

# He Gave His Word: Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and the Presidential Election of 1800

By Steve C. Griffith Jr.

As we approach another presidential election, it is illuminating to recall the circumstances surrounding the election of 1800. Modern Americans are accustomed to the peaceful transfer of power between political parties, but at the dawn of the nineteenth century this was not a foregone conclusion. The 1800 election marked the first time that power switched from one party to another, each with differing views of the appropriate role of the national government. It was so remarkable that historians have labeled it “The Revolution of 1800.” However, this revolutionary event was the result of an extremely close race, and South Carolina played a major role in the outcome.

The process of electing a president and vice president in 1800 was quite different from what it is today. Each member of the Electoral College cast two votes for president, “of whom one at least shall not be an inhabitant of the state with themselves” (“themselves” being the electors). The electors did not vote for the vice president; instead, that office was filled by the individual who received the second highest number of votes in the Electoral College’s presidential election. Eleven states picked their electors by a vote of their legislative body. The remaining five states allowed a vote of the people, with three states—North Carolina, Kentucky and Maryland—voting in congressional districts. Rhode Island and Virginia voted as entire states, with “winner take all.” Finally, the electors in each state were selected at various times throughout the year. As each state selected their electors, the names were published in various newspapers throughout the country. This meant that the candidates and their supporters knew who the electors were and had a very good indication of how they would vote. In 1800, the electors met in their

respective state capitals to vote for president on December 3. The result of the election was not officially known until February 1801.

Political parties were not anticipated by the Constitution’s drafters, but they developed quickly. By 1800, the Federalist and Republican Parties had formed, with John Adams as the leader of the Federalists and Thomas Jefferson leading the Republicans. The election of 1800 marked the first time that any political party played a major role in our national election. Each party selected two candidates to run for president by holding a caucus of members of Congress. The Federalists chose John Adams and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney as their candidates, and the Republicans nominated Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr.

Charles Cotesworth Pinckney was born in Charleston in 1746 to Charles and Eliza Lucas Pinckney. The elder Charles was appointed the agent of the colony of South Carolina and sent to London in 1753. He took his family with him and the young Pinckney boys, Charles Cotesworth and Thomas, studied at Westminster School. Both boys remained at school in England after their parents returned to America. Charles Cotesworth graduated from Christ Church, Oxford, and studied law at the Middle Temple, completing his studies with a tour of Europe and classes at the French Royal Military College in Caen.

His education complete, Charles Cotesworth returned to America six years before the Revolutionary War to practice law in Charleston. During that conflict, he served as an aide-de-camp to General George Washington and rose to the rank of brigadier general. When Charleston surrendered to the British in 1780, Pinckney was captured. He was offered freedom if he would take an oath of allegiance



*Undated engraving of Charles Cotesworth Pinckney.*

*From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.*

to King George III. Although many Charlestonians did take the oath, Pinckney refused. He wrote, "I entered into this Cause after much reflection, & through principle, my heart is altogether American." After the war, Pinckney was selected as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 and played a key role in South Carolina's ratification of the Constitution.

Before the end of Washington's second term, Pinckney was appointed minister to France. Pinckney took his second wife, Mary Stead, his daughter Eliza, and his personal secretary, Henry Middleton Rutledge, with him to France. Pinckney was chosen because he was publically unbiased

in his feelings towards England and France. He hoped to improve relations with the French but soon realized this would prove difficult. By the time he arrived in Paris, the government of France was controlled by the Directory, which was violently opposed to Adams's Federalist administration and considered Pinckney an "aristocrat." Angered by Jay's Treaty, which they felt violated an earlier agreement with the United States, the French government suspended diplomatic relations before Pinckney even stepped off the boat. In February 1787, the Directory of France issued a written order for him to leave the country. Pinckney, his family, and Henry Middleton Rutledge fled

to Amsterdam, where they awaited further instructions.

President Adams was determined to avoid war and sent two more envoys to aid Pinckney in his negotiations with the French: Elbridge Gerry, a Republican from Massachusetts, and John Marshall, a Federalist from Virginia. The three men arrived in Paris in October 1797. After a frustrating delay, the American ministers were approached by various emissaries of Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, the French foreign minister, asking for a loan of ten million dollars and a bribe for the Directors of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. It was not unusual in the eighteenth century for diplomats to suggest bribes. However, the French were requesting money to begin negotiations—not to end them. Letters between Gerry and Pinckney indicate that Gerry considered making some payment to the French. Pinckney and Marshall refused and Pinckney's response, "No, no, not a sixpence," became a rallying cry among Americans. At a dinner given to honor the American delegation, Representative Robert Goodloe Harper gave a toast that rephrased Pinckney's response as "Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute."

