

TEACHER GUIDE

1800 DOC. #3: Connecticut Courant Editorial

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the early years of the United States newspapers were usually associated with a political party. In 1800 the news and editorial statements in any given paper tended to support either the Federalists or the Republicans. Lies and attacks upon the opposition were commonplace. When people complain of bias in media coverage today they are making the same complaints that voters did more than 200 years ago.

The Sedition Act of 1798 made it a federal crime to print or publish false, scandalous, or malicious material critical of the government, Congress, or President. It specifically did not apply to the Vice President (Jefferson, who was Adams' competitor), and was limited only to Adams' term of office (Starr 79). The Republicans saw this law as an attempt by the Federalists to destroy their party, since most of those arrested for violating the Sedition Act were Republican editors who had criticized President Adams.

Federalist newspapers attacked Jefferson as a "Jacobin," another name for a radical associated with the French Revolution. Jacobins were a faction of the French revolution that executed scores of people during the *Reign of Terror*. After the French Jacobin Club was shut down in 1794, the name was used to refer to radical or left-wing groups in other countries. Federalists also claimed that Jefferson was anti-Christian since his scientific writings questioned the literal interpretation of Noah's flood and other Biblical references. Jefferson called himself "a rational Christian."

The Connecticut Courant was a Federalist newspaper that regularly attacked Jefferson and the Republicans. In its current form as *The Hartford Courant* it is the country's oldest newspaper in continuous publication (although it is no longer partisan). This excerpt is from an issue dated October 6, 1800. It contains the beginning and a middle section of a longer unsigned editorial addressed "To The People of the United States."

> **Project** the document and **have students read** excerpts on the student handout.

QUESTION **What messages are being communicated about Thomas Jefferson in the editorial? Give evidence from the text to backup your statements.**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The editorial makes the case that good citizens must fight Jefferson, an enemy of the people, who threatens the United States.

EVIDENCE "Jefferson is an enemy to the United States," "the dangers of our situation," "this great enemy of human peace, prosperity and happiness," "defensive warfare," "nothing more hazardous than a truce"

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PowerPoint Slide
Text on student handout

SUGGESTED ANSWER	Jefferson’s ideas will bring radical revolution and terrorist ruin.
EVIDENCE	“they will enter your dwellings, deprave the minds of your children;” references to “Jacobinism” and “idol of the Jacobins”
SUGGESTED ANSWER	Jefferson’s proven atheism makes him unfit to serve.
EVIDENCE	described as “an Atheist,” “our Chief Magistrates have hitherto been men who feared God” and brought “pride” and “honor”; Jefferson doesn’t “acknowledge his dependence on God” or “enter the sanctuary” [the church]
QUESTION	What evidence does the author provide to support his attacks on Jefferson?
SUGGESTED ANSWER	The author provides none. This attack on Jefferson is based on exaggerations and fear-based proclamations.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Is this editorial slanderous? Should the media be able to criticize candidates like this paper did without any evidence to back up their opinion?

Why have mudslinging and attack ads been a staple of American politics for over 200 years? How should a reader, listener, and/or a viewer respond to such attack ads?

There was a strong emphasis on belief in God in these early campaigns. How is that same emphasis on God reflected in U.S. printed currency?

ADDITIONAL INFO

The Courant was relentless in its attacks on Jefferson and seven months into his presidency called for his impeachment.

Jefferson himself sued *The Connecticut Courant* for libel at one point and lost the case. Jefferson’s strong feelings about the press of his day are evident in his writings: “Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle.... I will add that the man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them, inasmuch as he who knows nothing is nearer to truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods and errors” (Lipscomb and Bergh 415-419).

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

- Attack**
- Class/Labor**
- Foreign Policy**
- Media Bias**
- Reaching Voters** (Partisan Newspaper)
- Religion**

The Connecticut Courant article is one of the few documents in the kit to deal with the issue of religion (see also: 1960 doc. #2, Kennedy televised speech on religion and politics). After reading the *Connecticut Courant* attack on Jefferson’s faith consider looking at 2004 doc. #8 analyzing Bush and Kerry Web sites targeting religious voters.