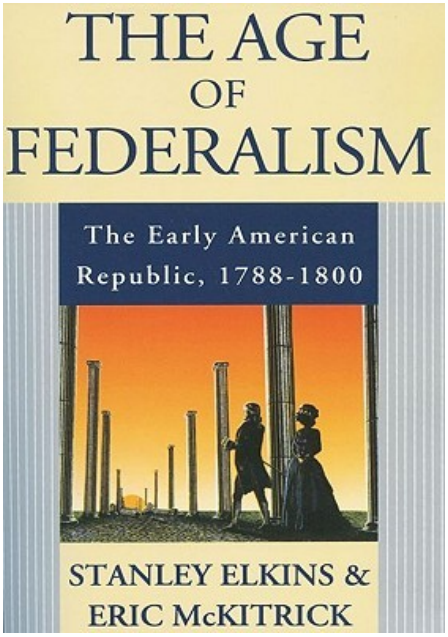

The Age of Federalism

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When Thomas Jefferson took the oath of office for the presidency in 1801, the United States had just passed through twelve critical years, years dominated by some of the towering figures of our history and by the challenge of having to do everything for the first time. Washington, Hamilton, Madison, Adams, and Jefferson himself each had a share in setting the nation's important precedents, in organizing the public finances, and in attempting - though with minimal success - to compel respect for the American republic from the powers of Europe. The historical era bounded by those first years is brilliantly represented in The Age of Federalism. Written by esteemed historians Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick, The Age of Federalism gives us a reflective, deeply informed analytical survey of this extraordinary period. Ranging over the widest variety of concerns - political, cultural, economic, diplomatic, military - the authors keep in view not only the problems the new nation faced but also the particular individuals who tried, with mixed results, to solve them. They intersperse their account with subtly perceptive (and sometimes delightful) character sketches, not only of the great central figures - Washington and Jefferson, Talleyrand and Napoleon Bonaparte - but also of various lesser ones, such as George Hammond, Britain's frustrated minister to the United States, James McHenry, Adams's hapless Secretary of War, a pre-Chief Justice version of John Marshall, and others. They weave these lively profiles into an analysis of the major controversies of the time in an effort to recover something that is now two centuries out of reach, the psychology of a generation of nation-builders, not allof it attractive. The moral urgency of these issues, and the bitterness of the disagreements over them, reflected a fearful sense that the entire future hung on the particular way any one of them was settled. We thus see, for example, how the fight over Hamilton's Treasury syste

The Age of Federalism Details

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From Reader Review The Age of Federalism for online ebook

B. Hallward says

This is a thoroughly excellent history of the early American republic that at its best brings a remarkable clarity to complex political and economic issues, particularly the working out of early forms and administrative procedures, the aims of Hamilton's economic policies, and the political realities under which treaties with England and France were reached. It is a somewhat old-fashioned history -- objectivist in tone and unselfconsciously concerned with a only a small political elite even in an era of growing popular movements -- and conservative in bias, but engaging and full of fascinating details which the authors clearly relish.

Jim says

The Age of Federalism is the result of a thirty-year collaboration between Elkins and McKitrick, called by their colleagues “the Batman and Robin of American historical scholarship.” The work earned the prestigious Bancroft prize for American history in 1994. Instead of American exceptionalism and unabashed equality, the author’s insights into the Washington, Adams, and Jefferson administrations show a complicated and divisive era as America grew out of infancy. The narrative benefits from strong use of primary sources to recreate an authentic past complete with a work-in-progress vision of the country’s founding fathers practicing hardball politics to shape the nation’s future. Given the depth of the research and writing, you can return to this book year after year and find new insights into this formative period in American history.

Andrew says

Standard, text-booky review of Washington and Adams administration. Moderate perspective was helpful for me- somewhat blowing off the hyperbole about Alien and Sedition acts (effecting so few and then those being mitigated too). Thorough review of the French problems from before during and after XYZ affair. Sufficient information to qualify as detailed without being tedious.

Lauren Albert says

All I can say is "whew." I must admit it was tough going--not a broad history but a very narrow detailed one--as it covers in great detail the political life of only 12 years of time in the early Republic. One of the most interesting things for me in reading it was the authors' critical view of some of the Founding Fathers--men who are more often than not subjects of hagiographic readings of their lives. They really really dislike Jefferson and think Adams ridiculous.

