

The Presidency of John Adams

(taken from History Alive! and The American Nation)

Setting the Scene:

Late in his life, John Adams looked back on his career with mixed feelings. He knew that leaders such as Washington and Jefferson were more widely admired than he was. In the end, he concluded: "I am not, never was, and never shall be a great man." Although he was not a popular hero, like Washington, he was an honest and able leader. As President, he tried to act in the best interests of the nation, even when his actions hurt him politically.

In 1796, **John Adams** was elected the nation's **second President** by a slim margin. Runner-up Thomas Jefferson became Vice President. No man came to the presidency with more political experience than Adams. He had been a leader of the Revolution, had represented the United States in peace negotiations with Britain, and had served as Vice President for two terms under President Washington. Politically, he sided with the Federalists. Like Hamilton, he distrusted the common people and believed that liberty could best be preserved by a powerful government headed by a strong and able executive such as himself.

The XYZ Affair:

No sooner did Adams take office than he faced a crisis with France. In 1797, French ships began to seize American ships in the West Indies. Americans called for war with France. Adams tried to avoid war by sending diplomats to Paris to discuss the rights of neutral nations.

France's foreign minister, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, did not deal directly with the Americans. Instead, he sent three secret agents to offer the Americans a deal. Talleyrand let it be known that he wanted \$250,000 for himself and a loan of \$10 million for France before he would consider having France stop the attacks on American ships. Adams was outraged! Adams published reports of the bribe in the American newspapers. He referred to Talleyrand's agents as X, Y, and Z. Americans were calling for war once again. Despite growing pressures, Adams refused to ask Congress to declare war on France. However, the attacks on American ships continued and he could not ignore this any longer. He moved to strengthen the navy. Shipyards began building frigates, fast sailing ships with many guns

This show of strength helped convince Talleyrand to stop the attacks on American ships. Many Federalists, led by Hamilton, criticized Adam's actions. They hoped a war would weaken the Republicans, supporters of France. Although John Adams was a Federalist, he would not give in to Hamilton. Like Washington, Adams kept the nation out of war. His success, however, cost him support of politicians in his own party.

The Alien and Sedition Acts:

Adams continued to be verbally assaulted by both parties, particularly the Republicans, who were angered that nothing was being done about British ships stopping and boarding neutral American ships and sometimes taking these Americans to serve in the British Royal Navy.

Hoping to muffle these assaults on the President, the Federalist-controlled Congress passed four laws known as the **Alien and Sedition Acts**. One of these laws made it more difficult for a foreigner(alien) to become a citizen by extending the naturalization period from five to fourteen years. Another of the Acts empowered the President to expel any foreigner thought to be "dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States." The most controversial law, the Sedition Act, made it illegal to "write, print, utter, or publish....any false scandalous and malicious writing or writings against the government of the United States."