

**Topic:** Jeffersonian Democracy

**Grades:** 8, 11

**Course:** American History

**Context:** In 1789, George Washington swore the oath of office and became the first president of the new constitutional republic. He served as president until 1797, when he was succeeded by his vice president, John Adams, who served until 1801. Both Washington and Adams were associated with a political faction known as the Federalists, later the Federalist Party. Along with Alexander Hamilton, they promoted trade, manufacturing, banking, and tariffs. They believed that a vigorous national government should support a global market and take an active roll in pro-business foreign policy. They also promoted the notion of “loose interpretation” of the U.S. Constitution. This position argued that if the Constitution did not specifically forbid the national government from taking certain actions, then the national government could do so. Through the Federalist-dominated years of Washington and Adams, Thomas Jefferson, along with like-minded Virginian James Madison, promoted a very different American vision. He argued for reduced national debt, a weakening of federal power, and above all, a primarily agriculture-based America. Historians often refer to the Election of 1800, when Jefferson narrowly defeated John Adams’ re-election bid, as the “Jeffersonian Revolution” or the “Revolution of 1800.” Contemporary Europeans were certain that George Washington would never allow the transfer of power from the Federalist Party to what were then being called the Jeffersonian Republicans. And so, when there was a peaceful transfer of power, there was a sense that a peaceful revolution had just taken place. But more importantly, when Jefferson came to the White House, he brought with him a fundamentally different American vision. This, more than a transfer of power, was the real Jeffersonian Revolution.

**Focus:** After becoming president in 1801, Jefferson attempted to shape America into an extensive democracy based on the noble character of hardworking small farmers. He wanted to shift the nation away from Hamilton’s focus on banking, shipping, and urbanization, believing instead that America drew strength from agricultural life. He also attempted to reduce federal power, military build-up, federal debt, and international activity, preferring to give attention to domestic policy and states’ rights. Nevertheless, external events and opportunities, such as the Tripolitan War, British abuse of American shipping, and the purchase of the Louisiana Territory all nudged Jefferson in a direction that made him continue at least some of the Federalist approaches of the previous decade. In some cases, he even rejected the theoretical positions he had previously promoted in the face of practical demands.

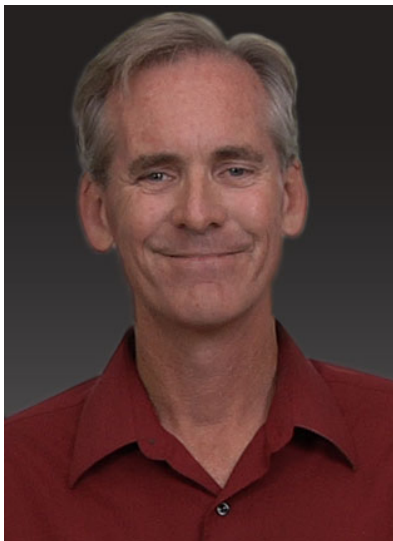
**Outcomes:** Students will be able to describe Jefferson’s expressed vision for America and the role of the federal government and compare that vision to his actual actions as president.

**Factors:**

- Virginia & Kentucky Resolutions
- Louisiana Purchase
- Yeoman Farmers
- Embargo & Non-Intercourse Act
- Tripolitan War
- Loose Interpretation vs. Strict Interpretation

**Student Writing:** To what extent did Jefferson’s actions as president accurately express his professed vision for American government and society?

*This lecture is brought to you by:*



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