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## THOMAS JEFFERSON STILL LIVES

MATTHEW SPALDING

One orderly transition deserves another, and another, and another.

March 4 is the 200th anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's inauguration in 1801 as the third President of the United States. Four years earlier, George Washington had turned over the presidency to his Vice President, John Adams. But Jefferson's inauguration was the first time in our nation's history—if not the world's—that the reins of political power were peacefully transferred from one party to its political rivals as a result of popular election. The significance of this event—and its contemporary lessons—cannot be overstated.

The election of 1800 was divisive. The Federalists, led by then-President John Adams, said the Republicans were radical democrats sympathetic to the violent revolutionaries in France. The Republicans, led by Jefferson, accused the Federalists of favoring monarchy and dictatorial rule. An electoral tie between the top candidates threw the election to the House of Representatives. After six days of voting and 36 ballots, Jefferson was elected President—some 10 weeks after the initial election. An embittered Adams, and other leaders in his political party, did not attend his successor's inauguration.

But consider what did not happen: Troops were not brought in, legislatures were not dissolved, and the previous leadership was not killed or imprisoned. Indeed, the oath of office was delivered by an archrival, Chief Justice John Marshall (whom the

outgoing President had appointed after the election), and the new President solemnly swore before his political enemy to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States.

At the first inauguration held in the new capital of Washington, D.C., President Jefferson delivered one of the two or three best and most quoted inaugural addresses in American history. Written nearly 25 years after he had drafted the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson's message speaks to our politics today.

**Ballots and not bullets are the arbiters of bitter political divisions.**

Throughout history, and still in many nations, violence has been the leading recourse of defeated partisans threatened with the loss of their political power. Jefferson notes that in the United States, the legitimate voice of the people, “*announced according to the rules of the Constitution,*” settles the question and “all will, of course, arrange themselves under the will of the law, and unite in common efforts for the common good.” Jefferson believed that republican government

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strengthened liberty by encouraging deliberation and allowing for the peaceful resolution of differences of opinion. "Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle."

**Majorities rule, but all possess equal rights.** Jefferson reminds us that we are bound to accept the rule of the legitimate majority but also notes that majority rule does not justify violating the just rights of the minority. "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." The reconciliation of political differences comes not from circumventing this principle but from strengthening our consensus about the importance of majority rule and minority right. "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."

**A wise and frugal government.** Finally, Jefferson points out that good government is limited government and that limited government encourages our civic happiness. He favored a constitutional government of enumerated powers, one that would restrain men from harming one another but would otherwise leave them to their own pursuits—not taking "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."

After the election of 1800, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, though they had been friends and fellow patriots since 1775, did not speak or write for 11 years. But in 1812, they reconciled and began one of the greatest and most poignant correspondences in all history. The two rivals both died, within hours of each other, on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of America's independence. Adams's last words, although factually incorrect, remain true: "Thomas Jefferson still lives."

—Matthew Spalding is Director of the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

**NOTABLE QUOTES FROM JEFFERSON'S FIRST INAUGURAL, MARCH 4, 1801:**

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.