, understanding and contextualizing the charge of monarchy shows just how far removed we are from the concerns of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

For there is nothing about the way we live now that allows us to experience the assumptions of people who were genuinely terrified by monarchy. By "monarchy," Jeffersonians meant more than simply kings and queens. They feared a broad culture of monarchy, which comprised hereditary power of any sort and any concentration or manipulation of public power likely to grant a few privileges that were denied to most. Jeffersonians identified this culture of monarchy as the most significant threat faced by republican experiments. The conviction arose that a culture of monarchy existed in the United States because the republic emerged toward the end of what can usefully be understood as the late early modern period, coinciding with what British historians call the long eighteenth century, beginning with the Glorious Revolution and ending at the Battle of Waterloo. [3]

I call the period "late early modern" because in post-revolutionary America (as well as the wider western European and Atlantic world of which it was a part), many features of the early modern period flourished: a commitment to a definable, pursuable, and unitary public good; quasi-aristocratic attitudes ranging from contempt to ambivalence about labor and laborers; and the conviction that societies could be divided into orders shaped by social and economic position, orders that corresponded to prescribed responsibilities and duties. Yet these convictions coexisted anxiously with ideas that reflected the lateness of this late early modern period, ideas often associated with mainstream nineteenth-century (and later) American political and economic thought. The late early modern period produced paeans to majority rule, egalitarianism, and the dignity of labor, along with an individualism that

stressed the legitimacy of self-interest and necessity of an authentic self. All of these compelling, but frequently conflicting, ideas were coeval in the same region, the same political party, even, at times, in the same person. But in general most Federalists of the 1790s were attracted towards the older, more conservative side of the late early modern period, while the Jeffersonian coalition embraced the era's more transformative possibilities.[\[4\]](#)

This late early modern period was dominated by the triumph of taxing states and increasingly consolidated national governments, with Britain separating itself from its competitors and forging the world's greatest empire by becoming the only truly successful fiscal state. The dominant state-building trends of the late early modern period were: embracing the financial revolution of public debt, constructing a nation-state bureaucracy that could manage overseas empires and the military forces such empires required, and, as much as possible, shifting decision-making power about nation-states and empires upward, to centralize political power and to subordinate localities to the center. Britain outdistanced its competitors in all of these goals; it was the model to emulate.[\[5\]](#)

American revolutionaries concluded that what they viewed as contempt for British liberty on the part of the new British state was systemically connected to the sort of state Britain had become. The Articles of Confederation government, with the most important locus of governance being the localities, was about as complete a rejection of the primary developments of the late early modern period that a people could construct and still claim to have a central government. During the 1790s all members of the emerging Jeffersonian coalition continued to agree that the locality should remain the principal place of governance.

The Federalists of the 1790s saw things rather differently. Federalists believed that disorderly citizens were creating conditions that would soon become unlivable. Popular support for the French Revolution produced self-created political organizations, the Democratic-Republican Societies. These groups challenged Federalist ideals of deference and hierarchy by inserting themselves into political debate and demanding changes in the nation's policies. Federalists believed such behavior produced the climate that caused a New York crowd to hurl stones at Alexander Hamilton when he spoke in support of an anti-French treaty. In addition, during the 1790s citizens registered discontent with Federalist economic and financial policies with actions that ranged from furious newspaper articles to armed rebellion. Federalists interpreted this behavior through a prism of classical republican political theory that argued for an inexorable progression from unstructured liberty to license to anarchy. Once anarchy replaced liberty, the citizenry would welcome any despot who promised to restore order, no matter how.

The Federalists were not seeking to restore hereditary rule, but they did believe that the gravest threat to republican institutions and the people's liberty was the people themselves. Their solutions: Hamilton's financial

program, the expansive interpretation of the Constitution, the defense of an energetic national state, and the court culture they developed in the Philadelphia capital. All of it was intended to merge a version of republicanism with the primary developments of the late early modern period. Hamilton's financial program made the new national government solely responsible for all revolutionary war debt, a debt by 1791 owned by a small group of the wealthiest Americans, and called for the national government to charter a Bank of the United States, partially funded with the newly valuable public debt. The program was openly modeled on the British financial system that had begun in 1694 with Parliament's passage of the million pound act and its creation of the Bank of England. Taxing to service public debt, critics of the Federalists insisted, was the quintessential act of modern monarchy. The Federalists sought to merge ownership of public debt with policies of economic development by making the debt a primary source of investment funds for manufacturing and banking projects.