As Marshall and Pinckney returned to America (Gerry chose to remain in France), President Adams received dispatches and documents that described the events in Paris. Fearing a war with France, Adams made an urgent plea to Congress for increased protection of seafaring vessels, replenishment of arsenals, and the power to tax in order to increase federal revenue. The Republicans, who controlled the House of Representatives, refused to respond to Adams's request. Although the president did not want to release the correspondence of the envoys, he was pressured by both parties to do so. Adams supplied the documents, but struck out the names of the French emissaries and identified them only as X, Y, and Z. The Federalists supplied copies of the XYZ correspondence to the press, and Pinckney's biographer, Marvin Zahniser, notes that "the country went on a patriotic spree that was unprecedented in its short history." Adams, Marshall, and Pinckney became national heroes.

Upon his return to the states, Pinckney was greeted with parades, banquets, and celebrations courtesy of the Federalists. According to his biographer, Pinckney's popularity was due not only to his stand in Paris, but to the fact that he agreed to step aside and allow John Hamilton to serve as Washington's second in command of the new army. Although Pinckney out-ranked Hamilton at the end of the Revolutionary War, he was willing to bow to Washington's choice and sent a message to Hamilton that he "would with pleasure serve under him." Federalists were thrilled with this response, as it helped to strengthen the party's power in the South. As he made his way home, Pinckney stopped in Philadelphia to discuss military

preparation with both Hamilton and Washington.

In South Carolina, as in much of the nation, the XYZ Affair strengthened the Federalist party. Mid-term congressional and state legislative elections added many Federalists to office. In February 1799, Pinckney finally reached Charleston and was greeted by the sound of trumpets, horns, and cannons. Ships in the harbor fired their guns, and the bells of Saint Michael's Church pealed. On the evening of February 8, he was honored by a banquet at city hall. Pinckney's portrait hung at one end of the banquet hall over the words: "Il faut de l'argent; il faut beaucoup d'argent?—'No, No! Not a six-pence.'" The band played "Pinckney's March" as he entered and the dinner ended with toasts and patriotic tunes. It was truly a hero's welcome.

Despite an increased influence and representation in state and federal government, there was a widening gulf within the Federalist Party. Hamiltonians, or "High Federalists," were dismayed at Adams's determination to maintain peace. Members of the party also realized that past policies of Washington and Adams were unpopular with voters. In 1794, Pennsylvania farmers mounted the "Whiskey Rebellion" to protest the excise tax on whiskey. They attacked a revenue collector and interrupted court proceedings. Alexander Hamilton was part of a large army sent to quell the rebellion, which vanished before the approaching troops. This action may have demonstrated the federal government's authority, but it created long-lasting hostility among farmers. Adams's Alien and Naturalization Acts were passed in 1798. The legislation was aimed at recent immigrants (most of whom voted Republican) and allowed the president to deport or imprison "dangerous" aliens at will. The Sedition Act targeted Republican newspapers and outlawed any public speech or publication that was of a "malicious" slant against the government. Finally, when an undeclared naval war erupted with France, Adams used the crisis to establish a new army. Republicans claimed the additional troops were really established to put down domestic opposition.

Believing that his party was in jeopardy, Hamilton refused to support Adams for a second term and hoped to manipulate the Electoral College in order to unseat the president. As he had attempted in 1796, Hamilton decided to support a nominee for vice president that would be so attractive he would actually obtain more electoral votes than the presidential candidate. To do this, Hamilton needed a candidate who was popular regionally and nationally and would follow Hamilton's guidance. He felt that Charles Cotesworth Pinckney was a perfect choice. General Pinckney was well known and popular, and he was seen as a Federalist but not an extremist. He served with valor in the Revolution and was admired by Wash-



*British satire of Franco-American relations after the XYZ Affair in May 1798.  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

ington. His record in civil office had been one of statesmanship and virtue.

