

## PRIESTLEY, JEFFERSON, AND ADAMS: THE ÉMIGRE AND AMERICAN POLITICS\*

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Shortly after his arrival in America, Joseph Priestley wrote that he “made it a rule to take no part whatever in the politics of a country in which I am a stranger” (1). Priestley added that “I only wish to be quiet, and pursue my studies without interruption, with the few advantages that I can expect in this country” (2). Famous as the discoverer of oxygen, Priestley intended to conduct further chemical experiments in America and to submit scientific papers to the American Philosophical Society. And as one of England’s leading Unitarians, he anticipated further theological study and publication. Given these pursuits, there is no reason to doubt Priestley’s intention to avoid political activity. After his triumphant arrival in the summer of 1794 in New York, where he received many laudatory welcoming addresses, and a stay in Philadelphia, Priestley settled in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, far from the hurly-burly of American politics.

Despite his earnest wish to avoid controversy, two forces worked to draw Priestley into the vortex of American politics. One was Priestley’s own decidedly radical political philosophy. The other was the deepening divisions within the Revolutionary generation and the emergence of political parties, or factions, to use a term more congenial to the founders. This development was symbolized by the rift in the 1790s between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, both of whom Priestley knew. Priestley’s view of Jefferson and Adams, their attitudes towards him, and his relationship with each changed

dramatically during his decade in America. To put it succinctly, Adams and Priestley drifted apart in the years of the Adams presidency, most notably over the issue of the Alien and Sedition Acts, while Jefferson and Priestley drew closer as Priestley came to view Jefferson’s election in 1800 as necessary to put the United States on a proper political and philosophical course. Indeed, Adams concluded that Priestley’s role in 1800 contributed to his defeat. It is in the complicated interrelations among Adams, Jefferson, and Priestley that the scientist can be viewed as a lightning rod for the schism between the two American revolutionary leaders and a symbol of their differences and of the emerging political parties.

Priestley’s location made it possible for him to stay out of partisan politics, for a time. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Northumberland, Pennsylvania, was isolated. It is about one hundred and thirty miles from Northumberland to Philadelphia, a goodly distance in the era before steam engines. Roads were horrible and bridges largely non-existent. It took roughly five days to make the journey under the best circumstances. The first time Priestley and his wife made the trip from Philadelphia to Northumberland was that first summer in America, and it was a particularly difficult journey. The Priestleys expected hardships, but the summer rains had swollen creeks and rivers, making fording hazardous. Accommodations in the 1790s for travelers were so dreadful that the Priestleys slept the last two nights of that first trip in “a common wagon” (3).

It is not entirely clear why Priestley settled in Northumberland. It is true his sons and his friend Thomas Cooper attempted to build in that region of Pennsylvania a community of English liberal dissenters which was to include the good doctor. It is also true that Mrs. Priestley instantly took a dislike to Philadelphia, finding it expensive and dirty, and she was anxious to move to the country. Priestley did not disagree with his wife's view: "There is a great drawback in the expence [sic] of living here [in Philadelphia], which is higher than in London, the price of every thing having been doubled in the last two years. On this account and with a view to having more leisure, I think I shall settle in the back part of this state, at Northumberland" (4).

"More leisure..." is the key to understanding Priestley's motivations in settling in rural Pennsylvania. To have leisure, Priestley had to live economically. As he explained to Josiah Wedgwood, he turned down a professorship at the University of Pennsylvania "for the sake of living in a much more agreeable, and healthy situation, at one-third of the expence, and where I can have more leisure for my pursuits" (5). Leisure did not, of course, mean living the life of a gentleman farmer; rather, it meant time to pursue scientific experiments and to write, mostly about theology. During his decade in Northumberland Priestley wrote some of his most important theological works, including the last four volumes of the *General History of the Christian Church*, *Notes on all the Books of Scriptures*, *Index to the Bible*, and many others.

Priestley returned to Philadelphia only four times before he died in 1804, and while he undoubtedly missed the delights of urban life, he appears to have easily and comfortably settled into a routine in Northumberland not unlike that of his earlier life in Birmingham, England (6). To be sure, there were problems being so isolated. "This place is inconveniently situated for carrying out my experiments," he wrote in January 1795, but quickly added, "living here is cheap, and the climate, &c., uncommonly fine, and my sons are settling in farms around me" (7).

Priestley may have been isolated, but he appears to have stayed well informed about the emerging political divisions of the 1790s. The schism among the "Band of Brothers" of 1776 can be seen in the rupture between Jefferson and Adams, revolutionaries who had worked intimately together on the Declaration of Independence and who had remained close during their years in Europe in the 1780s. While it is true that Jefferson came to

speak for and lead the anti-Federalists, or Republicans as they eventually would be called, Adams' relationship to the Federalists was murkier. Still, the differences between Jefferson and Adams encapsulated different views of society, economics, and politics in the new nation; and those differences were serious enough to result in a breach in their friendship that would last until the two old friends were able to forget the personal bitterness of the 1790s and renew their correspondence while in retirement, a correspondence in which the two aging revolutionaries not only "explained ourselves to each other" but in which they reflected on many of the issues that had divided them in the first place (8).

