



John Adams

The Price of Free Speech: The Alien and Sedition Acts

Part 1

Vocabulary words in this article:

monarchy:

nullify:

By 1788 enough states had approved the Constitution so that the new federal government could begin. Not everyone favored the Constitution and debates within each state had been intense. Now there was a new government – at least on paper. What kind of government would it be in practice? Would the federal government be strong enough to avoid past problems? Could the new nation be protected from possible foreign dangers? No one knew the answers to these questions. The new nation was yet to be shaped by experience.

As first president, war-hero George Washington was able to help the new government get underway. By the end of his time in office, serious problems had developed. These problems would haunt the next president, John Adams. One of these problems was the bitter differences between political parties. The Constitution had not provided for the existence of political parties, but their growth had a powerful effect on the new nation.

One of the parties was called the Federalists; the other, the Republicans. The parties reflected general disagreements among people. At times, the two parties seemed to disagree about everything.

Generally, the Federalists wanted a strong national government, friendly relations with England, and an economy built on manufacturing. The Federalists were most powerful in the northeastern states.

On the other hand, the Republicans wanted greater limits on the power of the federal government. They favored friendly relations with France and an economy based on agriculture. Republicans were strongest in the middle and southern states.

Federalists believed that the wealthy upper classes should control the government; Republicans believed the common people should have the biggest influence. The Republicans often feared that the Federalists wanted to make the new nation a monarchy as in England. A leading Federalist was Alexander Hamilton. A leading Republican was Thomas Jefferson.

Differences between the parties became severe in the 1790s. During that time problems with foreign nations threatened the safety of the new nation.

France had helped the colonies win their independence from England. After the Revolution, France was admired by most Americans. Then, beginning in 1789, France went through a series of violent revolutions. News of these events, a reign of terror in France, and French invasions of other European countries affected American thinking. Some people, mainly Republicans, were delighted that France had overthrown its king and was now attacking other monarchies. Others, mainly Federalists, feared the French example would stimulate violence in the United States.

Tensions between the political parties

increased when England and France went to war. According to the treaty signed in 1778, the United States had agreed to defend the French West Indies if they were threatened during wartime. George Washington believed the revolutions in France had nullified the treaty. He also did not want the young United States to become involved in a war. In 1793, he proclaimed that the United States would be neutral – would not take sides – in the European conflict.

French leaders were angered by this. They believed the United States had violated its treaty agreement. Also, they feared the United States might become too friendly with England and might even form an alliance. To get back at the United States, the French navy began attacking U.S. merchant ships, taking their cargo and often injuring their sailors. In 1795 about three hundred U.S. ships were captured.

When Federalist John Adams became president in 1796, anti-French feelings ran high among the members of his party. Republicans thought there was little danger to the United States, though many Federalists expected a full-scale war. Adams believed the French naval actions were, in effect, a declaration of war. It was, however, a half-war: "She is at war with us, but we are not at war with her."

Adams wanted to avoid a war with France. In 1797 he sent three ambassadors to negotiate with the French government. The French foreign minister sent his agents, later known as X, Y, and Z, to talk with the ambassadors. The agents said the government would not begin to negotiate unless the U.S. government first paid a bribe of \$250,000 and gave France a multimillion dollar loan. The Americans refused and no peace talks were held.

When news of the XYZ affair reached the United States, most people were shocked and offended. When John Marshall, one of the ambassadors,

returned, he was treated as a hero for turning down the French insults. A slogan of the day was, "Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute." Americans were unwilling to pay bribes to the French.

Hatred and fear of the French became common, particularly among Federalists. Many believed the French had secret agents in the United States who were plotting a revolution. Vice President Thomas Jefferson, generally friendly toward France, was regarded as one of the Federalists' enemies. Some newspapers printed a letter that they claimed had been written by Jefferson. The author of the letter said he hoped the supporters of France would take power in the United States.

Arguments between supporters of the Federalists and Republicans were common. Brawls took place in the streets. Newspapers took sides, some vigorously supporting the Adams administration, others strongly opposing it.

Political party differences seemed to surround everything. A Federalist newspaper reported a bank robbery. In the article, the robber was identified as a Republican. Even disease became political. Epidemics of yellow fever were common in Philadelphia during the summer months. In one instance, Republicans claimed the disease was carried by British ships while Federalists claimed it was spread by French ships.

The French continued to attack U.S. shipping, sometimes even in sight of the United States shoreline. To many it seemed war was inevitable. Some Federalists urged Adams to declare war. Adams made many speeches attacking the French but did not ask for a declaration of war. Instead, he urged Congress to pass laws for defense.

-Story from Reasoning with Democratic Values, by Alan L. Lockwood and David E. Harris.