

An Introduction to the Adams Presidency

Joint Crisis Committee Walker Model Congress 2016

John Adams, second president of the United States, served from 1797 – 1801 after having excelled as vice president under George Washington. Prior to that, he labored as a delegate of Massachusetts to the First and Second Continental Congresses, and as such played a major role in declaring independence in 1776. He was an author, statesman, diplomat, and, rather notably, an Enlightenment Era theorist, introducing ideas of Republicanism and a strong central government. This would become a theme for Adams' career as he became a spearhead for the manifestation of divisions in political beliefs within the young country. As the first president to be elected under a political party's sponsorship, John Adams represented the Federalist faction and, as the first partisan president, is a crucial figure in the emergence of the two party system.

Adams came to the presidency under growing pressure between Great Britain and France, and by extension this tension involved the United States due to the extensive trade network involving the three nations. This tension surfaced during Washington's presidency, helping to set the stage so that the 1796 election would highlight a growing division in political views on how to proceed with the European powers.

Following the ratification of the Constitution, politics remains painted by discussion over the proper role of the federal government. As a member of this committee, it is especially important to consider this question in the context of the period. The Constitution was ratified in 1788, and in 1789 became the law of the land. Having been elected in 1796, John Adams and his contemporaries still clearly remembered the Constitution's ratification, and because of this many of the issues up for debate echoed many of the same matters. One of the most fundamental tensions was the strength of the federal government. In ratification, the Federalists in power supported a strong central government in the creation of the constitution, and thus found conflict with the anti-federalist mentality that held the states should be given more power to control and solve their own matters as they see fit. Along with this conflict, the Federalists favored a looser interpretation of the constitution as law, and thus were in favor of a portion of Article 1 of the Constitution known as the "Elastic Clause," or "Necessary and Proper Clause."¹ This clause stated that Congress should have all powers "implied" but perhaps not explicitly stated in the Constitution. This would appear to be an effort to make the Constitution a document which would stand the test of time, though it did raise concerns with the contrasting political opinions over its potential abuse. Federalists were generally in favor of the clause as it granted the federal government a more flexible power, which would in most cases give a stronger power. The anti-federalists were not as much in favor, as they preferred to check the federal government as much as possible, and leave important decisions to the

¹ The Elastic Clause is the last section in Article I Section 8 which delineates the exact powers of Congress. Its exact language as taken from the National Archives is as follows: "To make all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution the foregoing Powers, and all other Powers vested by this Constitution in the Government of the United States, or in any Department or Officer thereof."

state and local governments. Following ratification, the majority of the followers of the anti-federalist faction would come to form the Democratic Republican party².

This disagreement over the role of the federal government also played into the nation's relationship with Great Britain. Fresh off of a revolution, many in the nation resented any sort of authority that remotely resembled the monarchy. This fear of the monarchy translated into a distaste for a strong federal government, and thus the mentality of the Democratic Republican party gained a following with those who retained this mindset. However, the Federalists, already in favor of a strong central government, did not fear association with Great Britain in the same way, choosing instead to associate in the name of trade and a greater economy.

In this time period, much of Europe was in turmoil, and so in order to establish the new government free from foreign political engagements, Washington declared a policy of neutrality in 1793. This legally prevented the states from pledging allegiance to a European power, however both France and Great Britain would proceed to put pressure on America to favor one over the other. Great Britain was quite aggressive in particular, using impressment tactics in naval trade for intimidation and disrupting many American trade vessels at sea. One of the largest incentives for US action, however, was the aftermath of the Fallen Timbers Battle. As the final battle of the Northwest Indian War, Fallen Timbers demolished Native American forces and brought stability into an otherwise conflict-ridden territory. However, in the aftermath, American forces realized that the Natives were armed with British muskets. This was an outrage for the Democratic Republicans, as they were upset that outside forces seemed to be escalating internal, national problems, particularly with the outcroppings of continued British aggression. From this came the 1794 Jays Treaty. John Jay, a Federalist, was sent to negotiate a treaty with Great Britain in order to effectively remove British presence from the Northwest forts, solicit reparations for lost wealth in vessels that had been seized, and to most basically stop Great Britain from interrupting the U.S.' foreign trade. He came out with a treaty that bound the U.S. from sending ships into "enemy ports" and also which granted the U.S. "most favored nation" status. It was a very non-neutral treaty, and passed through congress with a 2/3 majority very slightly, 10-20 in 1795, purely on the notion that it would avoid immediate war. The congressional debate over this treaty is often considered to be one of the milestones for the official birth of the two party system.