Priestley corresponded with both Adams and Jefferson. Both men urged Priestley to settle in their region of the country, with Adams singing the praises of New England, Jefferson those of Virginia (9). Both men met Priestley in Philadelphia, and both attended services in the Unitarian Church where Priestley occasionally preached. All three were members of the American Philosophical Society. The affection that the two aging revolutionaries felt for Priestley never waned. In 1813 Adams wrote "I never recollect Dr. Priestley, but with tender-



Photograph by James J. Bohning

ness of Sentiment. Certainly one of the greatest Men in the World.” But the New Englander added, “certainly one of the weakest” (10). To Jefferson, Adams wrote that same year, “Oh! That Priestley could live again! and have leisure and means.” And a few weeks later, Adams exclaimed, “Will it not follow, that I ought to rejoice and be thankful that Priestley has lived?” (11). Jefferson, whose intellectual debt to Priestley was great, once simply told the scientist, “Yours is one of the few lives precious to mankind for the continuance of which every thinking man is solicitous” (12).

It was the French Revolution that revealed the early differences between Priestley and Adams. It is true that in 1792 Priestley wrote a letter to Adams expressing some reservations about events in France, but Priestley’s mostly enthusiastic support of the French Revolution stands in stark contrast to Adams’ early opposition, long before the Terror (13). In his *Discourses on Davila*, Adams voiced disapproval of the philosophical and political direction of revolutionary France. He also mocked the French experiment with a unicameral legislature, an experiment that appealed to Priestley and like-minded radicals such as Tom Paine. In the *Discourses*, as in his earlier *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, Adams stressed the need for a balanced government which recognizes distinctions within society. These arguments always sounded to his more egalitarian contemporaries like a defense of hereditary government and as a wish to impose a British-style government on the United States. In this connection, it should be noted that the *Davila* essays caused the beginning of the rift between Adams and Jefferson (14).

By 1794, when Priestley landed in the United States, Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton had succeeded in establishing most of his nationalizing economic system. The disagreements over Hamilton’s program had led to divisions within George Washington’s cabinet and to the retirement of Hamilton’s chief adversary, Secretary of State Jefferson. By that date partisan divisions over the French Revolution were dominating politics and party development. Democratic-Republican Societies had begun to appear in considerable numbers in the more populated areas of the nation. These organizations toasted French victories against Britain and condemned the policies of the Washington administration; as such, they were symptomatic of the bitter discourse that was beginning to enter American politics. In 1794 an insurrection erupted in western Pennsylvania over Hamilton’s imposition of an excise tax on whiskey,

which hit western farmers hard because the cheapest way for them to get their produce to market was as distilled whiskey. Federal troops were raised in a show of strength to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion, and Washington issued a condemnation of the Democratic Societies, which he believed encouraged rebellion (15).

Into this increasingly bitter and partisan political climate landed Dr. Priestley, with his intellectual baggage, which included his dissenting religious beliefs and his radical politics. Priestley’s Unitarianism differentiated him from Americans of the time; and his pro-French views, which drove him from Britain, put him in the middle of partisan strife. But Priestley’s radicalism went deeper than support of the French Revolution, for it drew on a long-standing tradition in English social thought. Moreover, his radicalism defined his position in the political wars of the late 1790s and his relations to two of the poles in those wars: Adams and Jefferson.

Priestley’s politics grew out of his contact with radical intellectuals during his years in Britain (16). His political outlook drew heavily on John Locke, especially on the right of rebellion against tyranny, which had made him an early supporter of the American Revolution. Two principles underlay Priestley’s radicalism: belief in the inherent equality of all men and an unshakeable faith in mankind’s capacity for self-improvement, indeed in the perfectibility of man.

As the influence of Locke would indicate, Priestley was a vigorous advocate of a balanced constitution, and his political views fell into mainstream Whig tradition. For the most part, Priestley followed Lockean principles in rejecting Divine Right and arguing for a secular basis for political authority. Priestley also accepted Lockean notions of inalienable natural rights and of the social compact as the basis for political society. Related to this was Priestley’s devotion to limited government and separation of powers. But Priestley went beyond Locke in his political thought and writing. Priestley wrote in the preface to his *Essay on First Principles*, “...I had placed the foundation of some of the most valuable interests of mankind on a broader and firmer basis, than Mr. Locke, and others who had formerly written upon this subject” (17). And for Priestley that “broader and firmer basis” meant the adoption of a liberalism that merged, as D. O. Thomas has suggested, “the concept of a continuous progress to be achieved by a hardheaded appeal to the criterion of utility” (18).

One should never forget that Priestley’s science informed his other passions: whether it be theology or

politics or any other field upon which his curious and roving mind alit. Priestley, dedicated to the discovery of truth, believed that the application of scientific methods could yield results in any area of intellectual investigation. This underpinned his belief in progress, which of course ultimately led to a belief in human perfectibility. "...The human species itself," Priestley wrote, "is capable of a similar and unbounded improvement; whereby mankind in a later age are greatly superior to mankind in a former age..." (19). At the same time, Priestley believed, in the realm of civil government at least, that the principle of utility should be applied. Long before Jeremy Bentham, Priestley wrote (20):

