

Political Battles

In 1796, John Adams ran for president against Thomas Jefferson. Adams was a Federalist, a believer in a strong central government. Jefferson saw Federalists as aristocratic, power-hungry Northerners. Adams won by a slim margin, and Jefferson, the runner-up, became vice president. But the two men could barely stand each other, and Jefferson escaped the city often for his beloved Virginia estate, Monticello. James Madison, once a Federalist himself, but now allied with Jefferson, lived nearby. The two formed a strong bond, spent hours talking politics, and gave a name to their anti-Federalist position. They called themselves Democratic-Republicans, or simply Republicans.

Political arguments had simmered when the revered George Washington was president, but with Adams in office, they boiled over. During a debate on February 15, 1798, in the House of Representatives, Roger Griswold, a Yale-educated Federalist, insulted Mathew Lyon, an Irish-born Republican. Lyon responded by

spitting tobacco juice at Griswold. Then, Griswold hit Lyon with a cane, and Lyon picked up fireplace tongs to strike back. Shortly after the fight, this satirical cartoon appeared across the country, capturing the fight and ridiculing congressmen as foolish bystanders.

The Lyon-Griswold fight was not caused simply by differences of opinion, or group rivalry. It was part of a larger pattern of masculine violence in the new government. The country was so new and untested that a man's reputation and character were his main qualifications for office. An attack on his politics and his ideas was an attack on his honor, so deep and personal that it generated aggressive responses like spitting, insults, caning, even duels.

Later in the year, Mathew Lyon wrote and published a letter critical of President Adams. He was tried and jailed under the new Alien and Sedition Acts, which the Adams administration used to punish those who spoke out against the government.



Congressional Pugilists, 1798. Enching on wove paper. New-York Historical Society Library, PR 10.

Discussion Questions

- ★ What does this cartoon reveal about the state of politics in 1798? How does it compare with the behavior in Congress today?
- ★ How does the artist feel about the congressmen portrayed in this piece? How do you know?
- ★ What is the problem with having a government marked by bitter rivalries and fighting?

Sources: "Mathew Lyon (1749–1822)," Federal Judicial Center, http://www.fjc.gov/history/home.nsf/page/tu_sedbio_lyon.html (accessed by M. Waters, 9-7-2016); "Representative Roger Griswold of Connecticut Attacked Mathew Lyon of Vermont on the House Floor," History, Art & Archives: United States House of Representatives, <http://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1700s/Representative-Roger-Griswold-of-Connecticut-attacked-Mathew-Lyon-of-Vermont-on-the-House-Floor/> (accessed by M. Waters, 9-20-2016); "Roger Griswold (1762–1812)," Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=G000488> (accessed by M. Waters, 9-20-2016).