The last decade has witnessed a spate of compelling scholarly books that in some way address the first decade of American life under the Constitution. From David Waldstreicher’s seminal treatment of American nationalism to Simon Newman’s elegant examination of festive culture, from Rosemarie Zagarri’s cogent study of the ‘Rights of Women’ to Jeffrey Pasley’s incisive exploration of printers, and from Susan Branson’s illuminating survey of Philadelphia women to Albrecht Koschnik’s rigorous review of civic associations, scholars have been drawn to a period that for too long was overshadowed by works on the American Revolution and the Critical Period. So rich and exciting are these studies that they soon spawned a categorizing moniker, the “newest political history,” as

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well as important essay collections.\textsuperscript{2} The American 1790s, in short, are hot.

With \textit{The Jay Treaty Debate, Public Opinion, and the Evolution of Early American Political Culture}, Todd Estes, associate professor of history at Oakland University in Michigan, makes a significant and most welcome contribution to this burgeoning field. As the title indicates, the subject of the book is the controversy surrounding the Anglo-American diplomatic pact of 1795. But on a deeper level, Estes takes up the exact same theme—political culture—explored by each of the aforementioned authors. Whereas earlier historians of this era tended to focus on the founders, practitioners of the “newest political history” seek to examine the dynamic relationship between ordinary people and their leaders.\textsuperscript{3} Even more important, recent students of political culture in the 1790s tend to examine even the most well-known political affairs and individuals through the prism of language, symbolic ritual, and identity formation. Instead of assuming that the meaning of partisanship is straightforward, scholars associated with the “newest political history” seek to pull back overlapping layers of cultural tradition and innovation in an attempt to contextualize more fully historical actors’ choices and deeds. In that respect, claim the editors of one anthology, the “‘newest’ political history has synthetic potential, and begins to answer the call . . . for a more integrated understanding of the early republic.”\textsuperscript{4}

While Estes’s book meshes nicely with work produced by recent scholars of political culture, it stands apart in two important respects. First, it deals with one particular event and a rather concentrated period of time. Chapters one and two provide important background, but the last five focus almost entirely on the public tumult that erupted in 1795-1796 as a result of Jay’s Treaty. The unity of focus and brief temporal span under scrutiny enable Estes to unearth an abundance of fresh evidence, and he presents it with a rarely seen mastery of how it all fits together. The author knows this material intimately, and the argument assumes a distinctly authoritative aspect as a result. Estes’s book also differs from recent works on the 1790s in that it returns attention to the very stuff of politics—petition drives, Congressional votes, and town meetings—rather than simply the intersection of politics and culture.\textsuperscript{5} Although this book remains, at its core, a treatment of


\textsuperscript{3} This statement is a broad generalization, of course, and it is important to recognize that various scholars helped pioneer the study of “political culture.” See, for example, Jean Baker, \textit{Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of the Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century} (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998; orig. published, 1983).

\textsuperscript{4} Eds. Pasley, Robertson, and Waldstreicher, \textit{Beyond the Founders}, 5.

\textsuperscript{5} Another exception is Pasley, \textit{The Tyranny of the Printers}, which treats elections and campaigning extensively.
political culture, Estes implicitly highlights, more than other recent scholars of the 1790s, the first part of that term.

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of this well-written text is the way in which it transforms our understanding of Federalists. David Hackett Fischer demonstrated long ago that young Federalists in the two decades after 1800 embraced political campaigning, but Estes makes clear, with a keen eye for lively quotes and telling anecdotes, that something remarkable occurred even earlier. In particular, he shows beyond a shadow of a doubt that Federalists between 1793 and 1796 engaged in a wide variety of partisan activities—petition drives, town meetings, public rallies, newspaper writing, and even door-to-door solicitation—in an attempt to counteract the Republican movement. These are not your grandmother’s Federalists, in other words, and in numerous instances, supporters of Washington actually lamented the fact that they did not act sooner or with sufficient energy. While “Federalists were often ideologically elitist,” Estes astutely writes, “they were also operationally democratic.” (9)