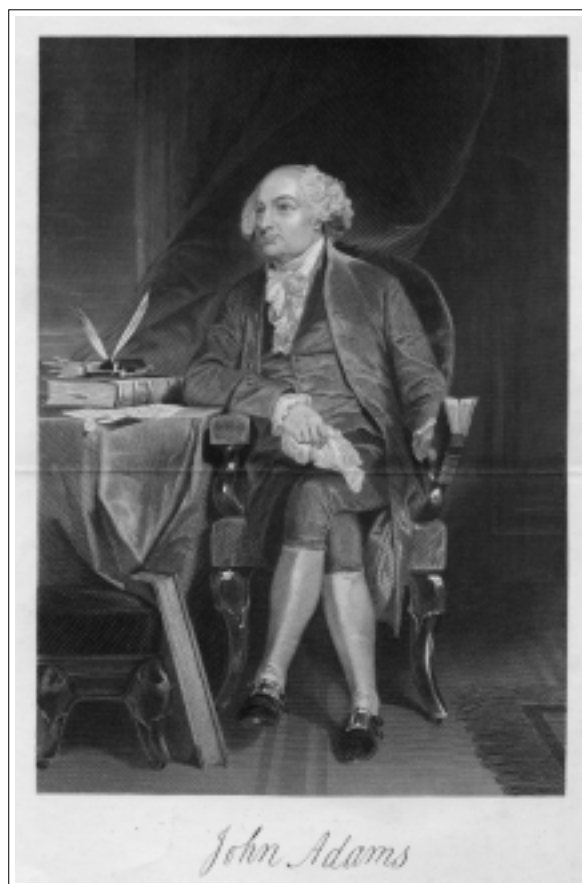
It must necessarily be understood, therefore, whether it be expressed or not, that all people live in society for their mutual advantage; so that the good and happiness of the members, that is the majority of the members of any state, is the great standard by which every thing relating to that state must finally be determined. And though it may be supposed, that a body of people may be bound by a voluntary resignation of all their interests to a single person, or to a few, it can never be supposed that the resignation is obligatory on their posterity; because it is manifestly *contrary to the good of the whole that it should be so.*

This is very close to Jefferson's famous statement to James Madison: "I set out on this ground, which I suppose to be self-evident, 'that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living'" (21). It is just one instance where Priestley and Jefferson shared beliefs. Starting in 1800, Jefferson and Priestley had a long-running correspondence on educational theory (22). Priestley's ideas on education influenced Jefferson's planning of the University of Virginia. Jefferson no doubt was familiar with Priestley's opinions on the disestablishment of the Anglican Church when he, with the help of Madison, drafted the statute on religious freedom in Virginia in 1786 (23). Jefferson also frequently praised Priestley's writings on religion and the two shared similar views on Unitarianism and Jesus Christ. Jefferson possessed Priestley's faith in human perfectibility and progress. Moreover, Jefferson's famous alteration of the Lockean formula of "Life, Liberty, and Property" in the Declaration of Independence to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" may well have owed something to his reading of Priestley's early political works.

The evidence suggests Priestley met Jefferson in Philadelphia; but their strong philosophical and intellectual ties were forged long before they met. Priestley and Adams, on the other hand, had a personal acquaintance that was about a decade longer, having met in

London when Adams was the first U.S. ambassador to Britain. The two men remained on cordial terms after Adams returned to the United States. In 1792 Adams wrote Priestley to express his condolences over Priestley's "Sufferings in the cause of Liberty" during the Birmingham Riots of 1791. Priestley replied that more than a year after the riots there still had been no indemnification for the destruction and that he was considering emigrating (24). Yet Adams and Priestley were far apart politically and in their views of man and society. The only exception came in the realm of religion: Adams shared Priestley's Unitarian views, and the vice president appears to have attended Priestley sermons on the "Discourses on the Evidences of Divine Revelation" delivered at the Universalist Church in Philadelphia in the spring of 1796. (25).

Adams did not attend a second set of "Discourses" the following year, although the two breakfasted during Priestley's visit to Philadelphia. "I asked him," Adams wrote his wife after Priestley and he breakfasted, "whether it was his Opinion that the French would ultimately establish a Republican Government. He said it



William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan

was..." (26). More than twenty-five years later, Adams wrote Jefferson about this meeting, saying Priestley "was very sociable, very learned and eloquent on the subject of the French revolution" (27). This breakfast appears to have been the last friendly encounter between the two men, and it shows that for Adams differences over the French Revolution proved critical. But in truth, the crusty New Englander viewed man and society through a much different prism from that of Priestley. To Adams, human nature in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the same as it had been in ancient times. Inequality in society was inevitable; and human beings were just as likely to commit evil as good. Even in America, where centuries of hereditary inequality did not exist, there were inequalities tied to family, wealth, and education. This rather dour view of human nature stands in stark contrast to Priestley's almost sunny optimism (28).

It took less than three years' residence in the United States for the disagreements between Priestley and Adams to become so serious as to cause a breach between the two old correspondents. It was perhaps inevitable that this would happen, despite Priestley's initial protestations "to take no part whatever in the politics of a country in which I am a stranger" (29). He may have intended not to take part, but he surely never meant to be oblivious to American politics. Shortly after settling in Northumberland Priestley wrote Benjamin Vaughn (30):

I have seen all the principal people and also persons who may be said to be the opposition... I perceive that the opposition is very considerable, and I am persuaded does not consist, as your brother will have it, of ill-intentioned men. They are called *Anti-federalists*, and object principally to the *excise laws*, and the *funding-system* founded on a *national debt*, which they wish to have discharged, while others avow a liking of it, as a means of creating a dependence on the governing powers, which they think is wanting in this country tho it has grown to dangerous excess in England.

This may have been a simplistic analysis of American politics in 1794, but it was an analysis Priestley shared with Jefferson and the Democratic-Republican Societies. Events in the period between Priestley's arrival in Northumberland and the election of Adams as president only served to show how close the Englishman's views were to what he called the "Anti-federalists." The most significant of these for party development was the bitter debate over Jay's Treaty, negotiated in 1795 with Great Britain. Priestley wrote at the time that "Mr. Jay's Treaty is almost universally condemned" (31), and in fact large sections of public opinion viewed the treaty as one-sided

in favor of Britain and as a repudiation of the Franco-American alliance of 1778, so instrumental in securing American independence. Priestley later noted that the treaty "could not fail to give umbrage to France" (32). Popular wrath against the treaty ran so strong that Jay later claimed his burning effigy lit the entire eastern seaboard every evening. Priestley, "having much leisure" in the spring of 1796, attended the debates on it in the House of Representative (33).

