Review of the book The First Presidential Contest: 1796 and the Founding of American Democracy by Jeffrey L. Pasley

Jeffrey J. Malanson
Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, malansoj@ipfw.edu

This research is a product of the Department of History faculty at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne.

Follow this and additional works at: http://opus.ipfw.edu/history_facpubs

Part of the Political History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Opus Citation
http://opus.ipfw.edu/history_facpubs/118

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at Opus: Research & Creativity at IPFW. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Opus: Research & Creativity at IPFW. For more information, please contact admin@lib.ipfw.edu.

In their efforts to define the elements of formal party systems, social scientists have concluded that the Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties were not true political parties. In The First Presidential Contest: 1796 and the Founding of American Democracy, Jeffrey L. Pasley argues that this focus on the institutionalized party has distracted historians from the very real partisan developments that took place in the 1790s. “The real importance of parties in the time of the Founders,” Pasley asserts, “is as rather loose but intense communities of political ideology, emotion, and action that took form among politicians, political writers, and their audiences” (p. 6). Throughout The First Presidential Contest, Pasley persuasively demonstrates the variety of ways that the 1790s was a time of real and sustained partisan development. Especially important in conceptualizing the partisanship of the 1796 campaign is Pasley’s call for the reader to “think of political campaigns. . .as stories: competing public narratives that seek to explain the world to voters in a way that compels a particular choice” (p. 225). From this vantage point it is clear that the partisanship of 1796 might not have been as fully developed as it would eventually become, but it was tangibly there in ways that recent generations of historians have been too quick to overlook.

While generally working within the standard narrative of early party development, Pasley carefully presents the emergence of the Democratic-Republican Party as the expression of a liberal opposition mentality sharply contrasted with the more conservative beliefs of the Washington administration and its supporters. Questions of who should rule and what role the public should play in governing—the differences between aristocracy and democracy in the American context—were central in the developing political culture of the period. The great strength of The First Presidential Contest is that in exploring
these issues Pasley aims to offer a “practically minded ‘history from the middle out’ that means to show how politics actually works, how high and low (or ‘grass roots’) politics are connected” (p. 14). This means that, although Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison feature prominently in the book, it is not the founding fathers who drive Pasley’s narrative. In the political culture of the late eighteenth century, the candidates themselves largely refrained from playing an active role in their campaigns, leaving lesser officials and operatives to do much of the work enunciating party ideologies and advancing party candidates. Central actors in Pasley’s story include newspaper editors, pamphlet writers, lower-level party operatives, and individual presidential electors in states with popular voting for electors. The actions of all of these figures—especially Benjamin Franklin Bache, the editor of the Philadelphia General Advertiser/Aurora, and other members of the partisan press—contributed to a vibrant and contentious national politics that resonated in cities and towns across the country and had an impact on their elections.

The First Presidential Contest presents a compelling and forward-moving narrative that reflects voluminous research in the print and political cultures of the 1790s. While generally outstanding, I would offer two small critiques. First, Pasley devotes roughly sixty pages to a very thorough consideration of anti-Jefferson essays written by William Loughton Smith in 1792 and 1796, and to Republican responses to A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America by John Adams. There is a lot of fascinating information contained in these pages, but at times it can pull the reader away from the bigger picture. I also quibble with Pasley’s overly partisan reading of what he calls “Washington’s Hamilton-written Farewell Address” (p. 265). On both the authorship of the address and the degree to which Washington intended it as a partisan document, Pasley overstates the case. These are relatively minor complaints about what is otherwise an excellent and extremely valuable study that should change the way historians understand partisan development in the early republic.
JEFFREY L. MALANSON is an assistant professor of history at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, where he teaches courses on early U.S. political and diplomatic history and the Atlantic World. His research focuses on early American foreign policy and the uses of the lives and legacies of the founding fathers in the nineteenth century.

The Philosophy of Religion of Alexander Campbell. By J. Caleb Clanton. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013. Pp. xi, 207. $42.00 cloth; $42.00 ebook)

A towering presence on the American religious landscape—both physically and intellectually—Alexander Campbell was a famed Christian apologist, engaging in public debate with the likes of atheist utopian Robert Owen and Catholic Bishop John Baptist Purcell of Cincinnati. As J. Caleb Clanton notes in this concise work on Campbell’s thought, the sage of Bethany, Virginia, “clearly viewed himself as a philosopher.” Yet, history has often overlooked his contributions, beyond the sphere of nineteenth-century Christian Restoration ideology (p. 12). In seeking “to reconstruct, explain, and evaluate the main contours of Campbell’s philosophy of religion,” Clanton, an associate professor of philosophy and University Research Professor at Lipscomb University, sets a high bar against the academic marginalization of his subject (p. 1). The resulting study compellingly argues Campbell’s position as a sophisticated, if not necessarily always original, thinker.

The book’s greatest challenge may lie in identifying an audience. Clanton writes deftly (describing, for example, Campbell’s “allergic reaction to irrational fideism”), but many readers will probably want more historical foundation to the discussion (p. 153). By the author’s own admission, “this book focuses on the arguments and positions in Campbell’s thinking; very little attention is given to chronological issues” (p. 19). While individual influences on Campbell are assiduously noted, broader contexts are often not fleshed out. In particular, Clanton’s cursory description of Barton W. Stone as “the other half