What is more, the author convincingly suggests that Federalists were not dogmatically hierarchical in their notions of social order. Some textbook depictions of the 1790s still assert that Jeffersonians were the party of the people in opposition to the neo-aristocratic followers of Washington, but anyone who reads this book will recognize just how facile that formulation is. In particular, Estes shows that Federalists placed great “faith and confidence in the people’s judgment,” (39) so much so that the renowned Massachusetts partisan Fisher Ames wrote that the “people must be very fully and repeatedly informed of their concerns” precisely because their “shrewd and penetrating sagacity” led them to support proper policy and leaders. (55) This does not mean Federalists were egalitarians in the modern sense. As the author makes clear, individuals like Noah Webster and Rufus King expressed a deep ambivalence about mobilizing the people to thwart the Republican insurgency. Even so, the deft portrait of partisanship developed in The Jay Treaty Debate illuminates the degree to which Federalists harbored a peculiar attachment to popular sovereignty and the people’s wisdom.

Republicans also look somewhat different as a result of this penetrating book. For one thing, while scholars like Linda Kerber have documented Federalist irritation with Jeffersonians’ pie-in-the-sky “philosophy,” Estes shows that Jeffersonians accused their counterparts of something similar—namely, “sophistry,” a specious reasoning embellished by “flowery diction.” (95, 107-08, 119-20; quotation on 107) In addition, Estes illustrates that Republicans sometimes “seemed more doubtful of the wisdom and propriety of carrying on a debate in the public papers than did Hamilton and the Federalists.” (42) To be sure, Madison, Jefferson, and like-minded elites kept their fingers on the pulse of current affairs at all times. (92-93) But in important ways, they apparently felt more comfortable

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leaving the leadership of actual opposition activities to mid-level partisans like “Blair McClanahan, Benjamin Franklin Bache, [and] John Beckley.” (106) Elitism could be found on both sides of the political aisle, in this sense, and Estes does a service to those who lived in the 1790s by implicitly calling on historians to recognize and more fully analyze this fact.

If the persistence of hierarchical habits of mind is one of the central themes of The Jay Treaty Debate, the larger story nonetheless buttresses the democratization thesis of Gordon Wood and other scholars. As Estes writes, the controversy over the Anglo-American pact of 1795 was not “a simple prelude to the elections of 1795,” but “the launching ground for a new means of practicing politics.” (212) Grounded in print culture and its interaction with public gatherings and petition drives, this “new means” helped crystallize political parties. Even more importantly, the “newer methods of practicing politics took on a life of their own” and thus “altered the entire political system within which the nascent parties operated.” (212, 213)

That type of conclusion may seem too pat, too overdetermined, and perhaps even too whiggish for some historians. But Estes is well aware of the “gradual, uneven, evolutionary” nature of political change, and close examination of his book reveals that he cares a great deal about historical ironies. (212) To begin with, he shows, more forcefully than any other scholar, I believe, the way in which Federalists’ “victory in the Jay Treaty debate was a Pyrrhic one, a classic case of winning a tactical victory at the expense of a larger strategic setback.” (212) Equally important, Estes shrewdly articulates the dialectical dynamic of the political disputes leading to and surrounding the Jay Treaty clash. In direct counterpoint to Republicans’ over-the-top enthusiasm for Citizen Genet and the Democratic-Republican Societies, Federalists successfully positioned themselves as the party of reason and the ongoing partisan struggle as a direct choice between Washington and Genet or Washington and the Democratic-Republican Societies. Conversely, Republican leaders showed an ability to retreat from dangerous political ground in order to fight another day.