When they met in Philadelphia in early May, the Federalist caucus nominated Adams and Pinckney. Apparently, Adams was aware of Hamilton's scheme and took action by removing two Hamiltonians, James McHenry and Timothy Pickering, from his cabinet. Hamilton responded by sending a letter to party members that questioned Adams's abilities and pointed out the president's "outrageous behavior" and "disgusting egotism." A copy of the letter was printed by Aaron Burr and released to the public.

While the Federalists struggled with their internal rifts, the Republican Party, led by Jefferson and James Madison, insisted that the nation needed to follow a different route. They proposed returning to the old values of 1776 where a smaller government would ensure freedom of religion and the press. They argued that the Federalist government had become monarchical and cited the Alien and Sedition Acts as proof. Those citizens who supported the cause of the Republican Party believed strongly that a change was necessary. Indeed, they felt the country would not survive without it and nominated Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr as their candidates.

It was a bitter campaign. Both President Adams and

Jefferson were attacked mercilessly. Adams was charged as being complacent, "quite mad," a war monger, and a monarchist. He was denounced as a friend of England, and the Alien and Sedition Acts were cited time and again as an example of his willingness to violate American civil liberties. Jefferson, on the other hand, was labeled an atheist and a Francophile of the worst kind, for he supported the radical element of the French Revolution. His past was brought into question, and the Federalists pointed out that during the Revolution his conduct as governor of Virginia lacked courage.

In the spring of 1800, New York elected its legislature, which in turn would pick the state's twelve electors. In 1796, New York supported the Federalists and had given all twelve electoral votes to Adams. But in 1800, the New York legislature was controlled by Aaron Burr. When New York City voted Republican, the city's votes combined with the state at large to give the election to the Republicans. This was a major upset and the Republicans were jubilant. A Republican explained that it must have been divine providence, as it was "the intervention of a Supreme Power and our friend Burr the agent." With the news of voting in New York, Jefferson believed he would be elected and Adams feared he had already lost.

As the campaign progressed, New England held fast for Adams. Pennsylvanians agreed to split their vote and cast eight for Jefferson and seven for Adams. New Jersey and Delaware supported Adams, and Maryland was divided five to five. In North Carolina, Adams received four votes to Jefferson's eight. Virginia, Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee stood solidly for Jefferson. As the election drew to a close, all of the candidates were tied, each holding sixty-five electoral votes. South Carolina would be the last state to vote and could determine the outcome of the election.

While Hamilton stuck to his plan to unseat Adams, other Federalists realized that the plan would not only defeat the president, but also might destroy the party. Hamilton's scheme was based on the idea that Pinckney and Adams would get equal support from the other states, but

in the South, Pinckney's electoral vote would win him the presidency. Realizing the plan might create an irreparable rift in his party, Pinckney wrote that he would forbid any votes for him by electors who were not also pledged to Adams.

As mentioned previously, in South Carolina the state legislature chose its electors. In 1796, South Carolina's electors had split their votes—eight for Jefferson and eight for Thomas Pinckney. If South Carolina repeated that trend in 1800 and voted eight for Jefferson and eight for Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, it was thought that Jefferson and Pinckney would be tied and the election would go to the House of Representatives, where many felt Pinckney would win.

The legislature elected by South Carolinians in October 1800 was composed of sixty-five Federalists, seventy-



*Undated engraving of Charles Pinckney, called “Blackguard Charlie” by some relatives for his opposition to his cousin Charles Cotesworth.*

*Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

Washington Dec 12. 1800

Dear Sir

The Electors for Mr Jefferson & Pinckney have been chosen in the State of South Carolina (have been chosen) by a majority of thirteen - It would have been easy to have made a Union for Jefferson & Pinckney. Mr Pinckney however would not consent to it & restrain his friends from it - I am respectfully  
Elizur Goodrich

Letter from Elizur Goodrich to Timothy Pitkin dated December 12, 1800, expressing his opinion that Jefferson and Pinckney could have taken the presidency and vice presidency, respectively, had Pinckney not refused to abandon Adams.

From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

one Republicans, and sixteen men who might have favored Jefferson politically but held great personal affection for Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. The prevailing political thought in South Carolina was that the South Carolinians would vote for Jefferson and Pinckney. However, times had changed in South Carolina since Pinckney's youth. Republicans were gaining strength in the Palmetto State and the man responsible for that growth was Charles Pinckney, a cousin of Charles Cotesworth Pinckney.