I imagine that the book would appeal not only to students of early America but those interested in the ins and outs of politics--the compromises, the power plays, the feuds. The coverage of relations between the U.S. and France and the U.S. and Great Britain were good examples of the errors in judgment that can be made in

international politics. They also make clear the importance of seeing things from the other point of view--what "we" never realized, in their version of the interactions between the U.S. and Great Britain, was how little we mattered to them in the larger scheme of things and this greatly affected our negotiating power.

Anyway, a worthy read but not one to be taken lightly (walk softly and carry a big book).

Lindsay says

This book is a beast. There is really no other way to say it. It took me forever to finish. Not because it was poorly written or boring, quite the opposite in fact. I was continuously impressed by the amazing quality of the writing and the fact that the information imparted was incredibly interesting. Fascinating vignette after fascinating vignette, I truly enjoyed reading this book. Don't be daunted by the 750 pages of writing (with an additional several hundred of notes), this is the type of book you can read 10 pages and put it down. That being said, this is not a book for those who don't like history, plain and simple.

Christopher Saunders says

I understand that The Age of Federalism began as part of The Oxford History of the United States, which certainly explains its mammoth size and detailed, often-ponderous analytical style. Granted, it doesn't reach the cultural sweep of that series' best volumes (like its ultimate replacement, Gordon S. Wood's Empire of Liberty); indeed, the early chapters bog down in excessive detail of party politics and ideological debates between early American leaders. Yet the book eventually takes flight, showing that the "Age of Federalism" was a lively era where different visions of America vied, in pamphlets and newspapers, in speeches and laws, in the very seats of government, to determine the new nation's future. Elkins and McKitrick provide engrossing looks at specific events (from Citizen Genet's disastrous agitation in the United States to the furor over the Jay Treaty and John Adams' presidency) and individual Founders; he posits the Federalists as doomed not due to their tendencies towards elitist authoritarianism, as many claim, but due to their divided councils, disputes over tactics and details and especially personality (the Adams-Hamilton feud is hashed out in great detail). Despite some slower passages, it's a rich, insightful book that rewards careful reading.

Aaron Crofut says

I absolutely loved this book. Elkins and McKitrick do a wonderful job putting the reader in the heady and exciting days of our nation's birth, when both possibilities and pitfalls seemed endless. This book is engaging and enjoyable; it's a thousand pages, but I never found myself wishing it was shorter. If anything, I would like to find similarly detailed accounts of every twelve year period in American history. But this is the big time, the big show, the time when America was new, when the tone of all to follow was to be established, and the men involved knew it.

This book has two overarching themes: the struggle to establish legitimacy for the new nation, and the painful birth of political parties. The story of the first theme can almost be summed up in two words: George Washington. Perhaps never has a man been so fit for a moment as he. His virtues border on the sublime: a Virginia aristocrat with both practical experience and the connections of an inside club, a man whose private affairs were always connected with the public welfare, he earned such a reputation that at virtually no point

was his nomination for top positions in the United States even challenged, whether he sought them or not. A man like that has the potential to be a Napoleon, but he became the American Cincinnatus. The Presidency and its powers were designed for him in a most literal sense; he was the President of the Constitution Convention, and nobody had any illusions about who would first fill that role.

It was necessary to have such a man at the helm, a man almost above reproach, because everything he and his officers did was brand new and worthy of argument. Do we call him "Sir" or "Your Excellency"? Can he fire his department heads without consulting the Senate? Should he go to Congress to discuss issues or they to him? Sounds silly today when these questions are established, but then they were issues of great contention which could only be firmly resolved by the presence of Washington.

This is a quirk of the time that brings in the second theme: the rise of the political party. When the nation was brand new, it did not come with political parties. If one was disappointed by the tone of the new government, he could speak out against it and try to convince others to do likewise, but there was no party system to unite them into a powerful political force. For the first few moments, the Administration was all of the auctoritas in existence on the national scale. No serious challenge could come from without, and so long as the issues at hand remained rather tame, no internal dissent would fracture this uniting force.