This hierarchical arrangement fit neatly with an interpretation of the necessary and proper clause of the Constitution that vastly increased the nation-state's implied powers to, among other things, charter corporations such as the Bank of the United States. These centralizing policies of finance and political economy appeared to their critics to flourish in the sumptuous, court-inspired culture of levees, balls, and assemblies that shaped Federalist Philadelphia. This so-called republican court centered on the President and Martha Washington and radiated outward to include office-holders, public creditors, and the administration's wealthiest and most socially prestigious supporters. Federalists sought to consolidate cultural, social, political, and economic power in the hands of a national gentry that could preserve the people's liberty by guiding them more virtuously and intelligently than the people could guide themselves. The Federalist solution provoked the fears of any who considered the key to preservation of republican institutions and liberty to be governance primarily by the locality, and the rejection of the main developments of the late early modern period.[\[6\]](#)

A diverse group of people could embrace local control. In doing so they were driven by a complex combination of principle and interest, a mix of high-minded, sordid, and most other sorts of motives in between. Gentleman slaveholders such as Thomas Jefferson, upwardly mobile strivers and professionals such as the lawyers Alexander James Dallas and Levi Lincoln, somewhat less than respectable autodidacts and immigrant radicals such as Philadelphia *Aurora* editor William Duane, hardscrabble laborers such as the former-weaver-turned-politician William Findley, the farmer-intellectual William Manning, and many others could make common cause in opposition. By joining together, they fashioned a political critique that simultaneously protected their material interests, allowed them to be far more significant to the republican experiment than they were likely to be in the frankly elitist world of the Federalists, and addressed what everybody from Mandeville to Hume to Rousseau agreed were the most compelling questions of the era.

By seeking the triumph of the localities over the center, the Jeffersonians opposed the dominant trends of that era. The only way the localities could triumph was to make them impregnable by parceling out power beyond the capacity of any effort to consolidate and direct it. Jeffersonian leaders, many of whom were slaveholders, defeated Federalist leaders, far fewer of whom were, because an ever-growing number of ordinary citizens associated their most cherished principles and their most intimate interests with the triumph of the localities. But localities deserved to govern themselves only if the mostly ordinary men in them were qualified to govern. In the early national period, defending the triumph of the localities required a language of democratization and egalitarianism, a language that promoters of the dominant trends of the late early modern period, such as the Federalists, could never be very comfortable using. [7]

Here was a purely Jeffersonian conundrum. Defending the supremacy of the localities gave local citizens the right and the power to do what they wanted, including own slaves. But championing the localities depended on claiming that all sorts of people who the Federalists considered incapable of reasoned judgment and self-government were capable of both. That claim was incendiary. When, for example, in 1800 Gabriel and other Richmond-area slaves revolted using the language and expecting the aid of the French and Jeffersonian friends of liberty, Federalists were quick to point out that gentlemen such as Jefferson should have known better than to incite their white inferiors, and so paved the way for this outburst from their black ones. [8]

This argument won few converts, partly because few slave revolts in the U.S. succeeded in the long run or drew the kind of cross-racial support Gabriel sought. And planters could lead a democratizing political coalition because a society of independent heads of household and local control were more appealing to most citizens north and south than anything the Federalists offered. Charges of monarchy resonated so powerfully because the political, social, cultural, and economic arrangements that sustained that institution during the late early modern period were essential to the goals of the Federalists, just as they were anathema to so many of their opponents.

The Jeffersonians succeeded in doing what they set out to do: organize the nation as the anti-Europe, as the refutation of the late early modern period. By glorifying the locality and making the nation the anti-Europe, the Jeffersonians rejected the centralizing trends of the late early modern period. By making the United States the anti-Europe, the Jeffersonians dissolved the institutions that the Federalists used to seek a consolidated and centralized nation state with direct connections to social and economic power. Such a state and ruling elite, Jeffersonians had no doubt, was evidence of an anti-republican culture of monarchy.

By building a 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-Europe, the Jeffersonians created a democratized, fluid, rapidly changing society of mobility, opportunity, risk, and often anxiety and uncertainty. Mobility went both upward and downward in

the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and rapid and often frightening social and economic change could be successfully negotiated, or fail to be. Regardless of the outcome, citizens of the republican anti-Europe learned repeatedly that they were pretty much on their own. For those who qualified as citizens, such a world was at once liberating and terrifying. The early American republic democratized both opportunity and inequality. It often seemed that as the chances for the first condition expanded, so too did the advancement of the second.

This republican anti-Europe depended on the autonomy of the locality. This autonomy guaranteed the absence of national institutions that could potentially consolidate political and economic power. By placing local autonomy at the center of their vision, the Jeffersonians dismantled the Federalists' consolidated nation-state, but they also guaranteed the safety of the slavery that sustained their primarily southern leadership. For local autonomy insulated and so allowed to expand the dominant institutions and practices within each locality. The same language that denounced the Federalists' consolidated nation-state also defended the autonomy of slaveholding localities. Once again principle and interest merged. All Jeffersonians feared a culture of monarchy and the consolidation within a nation-state of political and economic power. But certain Jeffersonians, especially the most prominent, lived as they did because they owned slaves, and slavery benefited enormously from a belief system that demanded that localities be left alone to do as they wished. By defeating what they had no doubt was a culture of monarchy, the Jeffersonians created a democratized, locally-oriented, republic of opportunity for all citizens—opportunity to rise or fall. Yet the ideals that made the United States the anti-Europe—a nation dedicated to the rejection of the central trends of the late early modern period—protected as no other 19<sup>th</sup>-century belief system could what Lincoln so movingly described as the embodiment of “the divine right of kings”: by 1860 for four million Americans “the same spirit that says you work and toil and earn bread, and I’ll eat it.”<sup>[9]</sup> Jeffersonian ideology triumphantly smashed the late early modern period taxing state culture of monarchy. In doing so, Jeffersonians laid the foundation for a nation that enslaved four million souls and spread the divine right of kings across the land.

