An Uncertain Destiny

When George Washington left office after nearly 8 years as the President, he left a nation that had matured radically. It had faced its first homegrown (Whisky) rebellion, and it had seen the government settle in at temporary capitols in New York, Philadelphia and briefly at Germantown while the new Territory of Columbia was built and transformed into the new Capitol, the District of Columbia. The Department of the Navy had been established, the northwest Indian War against Tecumseh and his allies had been won, and a genuine peace had been forged with Great Britain even as the French alliance crumbled beneath the violence of its own revolution.

In his two terms as president, his fame and influence had allowed him to be unusually free from the dirtier aspects of politics. He was an expert at allowing others to argue and fight until exhausted, so that he could step in at the last moment to get his own way. He had been elected unanimously, and the men he appointed to his cabinet to run the various departments of the government were usually unwilling to confront him directly. Because of the respect most people had for him, the man elected as his vice president was a man he generally approved of and got along well with: John Adams.

Now, Washington was gone, and suddenly some major problems became very obvious. There were two distinct schools of thought on how the new nation should proceed. The first group was led by Thomas Jefferson, a Virginian and a plantation owner who had been a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, authored the Declaration of Independence, and believed strongly that the future of the country should be determined by the actions of individual well-educated gentleman farmers such as himself. As such, he was opposed to strong central governments because he feared they would restrict his personal freedoms, and he believed the U.S. should support the French Revolution. He founded and led the Democratic-Republican Party, a group of politicians that opposed government expansion, military power, and taxation as threats to individual liberty. This party is sometimes called the Jeffersonian Democrat-Republicans, and bears no real relationship to the modern political parties.

The second group was known as the Federalists. It was led by Alexander Hamilton, a young man who had been an aide to Washington during the war. He strongly believed that a strong Federal Government was necessary to prevent special interests from dominating the country, and that only an impersonally interested central government could bring the financial stability that would bring prosperity to the nation. In Washington's administration, Jefferson had been the secretary of State, where he oversaw foreign relations. Hamilton had been the Secretary of the Treasury, where he oversaw financial policy. They had hated each other. In general, what one supported, the other opposed. They agreed on virtually nothing, and had even opposed each other during the struggle to ratify the Constitution, which was the very document that created the jobs that each now occupied.

When Washington refused a third term, his vice-president through the past two terms ran for the presidency. John Adams was a Federalist, and had written the series of newspaper articles supporting the new constitution called the Federalist papers. (He was also the man who had defended the British soldiers involved in the Boston Massacre, and clearly believed in the idea that a mob of individuals sometimes needed a clear head and hands to guide them.) Since he had been Washington's vice-president, he had the best chance at winning the election. Many federalists would have preferred to elect Hamilton, but the man was too unpopular.

The Democrat-Republicans put forth Thomas Jefferson as a candidate. When the election arrived, Adams received 71 electoral votes to Jefferson's 68 votes. Oddly, this did not mean that the Federalists had won outright. Instead, the way the original laws stating how presidential elections worked meant that the first place winner became president. The second place winner became the *vice*-president. This meant that a federalist was our second president, but that his bitter enemy Thomas Jefferson the anti-federalist was his Vice-President.

Much of Adams' presidency would be spent struggling with his enemies inside the government, who essentially believed everything he wanted to do was wrong. The first challenge of his administration was the dilemma of what to do with France. The Jeffersonians (who were also called the anti-federalists) believed that the U.S. should support the revolution in France, whereas the Federalists believed that to ally themselves with the new French Republic would mean more conflict with France's enemy, Britain. The Jay treaty had strengthened ties between Britain and the U.S., which many Jeffersonians feared would lead to a loss of independence. Adams was in a tough spot, since most Americans approved of France at the time.

Then, the XYZ Affair was made public. It seemed that certain agents of the new French Republic had refused to talk to U.S. diplomats until after they had been paid some rather hefty bribes. In response, the Adams administration released copies of the letters from the French, substituting the letters X, Y and Z for the names of the French diplomats. The greed of the French rapidly shifted public opinion in the U.S. against their former ally, and the Jeffersonians were left supporting a relationship with what was now a very unpopular country. As the French-U.S. relationship continued to sour, the U.S. defaulted on debts from the war that were owed to France, diplomatic relations were not restored, and eventually in 1798 the existing treaties were abandoned. French warships began capturing American merchant ships on the grounds that they were trading with France's enemy, Britain. Congress then authorized the construction of new ships to fight off French attackers at sea. The next two years would witness an unannounced naval war between the U.S. and France. Because no formal declaration of war was ever made, this was a known as the Quasi-War.

The Quasi-War gave Adams another advantage. Many of the Jeffersonian supporters were foreign born, but paranoia about foreign agents trying to influence the U.S. was now relatively high because of stressed international relationships. Even worse, Democrat -Republicans were in some states refusing to enforce federal laws, and occasional mutterings of secession were heard. (If a state were to secede, it would break ties and leave the U.S. to become its own nation. Whether this was a legal option was in doubt, but it certainly would have been disastrous for the union.) To combat such influence, the Alien and Sedition Acts were passed by the majority Federalist Congress in 1798. This made it illegal to criticize the government (sedition,) and lengthened the amount of time an immigrant had to live in the U.S. before becoming a citizen, as well as giving the President the power to arrest and deport immigrants considered dangerous.

Predictably, many were outraged at this new level of interference from the Federal Government, which clearly set limits on free speech and expanded the power of the government to arrest and deport people. The passage of these acts would mark the high point of Federalist influence in the government. By early 1799, Adams had forged a new peace with France, ending the crisis. Later that year, Washington passed away. The death of the greatest unifier the nation and federalist party had known led to an inevitable loss of power, as a well as a split between federalists who followed Adams and those who followed Hamilton. The 1800 election would be a defeat for Adams. He would move into the newly completed White House in the city of Washington D.C. just before surrendering the Presidency to Thomas Jefferson. The next few decades were a time when the government was controlled mostly by the Democratic-Republican party. The age of the First Party System was at its midpoint, but the age of Federalist power was over.

Use the SARs format to answer the following questions.

1. What was a major flaw in the early government?

2. What were the names and beliefs of the two political parties that emerged in the First Party system?

3. How did the French Revolution affect the relationship of France and the U.S.?

4. What was the XYZ affair, and how did it affect the U.S. government?

5. What was the Quasi-war, and how did it affect the U.S. government?

6. What were the Alien and Sedition Acts, and how did they affect the U.S. government?