It also is important to note that at this point the Federalist party was in control of both the executive and legislative branches, and so a fair number of the actions passed in the government could be argued to have been motivated to aid the power of the Federalist party, especially as the frontier was ever more populated, creating ever more dissent to the Federalist agenda. This fed an anger over the notion that an elite few were in control of the governance of the whole nation, contributing to arguments over appropriate representation in governmental decisions. The Alien and Sedition Acts, followed by the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, exhibit this powerplay. These acts were presented as a solution to the security risks following a growing "Quasi-War" with the French. This quasi-war refers to the increased seizure of American sea vessels, leading up to a series of events known as the XYZ Affairs. In the same nature as John Jay having been sent to negotiate a peace with Great Britain, John Adams sent John Marshall with a team of diplomats to negotiate a

² As a general rule, Anti-Federalists would become the Democratic Republicans, but not all of those against the Constitution's ratification would later join Jefferson's party.

treaty. Marshall and his men were ignored by the French formally, however they were approached by the foreign minister's agents and asked for a bribe of \$250,000 in order to formally negotiate with the French minister. Once news of this reached the states, it evoked a fervent anti-French sentiment among the people, and thus an undeclared war took place over the next two years, the French attacking American shipping vessels and Americans eventually retaliating.

The Alien and Sedition Acts, four acts passed by a Federalist Congress and signed into law by President John Adams in 1798, were touted as a way of ensuring national security with ever increasing European trade tensions. Included in this was the Naturalization Act, which raised the residency requirement to 14 years, discouraging citizenship, further discouraging voting. The Alien Acts gave the president the right to deport any foreigners deemed dangerous at his discretion, including foreigners from a nation deemed hostile. These measures while extreme certainly could be argued to have been in the interest of national security, though in conjunction with the Sedition Act, criminalizing criticisms of the government, the Alien and Sedition acts would seem to be unconstitutional, as they violated rights to free speech and press. This was presented as a way to provide security from the French, following the undeclared naval war with France, though with provisions restricting free speech, there is reasonable belief that these acts were more than anything in the interest of protecting Federalists from any political opponents being able to speak out.

In response to this, Republicans Thomas Jefferson and James Madison approached the difficult issue, difficult because per the Sedition Act, it would be illegal to speak out against the Alien and Sedition acts themselves, as it would be a criticism of the government. They came forth with the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, predicated on the Compact Theory of government, the idea that the federal government is a creation of the states, and thusly should it act in an "unjust" manner, the states should have the right to go against the decision, either by modifying it or through nullification or interposition. The Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions were "anonymous" statements of the respective legislatures that the Alien and Sedition Acts were unconstitutional, and that the states should be able to judge the constitutionality of federal governmental actions. These resolutions reflected a very Republican view, as they put yet another check on the power of the federal government, effectively allowing states to decide which federal laws they would want to follow. This has its modern implications as well, as the Theory of Interposition still translates into governing today, the state of Virginia deciding not to adopt Medicare expansions or the common core curriculum.

The Adams presidency was a defining period for the party system, and the divisions created would continue for decades to come. Eventually, the effects of this disunity would lead to a civil war over representation in federal government decisions and decrees. This could be considered the new nation's way of "breaking in" the somewhat inevitable political cleavages that come with any sophisticated society. Additionally, it could be considered troubling for the prospects of achieving national policies with such divisions. Regardless, the issues which came forth during Adams' presidency highlighted the challenges that the American government would encounter in the coming years, as it was very clear that it would no longer be a "neutral" government run mainly by wealthy, educated statesmen.

Federalist General Point of View:

A federalist by definition favors a more powerful federal government. As northeastern merchants, landowners, and skilled laborers, the majority of Federalist support came from the northern states in New England. In opposition to the Democratic Republicans, the Federalists valued order and stability, choosing to place greater faith in the federal government in exchange for greater economic benefits through trade and efficient, centralized decision making that would protect both the nation's and the people's wellbeing. They strongly distrusted "mobocracy" as Thomas Jefferson's vision was referred to, instead preferring a government led by the educated elite.

Democratic Republican General Point of View:

Mostly made up of Southern farmers, Democratic Republicans were led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison as the opposition to Alexander Hamilton's Federalist party. As the provincial, common man's party, they strongly disagreed with the Federalist elitist approach to governing, since they believed that every man, regardless of his education or the amount of land that he owned, should have an equal voice in government. As a result they supported a decentralized federal government that left the majority of decisions to state and local governments that could then choose their own paths. Against the tyranny of the government and any possibility of monarchy, this decentralized version would allow the people to maintain their control over the government, and therefore their liberty. Their unwillingness to give the central government too much power is their defining characteristic and, ultimately, the basis for any other opinions.

Questions to Consider

1. What concessions would be appropriate in legislation which must also pass Democratic Republican approval? Which Federalist party ideals are too integral to the success of the United States to be conceded?
2. What are the advantages to the Federalist ideals regarding the national government in conducting foreign and domestic policy?
3. Should the Compact Theory of government be considered valid? Does this negate any powers of the federal government, or provide a check on the powers of said government?
4. How did US-Europe relations affect the political climate of the developing United States? Should foreign relations play into domestic policy choices?
5. What methods can be taken to achieve a larger Federalist voter base in order to further Federalist success?
6. How can the ideals of the Federalist party maintain relevance and power amidst a growing opposition party?