

Bernard Weisberger has once again brought the past to life. If you want to experience the crossfire of intellectual and political ferment at the dawn of our Republic, open these pages and start ducking.--Bill Moyers America Afire is the powerful story of the election of 1800, arguably the most important election in Americas history and certainly one of the most hotly disputed. American self-government was still an endangered experiment seventeen years after the War of Independence had been won. As 1800 dawned, the sacrifices and fraternity of the spirit of 76 had vanished, replaced by bitter and angry rivalries. Former allies Adams and Jefferson, president and vice president, now Federalist versus Republican, squared off in a vicious contest to win the fourth presidential election under the Constitution. The Constitution was still new and untried. The young republic lacked a cohesive national identity, the strength to confront aggressive foreign powers in a world racked by war and revolution, and a stable system for working out political differences electorally. Political parties were new, unforeseen, and unwelcome creations. Small wonder that no one was prepared for the partisan warfare that threatened to rage out of control. Or for the broken friendships, scandals, riots, slanders, beatings, and jailings -- elements of a crucial and perilous election that sparked a constitutional crisis and threats of civil war. Ultimately, the surprise is not that problems arose, but that the United States emerged from them a stronger nation. For when Adams stepped down from the presidency peacefully in 1801, it was the first time in modern history that a leader had voluntarily turned over power to his political enemy. This was truly a revolution and a triumph for democracy made in America. Scrupulously researched and eminently readable, America Afire tells the tale of a watershed event in American history and lends a valuable new perspective on the early years of the United States, as well as the genesis and nature of our political system.

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