Scholars of the 1790s will also be interested in Estes’s careful articulation of the various stages and unexpected consequences of the Jay Treaty debate, which by implication reveals the unpredictability of historical development, even in such a relatively compressed period of time. As the author observes in a passage about Virginian John Page’s evolving opinion regarding the right of the people to instruct their representatives—Page supported that right in 1789 but pulled back from it in 1796—“shifting context and particular, concrete issues led participants to clarify and sometimes modify their positions in the political debates.” (147) Never disregarding or devaluing the advantages of hindsight, Estes nonetheless appreciates the fact that his subjects lived in a complicated world that

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necessitated new approaches to new situations. In essence, The Jay Treaty Debate is too smart of a work to let the democratization theme overwhelm the contingencies of history.

None of this is meant to suggest, of course, that this is a book without errors. The index is meager and contains at least one mistake.9 There are passages and examples that are a bit underdeveloped.10 There are instances of repetition.11 And trenchant works by Andrew W. Robertson and Marcus Leonard Daniel are noticeably absent from the footnotes; the former’s book on political rhetoric would have facilitated an even more insightful discussion of “The Words of Tongue and Pen,” while the latter’s treatment of political printers contains illuminating discussions of two individuals to whom Estes frequently refers, Noah Webster and Benjamin Franklin Bache.12 (104-26)

On matters of interpretation, a few of the author’s particular conclusions raise questions. To begin with, were the aforementioned McClenachan, Bache, and Beckley in fact overmatched by Hamilton’s forensic abilities, as Estes asserts? (106) Or did they find themselves in a more difficult rhetorical position—something the author at times suggests—and do the best they could with a losing hand? Is it possible, along those lines, that Jefferson and Madison stayed out of the rough-and-tumble of political combat in part because they knew Federalists held the upper hand in the mid-1790s? From their point of view, was it not better to wait for auspicious circumstances than risk embarrassment, discrediting, and marginalization, outcomes to which Republican printers frequently exposed themselves.

In addition, while Estes privileges Jefferson and the way in which his sense of “critical distance” from the worst political turmoil in urban areas enabled him to see the big picture and realize that the mobilization of the populace would ultimately benefit Republicans, did not Madison prove equally prescient when he observed that the fight over Jay’s Treaty “left” Federalist opponents “in a very crippled condition,” one in which only “auspicious contingencies abroad or at home” could change? (209, 197) The “contingencies” Madison longed for materialized (unexpectedly) as the XYZ Affair, the Alien and Sedition Acts, and

9 On page 265, the index’s reference to John Beckley’s “Calm Observer” writings instructs the reader to go to page 252, note 20, but in fact the passage in question is on page 254.

10 In my mind, the following passages, examples, and/or themes do not receive the analysis they deserve: the hollowed-out “watermelon” incident cited on page 75; Federalists’ insistence on the different ways in which urban and rural residents responded to political strife (80, 99-100, and 102); the metaphorical reference to the boat and captain on page 93; and exactly what is new in the “newer interpretation of citizens’ rights and duties” (135).

11 See the repetition of ideas and/or quotes on the following page pairings: 17 and 37 (Proclamation of Neutrality); 95 and 117 (Jefferson’s quote about Hamilton as a “colossus”); and 128 and 145 (Newberry County, South Carolina petitioners’ quote about Robert Goodloe Harper being a “brave hero”). See also the first and last sentences of the last full paragraph on page 29.

the popular backlash against John Adams’s presidential administration. Barring those events, it is highly unlikely the popular political maneuvering surrounding the Anglo-American pact of 1795 would have enabled Republicans to win the election of 1800. In that sense, Madison proved just as much of a prophet as Jefferson.

As this series of friendly inquiries and comments hopefully demonstrates, this is one of those books that propels the field forward by raising many more questions than it answers. Indeed, this book is a triumph of historical argumentation, evidence-gathering, and graceful writing. Tackling a familiar topic with a fresh angle of vision, Estes paints a compelling portrait of how a particular series of interrelated foreign and domestic events wrought transformative change among a group of people who did not know where history was headed. All historians of the American 1790s should therefore read this discerning monograph. Even more, *The Jay Treaty Debate* merits a wide readership among anyone interested in American political culture.