

# This Day in History... February 17, 1801

## Jefferson Wins Presidency

On February 17, 1801, the young United States faced a constitutional crisis that tested whether its new government could transfer power peacefully. That day, after weeks of deadlock, the House of Representatives finally chose a president, proving that the nation's system—though imperfect—could still function under pressure.

By 1801, Thomas Jefferson was already one of the most experienced political leaders in the new nation. He had helped guide American independence while serving in the Second Continental Congress. He later served in the Virginia House of Delegates and became governor of Virginia during the Revolutionary War. Jefferson also served overseas as minister to France. When he returned home, he became the nation's first secretary of State under President George Washington.



1867 "F" Grill



*Generally considered one of the most beautiful US portrait stamps of the 1900s.*

While serving in Washington's cabinet, Jefferson clashed often with Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton. Their main disagreement involved how to handle debt from the Revolutionary War. Hamilton wanted the federal government to assume and share the debt among all states. He believed this would strengthen the national government and build trust with foreign lenders. Jefferson disagreed. He believed each state should pay only its own war debt. Virginia, his home state, had already paid much of its share. This dispute helped create two early political groups. Hamilton led the Federalist Party, which supported a strong central government. Jefferson helped lead the Democratic-Republican Party, which favored stronger state power.

As secretary of State, Jefferson supported France during its conflict with England. However, disagreements within the cabinet and growing party conflict pushed him to leave government in 1793. He returned to his home at Monticello. There, he worked closely with James Madison to organize political opposition to Federalist policies.

Jefferson ran for president in 1796 but lost to John Adams. At that time, the candidate with the second-highest number of electoral votes became vice president. This meant Jefferson served as vice president under a political rival. The arrangement created tension and showed problems in the election system.

The election of 1800 exposed those problems even more clearly. Jefferson and Aaron Burr each received the same number of electoral votes. Under the Constitution, the decision then moved to the United States House of Representatives. At the time, Federalists still controlled the House. Many Federalists distrusted Jefferson. Some even considered supporting Burr instead.

The House vote dragged on for days. Representatives cast ballot after ballot without a winner. For 35 ballots, neither candidate could gain enough support. During this time, Hamilton—though Jefferson's political enemy—worked behind the scenes. He argued that Jefferson was more predictable and less dangerous than Burr. Finally, on the 36th ballot, the House broke the deadlock. Jefferson won the presidency by a vote of ten states to four, with two states divided. The decision was finalized on February 17, 1801.

The crisis revealed weaknesses in the original election system. In response, Congress later passed the 12th Amendment. It required electors to cast separate votes for president and vice president. This change helped prevent future ties like the one in 1800.

Although Jefferson and Burr had run together, their relationship was strained. Jefferson did not trust Burr's political ambitions. In the 1804 election, Jefferson chose a new running mate. Burr's political career soon collapsed. That same year, Burr killed Hamilton in a duel, ending one of the most famous rivalries in early American politics.

The peaceful transfer of power in 1801 became known as the "Revolution of 1800." It showed that political opponents could replace each other without violence. While the process was messy and stressful, it proved the new Constitution could survive serious challenges. For a young nation still defining itself, that was an important test passed.



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*Stamp issued three days after 200th anniversary House of Representative's first formal session*

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