But there were such issues. Elkins and McKitrick strain themselves to point out a fact almost inconceivable today: the United States was a very weak power in the world at this time, one routinely written off as unimportant. The weak suffer what they must (as those learned men in classical literature would know), and being weak, we suffered at the hands of a powerful Great Britain and, later, a renegade France. Americans would come to believe one side or the other was more fearful or more friendly to us, largely depending on their economics. New England merchants needed British trade and had no desire to pick a fight with them; Virginia planters had no love of the merchants, bankers, or British. These interlocking issues on foreign affairs, economics, and sectional interests became the ideological fields in which the opposing factions could form around their chief advocates, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson.

The details and interplay of these issues and men make up the bulk of this book, and I can't recap them all without copying the book. The Bank, assumption of state debts, the Whiskey Rebellion, the XYZ Affair, the Quasi-War, the Alien and Sedition Acts, are all topics worthy of study, in particular because it was our Founding Generation who argued about them. But there is one last thing I want to mention, something important today in terms of our political system and how it ended up being the way that it is. These men argued hotly over many issues, but their core fundamental beliefs were more often than not the same. They grew up on the same works of literature and the same history; most of them had gone through the crucible of the American Revolution (though how much of a national role they played influenced how national of a view they took after the war).

But all of them had incredible disdain for the notion of political parties. None would declare himself a member of such a thing. Abstractly, they were appalled by such a notion. The problem of parties is too well known to bother restating here: my point is simply that these men knew them as well as we, lived in an era where there were no parties, and then created the first parties, whether they would admit it or not. The Democratic-Republicans of Jefferson were particularly good at organizing their caucus, recruiting candidates, and perhaps most importantly, creating a media machine. The Federalists never really became organized; their last President had no loyalty to the Federalists, who themselves tried to oust Adams rather than focus on their nemesis Jefferson, bringing the latter into power and the Federalists into extinction. We may abhor political parties for their corruption, unreasonable criticisms, and inflexibility (the Dem-Reps of Jefferson and Madison paid dearly for their hostility to Hamilton's bank and army when the War of 1812 came around), but they serve their purposes too well for us to ever be rid of them.

I would highly, highly recommend taking the time to read this book well.

Marc says

Wow. I'm almost as impressed with myself for finishing this behemoth as I am with the thing itself. Make no mistake--this is some dense stuff (the small, single-spaced print means it's much longer than advertised), but just fascinating. I used to fancy myself reasonably well-informed regarding early American history, but after reading this I know that wasn't true (it's truer now). There's lots of great stuff here, including fascinating portraits of, Hamilton, Madison, and others, and great coverage of the origins of American party politics. But I was most struck by the importance of foreign affairs to American politics and society in this period; all the events I first heard about on my "Story of America" cards are here, from Citizen Genet to the XYZ Affair, and from the Barbary Pirates to the Jay Treaty. The facts are riveting, and the authors' analysis seems astute to me.

Highly recommended.

Jc says

A very dense work, definitely for the very serious history reader. A complete graduate-level course on the first decade or so of the Republic. It does expect you to know what it is talking about before reading it, no easy outlines of history here. But, if you can dig through it you will know a lot about how this country got off the ground. Definitly not for everyone, certainly not light reading, but more than worth it if you can do it. Shows the early republic to be a time not of mystical "fathers of the country," but of real political and financial struggle. [I suggest reading it in sections, with something lighter to clear the head in between:]

note upon finishing it: very worth reading if you are interested at all in US history, especially if you are under the illusion that the founding fathers were saint that got it all right from day one. Makes one appreciate what a struggle it was getting this country off the ground, and what problems it had from day one (many of which still haunt us)

Robert says

Though a little dry, this is by far the most comprehensive book I have read about the political history of the Washington and Adams administrations. Instead of focusing only on the well-known principals, local political trends, social pressures, and international events are brought together to give a thorough understanding of the era. The authors seem to have sought to create a work that can stand beside Adams's history of the Jefferson and Madison administrations (or at least its two-volume abridged version). I haven't seen any other work that comes so close to success. I would even recommend the chapter on American-French relations to those who have no especial interest in the last years of the 18th century.

Rj says

Of late I have been plodding through Stanley Elkins & Eric McKitrick's The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Elkins and McKitrick's study is a 925 page study of Federalism and the politics, culture and society of the early Republic. It is one of those books that would have proved invaluable while studying for my comprehensives, but at the same time would have seemed to heafty to wad through in the space of time alloted. The book carefully walks through the whole period analyzing the personalities and politics which led to the creation of the two-party system in the United States. It would be a welcome resource for teaching federalism and the early republic to undergraduates and has been a joy to pick up each evening.

