



This cartoon, by an unknown artist, depicts Thomas Jefferson attempting to destroy the Constitution. It was well-known, at the time the Constitution was being drafted, that Jefferson was very worried about giving too much power to a central (federal) government.

The original of this cartoon is maintained at the Library of Congress. Its curators [tell us more](#):

In this cartoon, Thomas Jefferson kneels before the altar of Gallic despotism [a reference to [the terrors of the French Revolution](#)] as God and an American eagle attempt to prevent him from destroying the United States Constitution. He is depicted as about to fling a document labeled "Constitution & Independence U.S.A." into the fire fed by the flames of radical writings.

Jefferson's alleged attack on George Washington and John Adams in the form of a letter to [Philip Mazzei](#) falls from Jefferson's pocket. Jefferson is supported by Satan [depicted by a snake around the altar], the writings of Thomas Paine, and the French philosophers.

This political cartoon, which originated around 1797, remains significant today as one of the first—if not *the* first—used to influence the outcome of an American presidential election. Beyond having Jefferson kneel in front of the “altar of Gallic [French] despotism,” the illustration’s message conveys that Jefferson is:

- Un-American;
- Un-Christian; and
- Pro-French.

Not just a little pro-French; dangerously pro-French.

In 1797, Jefferson was America’s vice-president and was intending to run for President (in the 1800 election). He had political disagreements with Federalists, and those political enemies were keen to keep the writer of America’s Declaration of Independence from becoming the country’s third President.

By that measure of success, the political cartoon was ultimately a failure (although the election was decided by the House of Representatives on the 36th ballot). How did that extreme situation come about? Curators at the National Archives [tell us more](#):

By the election of 1800, the nation's first two parties were beginning to take shape. The Presidential race was hotly contested between the Federalist President, John Adams, and the Democratic-Republican candidate, Thomas Jefferson.

Because the Constitution did not distinguish between President and Vice-President in the votes cast by each state's electors in the Electoral College, both Jefferson and his running mate Aaron Burr received 73 votes.

State	Thomas Jefferson	Aaron Burr	John Adams	Charles Cotesworth Pinckney	
New Hampshire			6	6	
Massachusetts			16	16	
Rhode Island			4	3	1
Connecticut			9	9	
Vermont			4	4	
New York	12	12			
New Jersey			7	7	
Pennsylvania	8	8	7	7	
Delaware			3	3	
Maryland	5	5	5	5	
Virginia	21	21			
Kentucky	4	4			
North Carolina	8	8	4	4	
Tennessee	3	3			
South Carolina	8	8			
Georgia	4	4			
Total	73	73	65	64	

According to Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution, if two candidates each received a majority of the electoral votes but are tied, the House of Representatives would determine which one would be President. Therefore, the decision rested with the lame duck, Federalist-controlled House of Representatives.

Thirty-five ballots were cast over five days but neither candidate received a majority.

Many Federalists saw Jefferson as their principal foe, whose election was to be avoided at all costs. But Alexander Hamilton, a well-respected Federalist party leader, hated Burr [who ultimately killed Hamilton in a duel] and advised Federalists in Congress that Jefferson was the safer choice.

Finally, on February 17, 1801, on the thirty-sixth ballot, the House elected Thomas Jefferson to be President.

Among other places, the cartoon appeared in *The Richmond Recorder* on the 1st of September, 1802. Click on the image for a better view.

Credits:

The Providential Detection 1797-1800 by an unknown artist. Copyprint of lithograph. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/The-Providential-Detection-Cartoon>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/The-Providential-Detection-Cartoon>