The Jay Treaty was crucial for party development, but Priestley noted that despite growing partisanship, the two parties "do not avoid one another... and once anything is decided by fair voting, all contention ceases" (34). This benign view of American politics extended to the upcoming presidential election, of which he noted: "Tho the contest will be a very warm one, it will be attended with no serious inconvenience" (35). While it was true that there was no serious inconvenience during the election, the result was a rather inconvenient one, putting Adams in the presidency and Jefferson in the vice-presidency.

In the first summer of Adams' presidency Priestley wrote Adams in what would prove to be one last overture to his old friend. Priestley evidently believed that Adams would not allow partisanship to interfere with friendship, but his naiveté revealed how little he understood the New Englander. The purpose of the letter was to seek a government position for his old friend Thomas Cooper, a request Adams ignored, in part probably because Priestley was not a particularly good salesman (36):

It is true that both, Mr. Cooper and myself fall, in the language of calumny, under the appellation of *democrats*, who are represented as enemies of what is called *government* both in England, and here. What I have done to deserve this character you well know, and Mr. Cooper has done very little more. In fact, we have both been persecuted for being the friends of liberty, and our preference of the government of this country has brought us both hither.

"Persecuted for being friends of liberty..." was no doubt a reference to his earlier treatment in England for his nonconformist religious views and his pro-French activities. But that persecution was beginning to have echoes in America, as Priestley increasingly found himself under attack, especially from William Cobbett in the columns of *Porcupine's Gazette*. Cobbett took Priestley to task for supporting the French Revolution and even for emigrating from Britain to America. Cobbett had first put Priestley in his sights in 1794, when the Englishman's

arrival in America had been the occasion of complimentary addresses to him by a host of Democratic Societies, to which Priestley had replied in kind. Angered by the addresses and replies, Cobbett issued a pamphlet entitled *Observations on the Emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestley*. Cobbett professed indifference to Priestley's coming to America, but "the fulsome and consequential addresses sent him by the pretended patriots, and his canting replies, at once calculated to flatter the people here, and to degrade his country, and mine, was something to me" (37). By the spring of 1797 Priestley, stung by Cobbett's constant barrage, saw fit to complain (38):

The writer of that scurrilous pamphlet on my emigration now publishes a daily paper, in which he frequently introduces my name in the most opprobrious manner, though I never took the least notice of him; and have nothing to do with the politics of the country; and he has more encouragement than any other writer in this country. He, every day, advertises his pamphlet against me, and after my name adds, "commonly known by the name of the fire-brand philosopher."

Of course, Cobbett was not the only scandal-monger writing in the late 1790s. Adams was to become the butt of many vitriolic attacks, some coming from James Callender, who Adams and his wife believed was in Jefferson's employ. Nor did Cobbett create the anti-French mania that gripped the United States during Adams' presidency; he merely stoked it. The actions of the French government fanned the flames as well, when it was revealed in the XYZ Affair that French Foreign Minister Talleyrand would not deal with an American delegation sent by Adams to negotiate differences unless a substantial bribe was paid. The Americans had gone to France to resolve issues arising from the Jay Treaty and to try to stop the Franco-American drift toward war caused by the depredations of French privateers against American shipping. By 1798 the United States and France were engaged in a quasi-Naval War and the government had begun to raise an army in case of war with France (39).

In the midst of this crisis atmosphere, the Federalist dominated Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Laws. The biggest blunder of Adams' blunder-prone administration, these laws were intended to deport or silence foreign-born residents, especially those who were pro-French and likely to support the Jeffersonian Republicans. The laws also made it a crime to publish "any false, scandalous and malicious writing or writings against the government of the United States, or either house of the Congress of the United States, or the Presi-

dent of the United States, with intent to defame the said government, or either house of the said Congress, or the said President, or to bring them, or either of them, into contempt or disrepute." Adams went to his grave insisting he never supported these infamous statutes, but he signed them into law and they became a burning issue in the election of 1800 (40).

Since Priestley never became a U.S. citizen, he could have been prosecuted under the Alien Laws. Cooper did become a citizen, so he was successfully prosecuted under the Sedition Law for an attack on President Adams. Secretary of State Timothy Pickering wrote Adams, "Cooper has taken care to get himself admitted to citizenship. I am sorry for it; for those who are desirous of maintaining our internal tranquility must wish them both [Priestley and Cooper] removed from the United States" (41). Adams replied, "I do not think it wise to execute the alien law against poor Priestley at present. He is as weak as water, as unstable as Reuben, or the wind. His influence is not an atom in the world" (42).

Adams, apparently under some pressure to have Priestley deported, quietly urged his old friend to keep silent (43). This, of course, Priestley could not do. Priestley and Cooper attended meetings in Northumberland in the summer of 1799 at which "democratic" toasts were drunk and the administration castigated. The year before, Priestley published under the pseudonym "A Quaker in Politics" the *Maxims of Political Arithmetic*, which criticized the Adams administration and lent support to Jeffersonian programs and philosophy. But most damaging to Priestley was the publication in 1798 by Cobbett of a cache of letters from John Hurford Stone in Paris to Priestley that had been captured aboard a Danish ship and previously published in London. Stone was a partisan of the French Revolution and Cobbett was able to use the letters to portray Priestley as an agent and spy for France (44).

Priestley, believing he might be deported, defended himself by publishing *Letters to the Inhabitants of Northumberland* in November 1799 (45). The *Letters* were more than just an answer to the Adams administration. They were also written to spell out Priestley's support for the opposition, as shown by his sending copies to Jefferson. In the *Letters* Priestley defended the French Revolution, while deploring its atrocities. He concluded that both the French and American revolutions were democratic and insisted that America had nothing to fear from France.