A.J. Howard says

Look in almost any grade-school American History textbook and you'll find, highlighted in bold, the term "the Revolution of 1800, referring to the fourth U.S. Presidential election. In these hypothetical textbooks, you'll find an explanation referring to the electoral victory of Thomas Jefferson over John Adams, and how the peaceful transition between two opposing parties demonstrated the strength of the new American democratic tradition. This isn't false, the peaceful transition between the Adams administration peacefully abandoning power in favor of a rival is certainly a landmark event, but it's not the complete story.

For one thing, a peaceful transition of the executive may have been important on a symbolic level, but does this justify the term Revolution? There had already been one peaceful transition after a disputed election. Granted, Adams succeeded Washington after the latter's retirement, not electoral defeat, and Adams was seen as Washington's sucessor while Jefferson was Adams replacement. But there had been peaceful transitions between two opposed groups vying for control of the House of Representatives. Additionally, the transition itself didn't occur until March of 1801. In fact, due to the tie between Jefferson and his vice presidential candidate, Aaron Burr, Jefferson wasn't officially certified as the president-elect until February. So if the term only concerns the peaceful transition, why isn't it known as the Revolution of 1801? So, if you go by our textbook's definition, the Revolution of 1800 becomes more like the Important Symbolic Gesture of 1801.

However, if you broaden the meaning of the definition both parts of our bold term work a lot better. There are plenty of elections that at first glance seem vastly more important. The results election of 1860 was the direct cause of the attempted secession of eleven states*****, and thus the Civil War. The election 1932 led to an remarkable growth in the authority of the federal government. A few years ago, liberals like myself used to daydream about an alternate timeline where President Gore had fixed global warming, invented flying cars, and legalized cannabis while Commissioner Bush was doing his best to deal with the steroid scandal in baseball. What's more, you can endlessly play the what-if game with other elections, if X would have won in Y then A would have happened instead of B. Meanwhile, the changes signified and subsequent effects of the 1800 election were probably inevitable. Despite this, the 1800 election is probably the most important presidential election in American history. That's because it didn't just involve a change in theory, or politics, but a change in the conception of what government was and how popular sovereignty was supposed to function.

***** I say attempted secession, because the United States never recognized the right of the eleven

states to secede, and since we won the war, our terminology wins. I said United States and we although I have lived most of my life in the South and ancestors who fought on both sides, I live in the United States, not some made-up confederacy that nobody recognized. As you might guess, some people don't love these views down here.

Elkins and McKitrick's *The Age of Federalism* is probably the most comprehensive account of the dozen years of constitutional government before this change that will be written in my lifetime. Every major political situation that occurred during the Washington and Adams administration is dissected to its base elements and examined from every angle. The authors display a exemplary command of the major figures of the era and are able to offer remarkable insight on their actions and belief, even when the authors believe they were clearly wrong, showing a real sense of empathy not usually seen in works of history done by academics. The book itself is just over 750 pages not, including notes. This may seem long enough, but it reads as a much longer book. It took me twice as long to read as I thought it would. This isn't because it's hard to read, or non-engaging, but because it is literally crammed dense with information. If you're looking for full biographies, an account of how people lived in the 1790s, or non-essential anecdotes that provide texture, look elsewhere. This is pure, uncut history of high-politics.

The main theme in *The Age of Federalism*, is the emergence of primeval political parties. At the end of the era, these were firmly established and accepted conceptions, although they were still a very far thing from our modern conception of political parties, which didn't really start emerging until the 1820s. Regardless of how far these early parties were from modern ones, they still symbolized a vast difference from what existed a dozen years before. One of the primary goals of the authors of the U.S. Constitution was to establish a form of government that would, by balancing power between different branches, and impose several removes between individual voters and government, work as a check against the formation of political parties. This is somewhat remarkable, so I'll repeat myself: Not only was the Federal Government not designed to operate under a partisan system, it was designed for the express purpose of preventing a partisan system from emerging. That's right, the U.S. Constitution in a real and significant way had failed a a little over a decade after it was ratified.

