Jefferson's Letters from France

“Reason and experience prove to us, that the first magistrate... is... an office for life.”

Thomas Jefferson was serving as the United States Minister to France during much of the time that the Constitution was being drafted in the United States. Being away from home, however, did not mean that Jefferson was uninformed with the developments of that document across the Atlantic. Jefferson maintained an active correspondence with James Madison, John Adams, and other Framers. He reviewed drafts of the Constitution and commented about it at length in his letters.

Jefferson's Objections

As the writing of the Constitution progressed, Jefferson expressed two major objections. First, he wanted a bill of rights included. Second, he wanted to limit the terms the President could serve. Read the excerpts from his letters to Adams and Madison, and then consider Jefferson’s reasons for wanting this second change to the Constitution:

TO JOHN ADAMS November 13, 1787

[The President] may be elected from four years to four years, for life. Reason and experience prove to us, that [the first] magistrate... is an office for life. When one or two generations shall have proved that this is an office for life, it becomes, on every occasion, worthy of intrigue, of bribery, of force, and even of foreign interference.

TO JAMES MADISON December 20, 1787

The second feature I dislike, and strongly dislike, is the abandonment, in every instance, of the principle of rotation in office, and most particularly in the case of the President.... If once elected, and at a second or third election outvoted by one or two votes, he will pretend false votes, foul play, hold possession of the reins of government, be supported by the States voting for him, especially if they be the central ones, lying in a compact body themselves, and separating their opponents; and they will be aided by one nation in Europe, while the majority are aided by another.

The Term of the President

For many years, Jefferson’s concern—that a President, once elected, would serve for life—proved unfounded. George Washington served only two terms, establishing a precedent. Jefferson himself chose not to run for a third term in 1808, even though many people urged him to. Not until Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected to a third term in 1940 and a fourth term in 1944 was this pattern broken. Roosevelt was the first and last President to serve more than two terms. In 1951, the 22nd Amendment prohibited anyone from serving more than two terms as President.

Questions for Discussion

1. What did Jefferson think would happen if the presidency became an office for life?
2. In what ways did Jefferson fear a President would try to hold on to office after being elected once?