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The United States in 1800

Henry Adams

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The United States in 1800 by Henry Adams is a compilation of the first six chapters of his magnum opus, *History of the United States of America during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.* In this volume, Adams explains how personalities and events from this period shaped the main lines of American national development.

The achievement of Adams's historical masterpiece (most specifically the first six chapters) is that it so fittingly presents the theme of what America is all about. It not only explains what Adams and others in his time described as the revolution of 1800, but it also offers a key to two other national revolutions that were to come, those of 1860 and 1991.

The first rebellion changed the nature of American politics by abolishing the notion of federalism—the effort by the authors of the Constitution to limit voting to the educated and wealthy. The party that came into power, led by Thomas Jefferson and his presidential successor, James Madison, advocated democracy and a wider suffrage. They sought to include in the government men not only from New England but also from the Middle States, the South, and the new West. In *The United States in 1800*, Adams details how this led to a much greater change in America's national fortunes. He examines how out of a relatively primitive state of affairs came the greatest nation on earth, measured not only in national power but also in national virtue. Even in those early years, Adams sensed a strength in democracy that outweighed its defects.

This broader appraisal of the United States is what makes this primary source volume so relevant today. It was this strength of democracy that kept the nation together after the revolution in 1860—the Civil War—and continues to keep it together following the drastic changes that have ensued since the fall of the USSR in 1991, so that today, as the only remaining superpower, the United States finds itself vulnerable to the willfulness of small groups of dissatisfied individuals. By exploring the origins of American democracy, we can learn what Adams knew back in the 1800s—that a pride in democracy and a willingness to make it prevail were all that people needed to free them from the chains of the past and perils in the future. Teachers of American history will welcome this volume to fill the void in the material available for classroom use.

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