Priestley then turned his attention to the American Constitution, which he labeled “the best that has ever been.” He expressed Jeffersonian views on states’ rights as opposed to what he saw as the centralizing actions of the Adams administration, and he went to lengths to deplore the Alien and Sedition Laws (46):

Laws calculated to restrain the freedom of speech and of the press, which have always been made on the pretence of the abuse of them, are of so suspicious a nature in themselves, and have been so constantly the resort of arbitrary governments, that I was beyond measure astonished to find them introduced here; and yet in some respects the laws that have lately been made by Congress are more severe than those of England.

But silencing the press was counter-productive: “The cause of *monarchy* in England and *federalism* in this country” will not be advanced, he wrote, by such laws against sedition. As for the Alien Laws, they were designed to keep out of the United States “the friends of liberty (opprobriously called *Jacobins, Democrats, &c.*) emigrating from Europe, a description of men in which I am proud to rank myself” (46).

Jefferson expressed to Priestley, before the election of 1800, his pleasure with the *Letters* and encouraged their further dissemination (47):

You will know what I thought of them by my having before sent a dozen sets to Virginia to distribute among my friends. Yet I thank you not the less for these, which I value the more as they came from yourself... The papers of Political arithmetic, both in your’s [sic] and Mr. Cooper’s pamphlets are the most precious gifts that can be made us; for we are running navigation-mad and commerce-mad, and navy-mad, which is worst of all. How desirable is it that you could pursue that subject for us. From the Porcupines of our country you will receive no thanks; but the great mass of our nation will edify & thank you.

Jefferson went on to sympathize with Priestley (47):

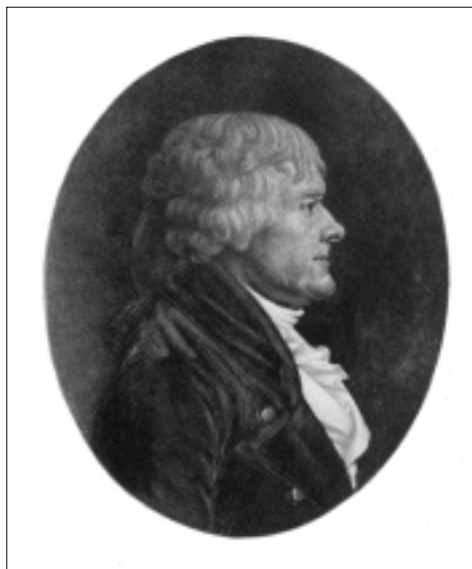
How deeply have I been chagrined & mortified at the persecutions which fanaticism & monarchy have excited against you, even here... You have sinned against church & king, & can never be forgiven.

In a second letter Jefferson urged Priestley to withstand the abuse hurled at him and expressed a belief in human progress normally so congenial to both correspondents (48):

Pardon, I pray you, the temporary delirium which has been excited here, but which is fast passing away. The Gothic idea that we are to look backwards instead of forwards for the improvement of the human mind... is not an idea which this country will endure; and the moment of their showing it is fast ripening; and the signs of it will be their respect for you, & growing detestation of those who have dishonored our country be endeavors to disturb your tranquility in it.

Priestley responded, somewhat pessimistically for him, that he wished he “could see the effects... of the increasing spread of republican principles in the country.” He added “... if I be rightly informed, my *Letters* have done more harm than good. I can only say that I am a sincere well wisher to the country, and the purity and stability of its constitution.” Jefferson replied “the mind of this country is daily settling at the point from which

it has been led astray... and I trust the day is not distant when America will be proud of your presence.” Jefferson’s friendly words encouraged Priestley to bring out a second edition of the *Letters*, in 1801, in which Priestley wrote in the preface that he had been told his pamphlet “contributed something” to the victory of Jefferson over Adams in 1800 (49).



Thomas Jefferson  
William L. Clements Library, University  
of Michigan

Jefferson was right: his victory in 1800 meant an end, for the most part, of the attacks on Priestley. Beyond that, Jefferson’s election had a calming influence on national discourse. Priestley recognized this when he wrote before the inauguration that “Mr. Jefferson will do nothing rashly.” In another letter, Priestley said “party-spirit is not so high as it was, owing to the moderation and prudence of Mr. Jefferson” (50). In his inaugural Jefferson went to lengths to demonstrate that moderation: “We are all republicans; we are all federalists,” he said, adding, “if there by any among us who 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” (51).