<sup>[1]</sup> Paul Vitello, “How to Erase that Smea...,” *New York Times*, August 17, 2008, WK3.

<sup>[2]</sup> Thomas Paine, “Letter to George Washington, President of the United States of America, on Affairs Public and Private,” (Philadelphia, 1796) 2-3, 7; No Author Listed, “Remarks Occasioned by the Late Conduct of Mr. Washington As President of the United States,” (Philadelphia, 1797), 27.

<sup>[3]</sup> Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978); James L. Huston, “The American Revolutionaries, the Political Economy of Aristocracy, and the American Concept of the Distribution of Wealth, 1765-1900, *AHR* 98 (1993):1079-1105; Huston, *Securing the Fruits of Labor: The American Concept of Wealth Distribution*,

1765-1900 (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 1998); Andrew Shankman, *Crucible of American Democracy: The Struggle to Fuse Egalitarianism and Capitalism in Jeffersonian Pennsylvania* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), chps. 1-2; Andrew Shankman "A New Thing on Earth: Alexander Hamilton, Pro-Manufacturing Republicans, and the Democratization of American Political Economy," *Journal of the Early Republic* 23 (2003): 323-352.

[4] A sampling of works on these transformative possibilities and also on the Jeffersonian connection to them includes, Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York, NYU Press, 1984); Appleby, "Thomas Jefferson and the Psychology of Democracy," in James Horn, Jan Lewis, and Peter Onuf eds., *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic* (Charlottesville, VA: UVA Press, 2002) 155-172; Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: the American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982); W.J. Rorabaugh "I Thought I Should Liberate Myself from the Thralldom of Others: Apprentices, Masters, and the Revolution," in Alfred F. Young ed., *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (De Kalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993) 185-217; Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrenceville, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1997); Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Jeffrey L. Pasley, "1800 as a Revolution in Political Culture: Newspapers, Celebrations, Voting, and Democratization in the Early Republic," in Horn ed., *The Revolution of 1800*.

[5] Richard Bonney ed., *The Rise of the Fiscal State in Europe, 1200-1815* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999); Bonney ed., *Economic Systems and State Finance* (London: Oxford University Press, 1995); Mark Ormrod, Margaret Bonney, and Richard Bonney eds., *Crises, Revolutions, and Self-Sustained Growth: Essays in European Fiscal History, 1130-1830* (Lincolnshire, UK: Alden Group, 1999); P.G.M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England: A Study in the Development of Public Credit, 1688-1756* (London, 1967); John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State: 1688-1783* (New York, 1988); Patrick O'Brien, "The Political Economy of British Taxation, 1660-1815," *Economic History Review* 41 (1988) 1-32; O'Brien, "Inseparable Connections: Trade, Economy, Fiscal State, and the Expansion of Empire, 1689-1815," in P.J. Marshall ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Eighteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998) 53-77; O'Brien, "Fiscal Exceptionalism: Great Britain and its European Rivals from Civil War to the Triumph at Trafalgar and Waterloo," in Donald Winch and Patrick O'Brien, eds., *The Political Economy of British Historical Experience, 1688-1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002) 245-265; Lawrence Stone, ed., *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689-1815* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[6] Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1789* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969); Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800* (London: Oxford University Press, 1993);

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[7] Thomas Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1986); Paul Douglas Newman; *Fries's Rebellion: The Enduring Struggle for the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, PA: Penn Press, 2004), Terry Bouton, "A Road Closed: Rural Insurgency in Post-Independence Pennsylvania," *Journal of American History* 87 (2000) 855-887; Andrew Shankman, "Malcontents and Tertium Quids: The Battle to Define Democracy in Jeffersonian Philadelphia," *Journal of the Early Republic* 19 (1999) 43-72; Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*; Richard K. Mathews, *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson: A Revisionist View* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1984); Colleen A. Sheehan, "The Politics of Public Opinion: James Madison's Notes on Government," *William and Mary Quarterly* 49 (1992) 609-627; Sheehan, "Madison vs. Hamilton: The Battle over Republicanism and the Role of Public Opinion," in Douglas Ambrose and W.T. Martin eds., *The Many Faces of Alexander Hamilton: The Life and Legacy of America's Most Elusive Founding Father* (New York: NYU Press, 2006); John E. Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[8] Douglas R. Egerton, "Gabriel's Conspiracy and the Election of 1800," *Journal of Southern History* 56 (1990) 191-214; Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800-1802* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1993).

[9] Abraham Lincoln, *Lincoln Selected Speeches and Writings* (New York, Verso Books, 1992), 193.

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