Repugnance at the idea of political parties was a sentiment that can be traced back to 17th century England, and was a belief all but universally held by the Revolutionary generation at the time of the signing of the Constitution.**** I put a qualifier in the last sentence, but the truth is, as late as the middle of the last decade of the 18th century, someone who came out in favor of political parties would be controverting not just a widely held position, but a longstanding and universal tradition.

****Madison discussed the acceptability of factions in a large republic in Federalist No. 10, but two things need to be noted. First, he's far from saying factions are a positive thing, he's saying they're inevitable, and a large republic will have a diluting effect on faction. Also, the idea of political parties are quite different from factions. Factions are concerned with the acquiring the ends, while political parties are concerned with the means.

So if everyone agreed that political parties were an unqualified bad thing, how did they nonetheless come about. What are Federalists? What are Democrat-Republicans? The story starts at the time of the debate over the ratification of the Constitution, Federalists supported ratification; while Antifederalists opposed it, at least without some alterations. Over the next twelve years, the details of Federalism may have changed, but

the basic summary remained; they were the proponents of the Federal government. As you can see the Federalists were more a group of men of a common persuasion than proponents an organized ideology. The Anti-Federalists didn't just disappear, nor did they seamlessly transition into Jeffersonians. Some were elected to Congress and were instrumental in the passage of the Bill of Rights.

After the ratification of the Constitution there wasn't anything resembling political parties. A good deal of this had to due to the figure primary figure in the Federal Government, the universally respected George Washington*******. The spark that led to their formation came in the early 1790s. This was provided by Hamilton's plans to finance the debt and establish a national bank. The lines in this argument were drawn were largely determined by an individual's home-state. If you were from South Carolina you were likely in favor, if you were from Virginia you were likely against it. The opponents of the measures never really had a great chance, but the argument is notable for Madison's arguments that the Constitutions only granted the Federal government limited powers expressly written in the Constitution. In all likelihood, Madison didn't really believe this, but was grasping at straws. It explicitly contradicted things that he had written just a few years earlier, and he didn't really press this line.******** Funny that we're still dealing with the ramifications of this desperate lunge.

> *******Elkins and McKitrick do a particularly good job of fostering an appreciation for George Washington as a President. Not only was he faced with monumental decisions, he had to determine the way in which those decisions would be decided and then put into effect. That his instincts were so consistently right on a wide array of issues, from commerce to etiquette, is frankly remarkable. The esteem he was held in by his own contemporaries is somewhat remarkable as well. It's somewhat well-known that Washington was unanimously elected president in 1788-89 (as well as in 1792). What's less known is that there was no organized resolution or movement behind this. It was just inconceivable that the job could go to anyone else rather than him. Jefferson, who could be unsparing of his enemies, even after they died, and never really saw eye to eye on Washington privately remarked that Washington's "character was, in mass, perfect, in nothing bad, in a few points indifferent; and it may truly be said, that never did nature and fortune combine more perfectly to make a man great."

> ********Elkins and McKitrick do the best job I've witnessed of reconciling the James Madison of 1789 and the James Madison of 1791. Previously, other books almost make it appear that he cowed to Jefferson after the latter returned from France, but his real motivations are more nuanced, and perhaps more craven than that.

What was really behind these issues was another question: who do you like better, England or France? This question was somewhat simpler, but tended to provoke a much more emotional response than assumption of state debt might do on its own. Of course the 1790s were not a particularly good time for a country to be divided on this issue. The Jeffersonians, particularly the Virginians, were motivated by a visceral hatred of England, and English culture. Jefferson in particular was seemingly unable to think of any issue concerning the English in a rational way. (Much like he was unable to look at any issue concerning the French in any sort of negative way. Elkins and McKitrick demonstrate ably how these two tendencies made him a pretty terrible Secretary of State.) From the start, any attempt to increase relations with Britain, or to improve commercial relations between the two countries, could *only* be the work of liberty-hating pseudo-aristocrats,

bent on subverting the popular sovereignty and establishing a monarchy and nobility in the United States. At first this bias was somewhat one-sided, but with the increasing radicalism of the French Revolution, Hamiltonians began to cast the Jeffersonians as radical Jacobins who wished to install Jefferson as dictator.