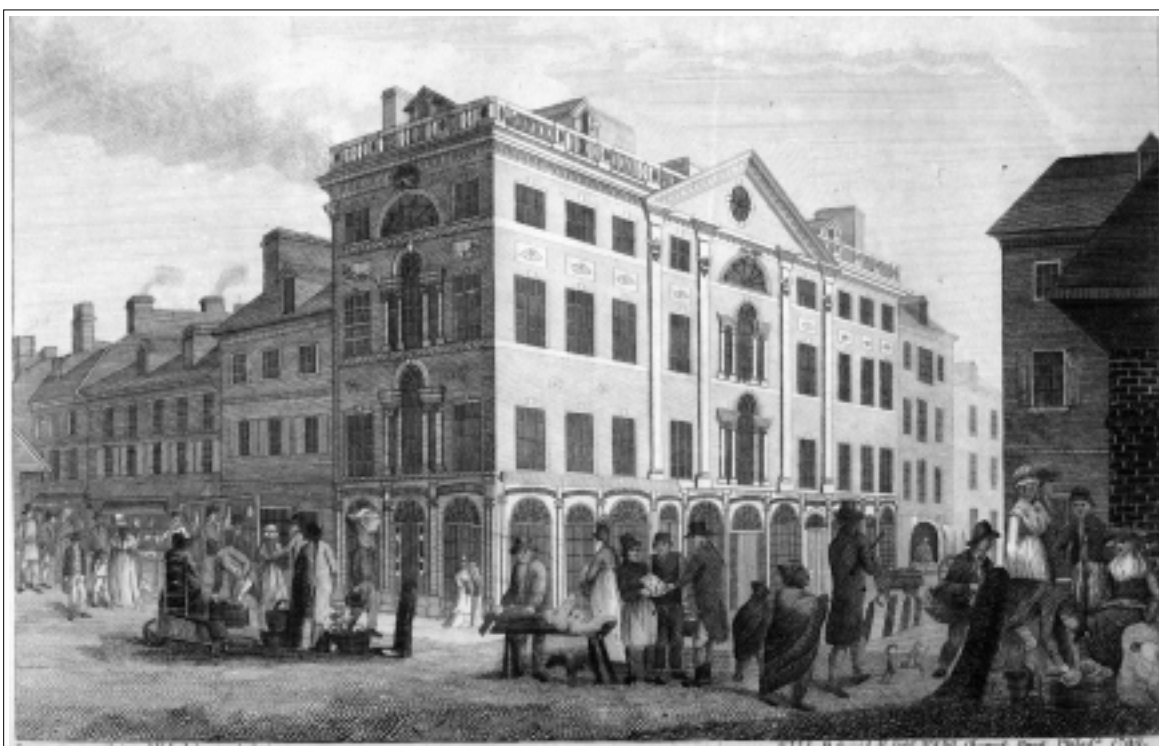
To Priestley, Jefferson wrote just a few weeks after assuming office that “in the first moments of my public action, I can hail you with welcome to our land, tender to you the homage of it’s [sic] respect & esteem, cover you under those laws which were made for the wise and good like you.” Jefferson then spoke of the limitless possibilities for the new land (52):

As the storm is now subsiding & the horizon becoming serene, it is pleasant to consider the phenomenon with attention. We can no longer say there is nothing new under the sun. For this whole chapter in the history of man is new. The great extent of our republic is new... The order & good sense displayed in this recovery from delusion, and in the momentous crisis which lately arose, really bespeak a strength of char-

a political philosophy and an optimistic view of human progress (53):

I rejoice more than I can express in the glorious reverse that has taken place, and which has secured your election. This I flatter myself will be the permanent establishment of truly republican principles in this country, and also contribute to the same desirable event in more distant ones

By the time Jefferson assumed the presidency Priestley was in the last years of his life, and the combination of old age and a more favorable political climate meant that Priestley became less active politically and more content with life in America. In a letter to Samuel Mitchill, a Professor of Chemistry at Columbia Univer-



*Southeast corner of Third and Market Streets, Philadelphia, William Burch & Son, 1799.  
Free Library of Philadelphia*

acter in our nation which augurs well for the duration of our Republic: & I am much better satisfied of it’s [sic] stability than I was before it was tried.

The “momentous crisis” occurred in the Electoral College where there was no constitutionally-mandated way to choose between president and vice president. But it was resolved peacefully: “There was no idea of force, nor of any occasion for it” (52).

Priestley responded, expressing his pleasure on living in a country led by a President with whom he shared

sity serving in the House of Representatives, Priestley declared: “In all respects I think the climate of this country greatly preferable to that of England; and its government still more so. Here we have *peace* and *plenty*, and in England they have neither...” (54). To Jefferson, Priestley wrote that he wished to dedicate the second part of his *Church History* to the Virginian because he was a friend of religious toleration and political liberty. Priestley wrote of Jefferson with some exaggeration (55):



It is the boast of this country to have a constitution the most favourable to political liberty, and private happiness of any in the world, and all say that it was yourself, more than any other individual, that planned and established it; and to this your conduct in various public offices, and now the highest, gives clearest attestation.

Priestley praised Jefferson for the constancy of his dedication to “the rights of man,” claiming that many are the friends of liberty when out of office, “but I do not recollect one besides yourself who retained the same principles, and acted upon them, in a station of real power.” In a reflection of the fear of authority that Priestley had felt both in England and perhaps under the Adams administration, he told Jefferson that “It is only now that I can say I see nothing to fear from the hand of power, the government under which I live being for the first time truly favourable to me” (55).

In late 1801 Priestley told a confidant that “To me, the administration of Mr. Jefferson is the cause of peculiar satisfaction, as I now, for the first time in my life (and I shall soon enter my 70<sup>th</sup> year) find myself in any degree of favour with the governor of the country in which I have lived, and I hope I shall die in the same pleasing situation” (56). He was to get his wish, dying on February 6, 1804 at his home in Northumberland during Jefferson’s first term as president. The émigré, who spent the last decade of his life in the United States professing to want only to live quietly and peacefully, found himself not only enmeshed in the politics of his new land but also a symbol of the partisanship of the 1790s. Priestley’s intention to stay out of American politics proved impossible as did any attempt to stay neutral in the disputes between Jefferson and Adams. As an 18<sup>th</sup>-century English radical, Priestley was most definitely a Jeffersonian in the context of American politics. That radicalism, of course, had made it difficult for Priestley to maintain silence in the United States. Priestley was a political as well as a scientific and religious man. After all, it was politics, along with his dissenting views, that provoked his emigration to the United States in the first place.

