



John Adams and Foreign Policy

The Election of 1796

With Washington deciding not to run for another term, the eyes of the nation were focused on the election of 1796 intently. Deciding who would fill his shoes and become the next president was an important concern. Each party chose two candidates. The Republicans chose Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr, while the Federalists chose John Adams and Charles Pinckney. Electors voted for any two.

At that time, the Constitution called for giving the presidency to the candidate with the highest number of electoral votes. The candidate with the second highest number would become the vice president. John Adams received 71 electoral votes, followed by 68 for Jefferson, 59 for Pinckney, 30 for Burr and 48 to various other candidates.

- **Stop and think:** can you see a problem developing here? Who won the election, and what issues might that mean for the nation?

The XYZ Affair

John Adams spent most of his life in public service. He was well-known as one of Massachusetts' most active Patriots during the Revolutionary War. He served two terms as vice president under Washington before becoming president. However, his presidency was nonetheless troubled.

Like Washington, Adams was faced with several conflicts early on during his presidency. Due to the country's policy of **neutrality** during the French Revolution, France was very displeased with the United States. They strongly opposed Jay's Treaty, claiming it favored the British. To punish the United States, the French began seizing American ships that carried cargo to Britain. Americans called for war.

- **Make a prediction:** Do you think that Adams will handle this threat like Washington did, or differently? Explain.

In an effort to avoid war, President Adams sent a team to Paris to try and resolve the dispute in the fall of 1797. However, French officials would not meet with the American representatives. Instead, they sent three agents to offer America a deal. Before French officials would even agree to talk, the agents said, they wanted \$250,000 for the foreign minister and a \$10 million loan for France. Adams was furious. In his report to Congress, Adams used the letters X, Y and Z in place of the French agents' names. As a result, the event became known as the **XYZ Affair**.

The XYZ Affair created war fever in America. Despite strong pressure, Adams refused to ask Congress to declare war on France. Like Washington, he wanted to keep the country out of European affairs. However, he couldn't ignore the attacks on American ships, so he strengthened the Navy by building **frigates**, or fast-sailing ships with many guns. This action convinced France to stop attacking American shops.

Although Adams was able to avoid war, he still received harsh criticism from the Federalists. They were hoping for war with France, because it would weaken the Republicans, who supported France. War would have also strengthened the nation's military forces, which would mean an increase of federal power- a key goal of the

Federalists. Their disagreement created a split in the Federalist party, which cost Adams the support of many Federalists for the election of 1800.

1. What sparked (caused) the events that led to the XYZ Affair?

2. How was the issue resolved?

3. Why would Hamilton and other Federalists be *unhappy* with Adams for avoiding war?

The Alien and Sedition Acts

When the public found out about the XYZ Affair, many grew angry at this foreign attempt to influence their government. They became more suspicious of **aliens**- residents who are not citizens. Many Europeans who had come to the United States in the 1790s supported the idea of a French Revolution. Some Americans questioned whether these aliens would remain loyal if the U.S. went to war with France.

In 1798, Federalists pushed several laws through in Congress. Under the **Alien Act**, the president could expel (kick out) any foreigner suspected to be dangerous to the country. Another law made it harder for immigrants to become citizens. Before 1798, white immigrants could become citizens after living in the U.S. for five years. The new law made immigrants wait 14 years. Many immigrants supported Jefferson and the Republicans. By making them wait longer to become citizens, they would be unable to vote and support Republican policies.

The Republicans grew even angrier when Congress passed the **Sedition Act**. Sedition means stirring up rebellion against a government. Under this law, citizens could be fined or jailed if they criticized the government or its officials. Republicans argued that it violated the Constitution. Under the First Amendment, free speech and press were protected. Jefferson warned that the new laws threatened American liberties.

4. What were the goals of the Alien and Sedition Acts? _____

Jefferson, strongly opposed to the Alien and Sedition Acts, encouraged the states to **nullify**, or cancel out, the laws. He argued that each state “has the right to judge for itself” whether a law is constitutional and could resist the power of the federal government by nullifying a law it did not agree with. With the help of Jefferson and Madison, Kentucky and Virginia passed resolutions that nullified the Alien and Sedition Acts. **The Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions** supported the idea of states’ rights- that the federal government had limits on its powers, and that states have the right to claim any power not specifically granted to the federal government.

5. Why were the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions of 1798 and 1799 significant? What issue did they address?