This animosity was crucial to the development of political parties. It took a long time for the Jeffersonians to grow comfortable with the concept of acting as an opposition party. Partisan behavior was antithetical to the mores of society and how government was supposed to work. Democratic Societies which were forming across the country around this time were widely rejected across the spectrum, not because of what they did, but because of the fact that they existed at all. The mere act of forming a group of politcally like-minded people was a subversion of popular sovereignty. If these men were going to take up any activity that was described as partisan, it couldn't be just because the other side took different positions on the issues. It had to be because the others were actively working to crush liberty. Or the others were looking to install a dictatorship of the majority. The rhetoric in newspapers didn't get poisonous in order to win elections, it got poisonous because that was the only way it could justify itself.

Therefore, by Washington's retirement, there were two clearly developed opposing ideologies. The Federalists were still the party of the government.*****, and their candidate was Washington's logical successor, Vice President Adams. Meanwhile, the opposition party united behind Jefferson. That's about as partisan as things got. There was no real partisan electioneering in 1796.

> *****History textbooks like to refer to Washington as not a member of a political party. But being that the Federalists were the party of the government, to which there was a clear opposition party to for the entirety of his second term, I believe it's just as accurate to call Washington a Federalist as it is to call Jefferson a Democratic-Republican.

Pretty soon into the Adams administration, the internal logic of Federalism began to fall apart. As I have said, the Federalists are best understood as the supporters of the government, but if you had to identify an intellectual leader of Federalism it would be Alexander Hamilton. Up to this point, Hamilton had a pretty remarkable record of brilliance, and at the very least being on the right side of history. Indeed, I have read plenty of books that attempt to justify Madison and Jefferson's opposition to Hamilton's policies, but I have never read an adequate defense of whether they were right.****** But around this time Hamilton began a series of what can only be described as baffling missteps. First, he appeared to have attempted to influence the vote in South Carolina in an effort to have Thomas Pickney, the Federalist Vice Presidential candidate, elevated to the Presidency above Adams. Hamilton always denied this was his goal, but he wasn't convincing, least of all to Adams who developed an implacable hatred of Hamilton that would be passed down in his family for generations. Adams was a bit irrational in this hatred, he would refuse to entertain advice from Hamilton, even where they matched his own convictions of what should be done.

> ******One could say that *The Age of Federalism* favors Hamilton, but I think the analysis is completely even-handed and fair. Jefferson, Madison and others might come off as biased, naive, parochial, and/or shortsighted, but that may be because they were.

Compounding this situation was the fact that Adams had retained Washington's last cabinet, made up mostly of allies and close friends of Alexander Hamilton. These cabinet members became convinced, which were

strengthened due to Adams' prolonged and inconvenient absences from the capitol, that they didn't serve at the pleasure of the President, but that the President was an obstacle to their effective administration of the government. This eventually led to a breaking point where Adams dismissed the cabinet in a huff, thereby alienating a large wing of his supporters. The party of the government no longer supported the head of the government.

Adams can appear to be a weak-willed and equivocating president. One who claimed to act in a rational search for balance but who often acted in a vindictive and spiteful manner. This can be argued the other way though. What is clear is that he was the worse person to be in the leadership of the Federalist party in 1800. He repeatedly claimed that he was not interested in being a leader of a political party, but his refusal to take the smallest babysteps to repair the breach among those who would be his supporters, or to ensure some sort of organized effort behind his candidacy was a political death-wish. Therefore the Federalists faced an unprecedentedly organized and resolute opposition with an extremely weak candidate. With a few more votes at the right time in the right place, Adams would have won the election. But that it was that close is pretty remarkable.

But, even if Adams had been a stronger candidate, even if he was reelected, it's still an open question of what purpose it would serve. The eventual triumph of the Democrats over the Federalists was basically inevitable. This is because of something more inevitable than quality of candidates or party unity. The Federalists were the party of the Revolutionary generation. They believed in diluting out the elements of faction, in a type of natural aristocracy, virtue in the old sense of the word, "that quality under which he fulfills the totality of his nature in service of the republic." That conception was with the advent of the first generation of American born shortly before, during, and after the Revolution. This new generation had a different conception of how democracy was supposed to work, and what the meaning of virtue is. We're still living with these new conceptions today. And it's not surprise that within another dozen years of 1800, Federalism would be all but completely irrelevant.