### Epilogue

Nearly a decade after his death, Priestley served as the focus of debate between Adams and Jefferson. The occasion was the publication in 1812 of the *Memoirs of the Late Reverend Theophilus Lindsey*, a prominent English Unitarian. Priestley had sent Lindsey copies of some of his letters, and these wound up in the *Memoirs*.

One of those letters was from Jefferson, written shortly after his inauguration, which included some sharp criticisms of Adams as well as Jefferson’s famous comment telling Priestley that his was “one of the few lives precious to mankind” (57).

Two points by Jefferson particularly irked Adams, who shortly after Lindsey’s book appeared, wrote Jefferson for an explanation (58). One point was a criticism of the Federalist regime for its “bigotry” and for looking to “the education of our ancestors; We were to look backwards, not forwards, for improvement: *the President [Adams] himself* declaring, in one of his Answers to addressees, that we were never to expect to go behind them in real Science.” To Jefferson, Adams said he had “no recollection of any such Sentiment ever issued from my Pen, or my tongue, or of any such thought in my heart...” though he conceded he could not recall every public statement he made as president. “The Sentiment,” Adams challenged his old friend, “that you have attributed to me in your letter to Dr. Priestley I totally disclaim and demand... of you the proof” (59).

The second bothersome point to Adams concerned politics. This was a condemnation by Jefferson of the Alien Act as a “Libel on legislation.” Adams’ answer to this accusation was to try to spread the blame while denying culpability (60):

As your name is subscribed to that law, as Vice President, and mine as President, I know not why you are not as responsible for it as I am. Neither of Us were concerned in the formation of it. We were then at War with France: French Spies then swarmed in our Cities and in the Country. Some of them were, intollerably [sic], turbulent, impudent and seditious. To check these was the design of this law. Was there ever a government, which had not Authority to defend itself against Spies in its own Bosom? Spies of an enemy at War? This Law was never executed by me, in any Instance.

Adams was accusing Jefferson of supporting legislation that neither of them favored but that was necessary because of French spying but which was not enforced.

Jefferson replied to Adams’ accusation, urging his friend to ignore the controversy. “The renewal of these old discussions,” he wrote, “would be equally useless and irksome” (61). But in truth Jefferson was embarrassed that his private correspondence had been published: “It was a confidential communication... from one friend to another... Whether the character of the times is justly portrayed or not, posterity will decide” (62). Jefferson rather adroitly attempted to deflect the accu-

sation that Adams looked backwards: "You possess, yourself, too much science, not to see how much is still ahead of you, unexplained and unexplored." At the same time, Jefferson tried to separate Adams from the Federalist Party: "In truth, my dear Sir, we were far from considering you as the author of all measures we blamed. They were placed under the protection of your name, but we were satisfied they wanted much of your approbation" (63). Adams responded to this letter, saying "Be not surprised or alarmed. Lindsays [sic] Memoirs will do no harm to you or me" (64).

In one sense, the contretemps over the publication of Jefferson's letter to Priestley was a tempest in a teapot and ultimately part of the ongoing attempt of Jefferson and Adams both to patch up their differences and understand each other. But the flurry of letters in 1813 also sums up how Priestley symbolized those differences, differences which were reflected in the party development of the late 1790s.

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

\* This paper is based on the presentation at the symposium at the Philadelphia ACS Meeting, Philadelphia, 2005, HIST 017.