In 1800, Charles Pinckney was a U.S. senator representing South Carolina. He had served as governor and, along with Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, was a delegate to the 1787 Constitutional Convention. He was a friend of Madison and a follower of Jefferson. According to George C. Rogers Jr., Charles Pinckney thought that his

cousin was "being duped by the leaders of the national party." He was interested in defending southern interests and thought that Adams's power was detrimental to the freedom of individuals and the states. In essence, he became the campaign manager for the Republicans in South Carolina and was an excellent political operative. At that time, the legislature elected everyone who held office in South Carolina, including U.S. senators, the governor, the lieutenant governor, sheriffs, clerks of court, and judges. Having been elected governor twice and serving as a U.S. senator, Charles Pinckney knew the art of patronage and persuasion. Rogers describes the election of 1800 as the Pinckney's "grand battle."

As he worked to win over members of the South Carolina legislature against his cousin, Charles Pinckney

focused on the Federalist support for a war with France. Charles and his fellow Republicans portrayed Pinckney as a puppet, a poor diplomat, and a military despot. Republicans claimed that Pinckney had been nominated to confuse voters and revealed Hamilton's scheme to unseat Adams. Charles Cotesworth Pinckney's friends were distraught at the harsh attacks and allegations. Kinsmen began to call Charles Pinckney "Blackguard Charlie" for his actions against his cousin.

It is impossible to determine exactly what happened in Columbia when the state legislature met in November. Only a few letters exist that discuss the events, and many of those are contradictory. There were 161 members of the legislature in 1800 and ten were absent, so one of the parties had to gain the support of seventy-six votes in order to elect its candidate. Apparently, the Republicans met on November 25 and about fifty signed a pledge to support Jefferson and Burr, with no compromise. The next night, more names were added to the pledge. On November 27, the Federalists met and about fifty members signed on to support Adams and Pinckney. The Republicans were to hold another meeting the next evening, and talk was rife in the legislative halls that a deal would be struck dividing the votes between Jefferson and Pinckney. The sixteen members who were on the fence were called "trimmers." They wanted to make a deal because of their loyalty to Pinckney. However, Charles Pinckney convinced them to cancel the meeting. Peter Freneau, co-editor of the *Charleston City Gazette* and a Republican friend of Charles Pinckney, wrote to Seth Paine concerning the election. Freneau felt that if Charles Pinckney had not cancelled the meeting of the Republicans on November 28, a deal would have been made to elect Jefferson and Pinckney.

Henry de Saussure, a close friend of Pinckney's, later wrote: "It is certain that if we would give up Mr. Adams we could easily secure the election of General Pinckney." Both Freneau and de Saussure (who represented different parties) mention two attempts to convince Pinckney to run on a compromise ticket with Jefferson. Within the holdings of the South Carolina Historical Society is a letter written from Elizur Goodrich to Timothy Pitkin of Connecticut on December 12, 1800. Goodrich contended that in South Carolina, "it would have been easy to have made a union for Jefferson and Pinckney." According to Pinckney's biographer, the general refused on the grounds that "if the gentlemen were unable to vote jointly for him and Adams as Federalists, then they should vote according to their political convictions."

It is very likely that if Pinckney had agreed to abandon President Adams, he would have been elected vice president. Because he refused, on December 2, 1800, the South Carolina legislature chose eight electors who were pledged

to vote for Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr. With these eight votes Jefferson and Burr were tied, and the election was thrown into the House of Representatives. After thirty-five ballots, the deadlock was broken when a congressman from Delaware withdrew his support from Burr and, along with several Federalists from South Carolina, cast a blank ballot. Jefferson was elected with Burr as the vice president.

The actions of Charles Cotesworth Pinckney during the election of 1800 reveal a consistent determination to maintain his honor and integrity. In an 1801 letter to Christopher Gadsden (also held by the Historical Society), John Adams noted that Pinckney's "frank, candid and honorable" behavior during the election was consistent with "the whole tenor of his conduct of life." There had been previous tests to the general's character. As a prisoner of the British forces in the Revolution, he was offered his freedom if he pledged allegiance to King George III but he refused. Likewise, when serving as a minister to France, he was asked for a bribe and refused. In 1800, Pinckney was tested again. As Zahniser notes: "He had given his word that he would not accept votes that were intended for President Adams, and Pinckney was not a man to go back on his promises.... By his refusal to accept those votes, Pinckney had lost the vice presidency but had preserved his reputation." ♦

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