The Age of Federalism covers much more than the rise of political parties, but I've gone on long enough. I can't help but mention a long chapter on the unmitigated disaster that was the initial development of the District of Columbia. The authors persuasively argue that choosing to build a capitol on sparsely populated swampland retarded the country's political, social, and cultural development for over a century. On the matter of accessibility, I don't think the book requires an expertise on the era. The authors don't dwell on introducing each issue, but they provide adequate summaries. Really, if you have enough curiosity to even pick this thing up you should be fine. There's a lot in the book that deals with the finer details of commerce and banking, which many people might find dull. It's not exactly my cup of tea either, but I thought it was presented in an engaging manner.

The twelve years encompassing the Washington and Adams administrations are perhaps the most unique in the annals of American government. *The Age of Federalism* provides a meticulous account and illuminating analysis of this era.

Igor Faynshteyn says

This is not a typical popular history book. It is not merely a historical narrative, reciting major events, dates and historical figures in chronological order. Rather, it is a deep, penetrating, interpretive and scholarly political history of the first 12 years after the ratification of the US Constitution in 1788. I found it impossible to read this book without finding myself constantly thinking, re-reading passages and really

focusing in on details. To say that this book is different from 99% of other popular history books on the store shelves is an understatement. To read this book is to immerse oneself in an intellectually satisfying experience. However, due to its enormous length (it's quite a tome), interpretive and analytical writing style, and its plethora of details, it is not everyone. Certainly, it's not a summer reading material (though I read it for pleasure, beginning in the summer of 2013 and finish it in January, 2014). Although I am not a history buff (I took only one college history course), I thoroughly enjoyed this book and it's surely one of my fave non-fiction books of all time.

The book more or less chronologically organized, but at various points it tends to be organized by subject rather than by strict chronology. Each chapter feels like a scholarly summary of several Ph D dissertations about a given subject matter. The content tends to be interpretive, and analytical, and therefore very interesting and intellectually stimulating. But the writing style is not the most fluid one, and can feel loaded and heavy at times. But what the book may lack in narrative fluidity, it more than makes up for it in its penetrating and deeply scholarly analysis of the period.

This magnificent work of scholarship examines the dawn of American politics after the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Specifically, it examines the beginning of the formation of political factions. Although these early political factions resembled in some ways the modern political parties, they nevertheless could not be called modern in any sense of the word. The political ideologies were in their infancy stages; professional party machinery was virtually absent; and there was still an intense anti-party animus ingrained in the American political culture. Nonetheless, the 12 years from 1788-1800 witnessed the gradual progression and maturation of political factions, which paved the way to more professional and sophisticated political parties in the coming decades.

This is a magnum opus for the co-authors, both of whom were professors of American history. Ironically, while they made their names as graduate students and scholars in the field of slavery, this book has zero to say on the issue. In fact, while the book is deep and scholarly, its coverage range is rather narrow. It focuses almost exclusively on politics, both domestic and international. It has nothing about social history, culture, economics (except as it relates to politics), or slavery. Its focus remains steadfastly and exclusively on politics throughout the book.

In examining the 12 years of political history, the authors provide very detailed and analytical narratives of major events and biographies of relevant political actors. The mini biographies rarely exceed several pages, and they are relevant to explaining the historical context. The authors also do an excellent job in constructing and meticulously explaining the vast political context, which includes explanations of structural and impersonal forces at work, such as economics, political culture, westward expansion, and etc.

The book also contains surprisingly much about treaties and the French Revolution. However, the context for covering treaties, their detailed negotiations, and the French Revolution is still domestic politics. Since it is the authors' contention that treaties, and more generally foreign relations, played an active role in determining the split between the Federalists (who were anglophiles and Francophobes, led largely by Hamilton and Ames) and the Republicans (who were anglophones and Francophiles, led mainly by Jefferson and Madison), foreign relations get almost as much coverage as domestic politics.

The book also does not contain many anecdotes, and has nothing about the Hamilton-Burr duel, or the tumultuous Jefferson-Adams election of 1800. However, there is extensive coverage of the Jay treaty and its accompanying negotiations; commercial and other treaties between US and France/Great Britain/Spain; XYZ affair; Whiskey Rebellion in PA; and some coverage of the Sedition and Naturalization Acts. Particularly, there is a broad and detailed coverage of the establishment of Hamilton's financial system and the rift it

caused with Jefferson and Madison, which was the one event, more so than any other, that triggered the formation of political factions.