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3. A. Holt, *A Life of Joseph Priestley*, Oxford University Press, London, 1931, 186.
4. Priestley to Samuel Parker, 27 June 1794, Robert Schofield, Ed., *A Scientific Autobiography of Joseph Priestley (1733-1804): Selected Scientific Correspondence Edited with Comentary*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1966, 280-81.
5. Priestley to Josiah Wedgwood, 17 March 1795, Ibid., p 285. See also Priestley to Benjamin Rush, 11 November 1794, Ibid., p 283.
6. On Priestley's decision to settle in Northumberland and on his life once there, see C. Robbins, "Honest Heretic: Joseph Priestley in America, 1794-1804," *Proc. Am. Philos. Soc.*, **1962**, 106:1, 65ff. Also see E. F. Smith, *Priestley in America 1794-1804*, 1920. Reprint, Arno Press, New York, 1980.
7. Priestley to Parker, 20 January 1795, Schofield, Ed., *Scientific Autobiography*, 284-85.
8. Adams to Jefferson, 15 July 1813, L. J. Cappon, Ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1959, Vol. II, 358. The complete quotation: "You and I ought not to die, before We have explained ourselves to each other." Joseph Ellis has written sensitively about the Adams-Jefferson friendship, especially in chapter eight of *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 2001.
9. J. Graham, *Revolutionary in Exile: The Emigration of Joseph Priestley to America, 1794-1894*, *Trans. Am. Philos. Soc.*, **1995**, 85 (2), 28, 33, 48. See also Robbins, "Honest Heretic," p 63.
10. Adams to J. Vaughn, 23 November 1813, quoted in Graham, *Revolutionary in Exile*, p 165.
11. Adams to Jefferson, 3, 25 December 1813, Cappon, Ref. 8, II:405, 409-10.
12. Jefferson to Priestley, 21 March 1801, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress (online). On the importance of Priestley in "The Jeffersonian Circle," see D. Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1960, 17-19.
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14. See John Adams, *Discourses on Davila and A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*. Both of these can be found in C. F. Adams, Ed., *The Works of John Adams*, 10 vol. Little, Brown, Boston, MA, 1856. For more on Adams, see D. McCullough, *John Adams*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2001. For an analysis of these writings, see J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams*, Norton & Company, New York, 1993, Ch. 5. The Republicans were fond of labeling Adams, as well as Alexander Hamilton, as a "monarchist." The validity of the charge is irrelevant here: it is political perception that contributed to party development.
15. On the Democratic-Republican Societies and the Whiskey Rebellion, see the following: S. Elkins and E. McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993; G. Chinard, *Thomas Jefferson, The Apostle of Americanism*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev., 1957; R. Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, The Penguin Press, New York, 2004. These are just a few of the many secondary works covering these events.
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  18. D. O. Thomas, Ref. 16, p 73.
  19. Ref. 17, p 9.
  20. Ref. 17, pp 13-14. Italics are in the original text.
  21. Jefferson to Madison, 6 September 1789, Jefferson Papers.
  22. See, e.g. Jefferson to Priestley, 18 January 1800 and Priestley's "Hints Concerning Public Education," Priestley to Jefferson, 8 May 1800, Jefferson Papers.
  23. On Jefferson's debt to Priestley, see Kramnick, Ref. 16, note 3, p 87.
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  27. Adams to Jefferson, 15 August 1823, Cappon, Ref. 8, II:594-95.
  28. For Adams' opinions on human nature, see McCulloch, Ref. 14, and Ellis, Ref. 14.
  29. See Ref. 1.
  30. Priestley to Benjamin Vaughan, 30 July 1794, quoted in Graham, Ref. 9, p 62.
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  33. Priestley to Lindsey, 3 May 1796, Priestley, *Works*, I.2.340.
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  39. See Elkins and McKittrick, Ref. 15, pp 549-662, on the tumultuous events of these years. See also McCullough, Ref. 14, and Chernow, Ref. 15.
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  41. Timothy Pickering to Adams, 1 August 1799, C. F. Adams, Ref. 14, IX:5-6. On Cooper, See D. Malone, *The Public Life of Thomas Cooper, 1783-1839*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1926.
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  43. Smith, Ref. 40, pp173-74; Graham, Ref. 9, pp 125-26.
  44. Graham, Ref. 9, pp 110-14, contains a detailed account of this convoluted tale.
  45. J. Priestley, *Works*, XXV:114-15.
  46. J. Priestley, *Works*, XXV:163-65.
  47. Jefferson to Priestley, 18 January 1800, Jefferson Papers. See Priestley to Robert Livingston, 17 April 1800 [in Schofield, Ref. 4, p 303] for a reference to further editions and Priestley's comment: "These Letters, I find, have given great offence to the Federalists."
  48. Jefferson to Priestley, 27 January 1800, Jefferson Papers.
  49. Priestley to Jefferson, 8 May 1800, Jefferson to Priestley, 11 August 1800, Priestley to Jefferson, 10 April 1801, Jefferson Papers.
  50. Priestley to Lindsey, 25 December 1800, Priestley to Thomas Belsham, 2 March 1801, *Works*, I.2:451, 454-55.
  51. Scholars have debated just what Jefferson meant by these famous words. But it seems clear that he meant, as he himself said, that not every difference of opinion is a difference of principle. And yet, Jefferson's view of "the revolution of 1800," at least as he wrote about it in later years, contrasts with the "we are all republicans; we are all federalists" formula of his first inaugural. In 1819, Jefferson said "the revolution of 1800... was as real a

revolution in the principles of our government as that of 1776 was in its form; not effected by the sword, as that, but by the rational and peaceable instrument of reform, the suffrage of the people." Jefferson to Spencer Roane, 6 September 1819, Jefferson Papers. Part of the problem in parsing this phrase is grammatical: in the printed versions of the speech Federalists and Republicans were capitalized, indicating that Jefferson was referring to political parties; but in Jefferson's hand-written draft, the words are lower case, indicating not a reference to parties, but rather an observation that all Americans were united by a belief in a republican form of government bound by a federal structure. These are two significantly different meanings. See J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, Vintage Books, New York, 1996, 216.

52. Jefferson to Priestley, 21 March 1801. The importance of the peaceful transfer of power as demonstrated in this election cannot be underestimated. In 1796 power was transferred peacefully, but within the Federalist Party. In 1800, power was transferred peacefully from one party to the other, by, as Jefferson himself said, "the suffrage of the people." See Ref. 51. On the election, see J. Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004.
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54. Priestley to Samuel Mitchill, 16 July 1801, Schofield, Ref. 4, p 309.
55. Priestley to Jefferson, 17 June 1802, Jefferson Papers.
56. Priestley to George Logan, 26 December 1801, cited in Graham, Ref. 9, pp 153-154.
57. Jefferson to Priestley, 21 March 1801, Jefferson Papers.
58. Adams wrote on 29 May 1813, asking Jefferson "if you have seen this Book." Cappon, Ref. 8, II:326.
59. Adams to Jefferson, 10 June 1813, Cappon, Ref. 8, II:326-27. Note that the first quotation in this paragraph is Adams quoting what Jefferson wrote, where the punctuation is slightly different from that in the original letter to Priestley in the Jefferson papers. Since the issue here is the lingering dispute between Adams and Jefferson, I have quoted the Adams version of the letter.
60. Adams to Jefferson, 14 June 1813, Cappon, Ref. 8, II:329.
61. Jefferson to Adams, 27 June 1813, Cappon, Ref. 8, II:337.
62. Jefferson to Adams, 15 June 1813, Cappon, Ref. 8, II:331. This is a reply to Adams' letter of 29 May 1813 which raises the issue for the first time but does not include specific allegations. Adams to Jefferson, 29 May 1813, Cappon, Ref. 8, II:325-326.
63. Jefferson to Adams, 15 June 1813, Cappon, Ref. 8, II:332.
64. Adams to Jefferson, 25 June 1813, Cappon, Ref. 8, II:333.

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