Negative campaigning in the United States can be traced back to lifelong friends, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Back in 1776, the dynamic duo combined powers to help claim America’s independence, and they had nothing but love and respect for one another. But by 1800, party politics had so distanced the pair that, for the first and last time in U.S. history, a president found himself running against his VP.

Things got ugly fast. Jefferson’s camp accused President Adams of having a “hideous hermaphroditical character, which has neither the force and firmness of a man, nor the gentleness and sensibility of a woman.” In return, Adams’ men called Vice President Jefferson “a mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed Indian squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father.” As the slurs piled on, Adams was labeled a fool, a hypocrite, a criminal, and a tyrant, while Jefferson was branded a weakling, an atheist, a libertine, and a coward. Even Martha Washington succumbed to the propaganda, telling a clergyman that Jefferson was “one of the most detestable of mankind.”
Jefferson Hires a Hatchet Man

Back then, presidential candidates didn’t actively campaign. In fact, Adams and Jefferson spent much of the election season at their respective homes in Massachusetts and Virginia. But the key difference between the two politicians was that Jefferson hired a hatchet man named James Callendar to do his smearing for him. Adams, on the other hand, considered himself above such tactics. To Jefferson’s credit, Callendar proved incredibly effective, convincing many Americans that Adams desperately wanted to attack France. Although the claim was completely untrue, voters bought it, and Jefferson won the election.

Playing the Sally Hemings Card

Jefferson paid a price for his dirty campaign tactics, though. Callendar served jail time for the slander he wrote about Adams, and when he emerged from prison in 1801, he felt Jefferson still owed him. After Jefferson did little to appease him, Callendar broke a story in 1802 that had only been a rumor until then—that the President was having an affair with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings. In a series of articles, Callendar claimed that Jefferson had lived with Hemings in France and that she had given birth to five of his children. The story plagued Jefferson for the rest of his career. And although generations of historians shrugged off the story as part of Callendar’s propaganda, DNA testing in 1998 showed a link between Hemings’ descendents and the Jefferson family.

Just as truth persists, however, so does friendship. Twelve years after the vicious election of 1800, Adams and Jefferson began writing letters to each other and became friends again. They remained pen pals for the rest of their lives and passed away on the same day, July 4, 1826. It was the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.
No one could tell George Washington how to be president. No one had done the job before. Washington knew that whatever he did would set a precedent. That means he would be the example and other presidents would follow his lead.

The Constitution outlined the basic tasks of the president, but it didn’t go into details. George Washington had to decide many things himself.

As always, he did his very best. He didn’t want the president to be like the English king, but he did think it important that the president be grand. He wanted people to look up to the president and respect and admire him.

So Washington acted with great dignity and rode about in a fine canary-yellow carriage pulled by six white horses whose coats were shined with marble dust, whose hoofs were painted black, and whose teeth were cleaned before every outing.

When President Washington held official receptions he wore velvet knee breeches, yellow gloves, silver buckles on his shoes, and a sword strapped to his waist. He used his coach to tour the country.

Washington liked things just so. He also chose his carriage’s paint and seat fabric.
As president he was head of the executive branch of our three-branch government. (The other two branches are the legislative, which is Congress, and the judicial, which is the courts.) Washington knew he couldn’t make all the decisions of the executive branch by himself. So he appointed advisers. Most of those helpers were called secretaries: secretary of state, secretary of the treasury, and so on. All together they were known as the “cabinet.”

Washington picked the very best people he could find. To help with foreign affairs, he picked an American who had been Virginia’s governor and had lived in France and knew a lot about foreign nations. Can you guess who he was? Well, George Washington named Thomas Jefferson as his secretary of state.

You can’t run a country without money. Since the days of the Revolution, when the states first united, they had had money problems. Washington needed a good man as a financial adviser. He named Alexander Hamilton as secretary of the treasury. Hamilton organized the nation’s monetary system. Some people think that Alexander Hamilton was the best secretary of the treasury ever.

To head the army and navy, Washington chose his old friend Henry Knox. Remember Knox the Ox? He was the general in charge of artillery during the Revolutionary War. Washington named him secretary of war in charge of national security.

John Adams, who had been elected George Washington’s vice president, was also a cabinet member. Washington completed the cabinet when he appointed Virginia’s governor, Edmund Randolph, as attorney general.
When he needed help writing a speech, President Washington turned to a congressman who had one of the finest minds in American history: James Madison. (And when Congress wished to address the president, guess who wrote the message? James Madison. So Madison was writing and answering the same messages!)

Altogether, Washington had about 350 people help him manage the new government. That was only about a hundred more people than he supervised at his plantation home, Mount Vernon.

Almost as soon as the new government got started, something happened that Washington hadn't expected. His two top advisers argued with each other. They really argued. Jefferson and Hamilton had ideas that clashed. They found it hard to compromise. In those days people sometimes watched cockfights, and so when Jefferson wanted to describe himself and Hamilton, he said, "Hamilton and myself were daily pitted in the cabinet like two fighting cocks."

Both were brilliant men. Both were patriots who wanted to do their best for their country. They just disagreed on what was best. Did they ever disagree! In fact—this is interesting—political parties in America developed because of that disagreement.

The country didn't begin with parties like today's Democrats and Republicans. The Founding Fathers—the men who wrote the Constitution—didn't realize that parties would develop. Washington didn't like the idea at all. He called them "factions" and warned against them. "The spirit of party," said the president, "agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms."

Cockfighting, an ancient betting sport, began in Asia and reached Europe in the fifth century B.C.E. It was no sport for the roosters—they were usually fitted with metal spurs and fought to the death. Here, two men seem to be fighting, too.

Here, to pit means to "set against each other." It doesn't have anything to do with the pit inside a cherry or a peach. Cockfights were staged in pits.