As magnificent as this book is, however, it is not for the faint hearted. The paperpack edition contains 754 reading pages (excluding bibliography). The font is small, dense and single spaced. And given that the narrative is not the most fluid one, it will take quite an effort to get through it. It took me over half a year to finish it. By contrast, I usually finish 700-800 pg. books in about a month or less.

The book is largely without a strong bias. If any bias may be detected it is the bias of realism. Both authors were graduate students of Richard Hofstadter, who was considered a liberal leaning academic at Columbia University. However, it seems that McKitrick and Elkins were not much influenced by his liberal views. In fact, they tend to be more conservative than either Hofstadter or his other famous disciples (i.e. Foner).

In sum, this is a book well worth reading, but only for those interested in serious and contextual political history, and who are committed to a sustained and probably long effort. This is without a doubt one of my top 3 fave history books and I recommend it highly.

Tom says

The current batch of know-nothings ought to be forced to read this book, not to mention any other buffoon batting the phrase "founding fathers" around like a volleyball.

Jonathan says

Superb. Crisply organized and elegantly, indeed wittily, written. *The Age of Federalism* is, to be sure, an old-fashioned blow-by-blow political history -- but it's a splendid one, enriched with intriguing disquisitions on social and geopolitical context.

The thesis is straightforward. Elkins and McKitrick believe that the struggle between Federalists and Republicans in the 1790s was a version of the old Court-Country rivalry of eighteenth-century England. The Federalists, they argue, were not so much a party as a government; they were insiders who prized stability and effectiveness in the national state. Like the "Court" party in England, the Federalists were good Whigs, albeit Whigs with a ministerial tendency. (They lacked, however, the tools that British governments had developed to keep Parliament and the people in line.) The Republicans, meanwhile, were first and foremost an opposition party. They were relative outsiders who thus started out suspicious of power in general, only gradually developing a coherent policy vision in response to Federalist actions that made them uneasy for various reasons. Perhaps as a result, it was the men attached to the Republican interest who first came to think of themselves as a popular party and adapt themselves to that role, while the Federalists grew increasingly defensive and self-justifying in their approach to government after 1798.

The authors identify several reasons for these different perspectives. First, they see Federalism as originating among a loose faction of "Continentalists" during the Revolution -- comprising men who occupied positions on Washington's staff, American foreign missions, and congressional war committees. From the beginning, these men saw American government as necessarily national, and they chafed against the various forms of disorganization that plagued the states from the outset of the war. They urged the adoption of the 1787

Constitution and then generally favored a liberal interpretation of presidential power. James Madison was for a time prominent among them; without actually saying so, the authors are assuming that Federalism after 1789 was just an extension of Federalism before 1789, and that Republicanism was a dissident movement that began largely within its ranks, not among the Antifederalists.

In addition, the authors see several subsidiary factors at work shaping the character of the party struggle. They believe that the individuals in this story -- virtually all of whom may be considered members of an elite within their generation -- constantly felt the lure of immortality. They were highly conscious of their unique situation and were politically and historically ambitious, so that it became virtually impossible to differentiate between public service and private interest. They also see a "Virginia principle" at work: the Virginians were a proud and closely connected class within an elite, sharing a general "anglophobia" that made a sharp contrast with New Yorkers and New Englanders. And, perhaps most importantly, the authors see the dismal swampy provincialism of the District of Columbia, which was (barely) created during these years, as a symbol of a unique American reality. The District of Columbia was remarkable for its remoteness, its newness, the absurd Baroque rationalism of its design, and its ludicrous proportions. It was not, in any meaningful sense, a national capital; it was an out-of-the-way place where state business was conducted by people with no real sense of organic growth. D.C. thus represents one of the most important reasons for the success of the Republican party: the American mind was already overwhelmingly centrifugal and ideological. The Republicans spoke to the libertarian suspicion and the impulse toward organized dissent that governed American thinking, while Federalists tried to maintain control through (often genuinely) skillful administration.

Although the authors downplay ideology as a determinant of party behavior, therefore, they actually prove very sensitive to subtleties of mindset. The book is full of short biographies and delightful stories that capture the individual and collective moods of this decade.
