

John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and the Quasi-War with France

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Abstract

This paper examines the split of the Federalist Party and subsequent election defeat in 1800 through the views of John Adams and Alexander Hamilton on the Quasi-War with France. More specifically, I will be focusing on what caused their split on the French issue. I argue that the main source of conflict between the two men was ideological differences on parties in contemporary American politics. While Adams believed that there were two parties in America and his job was to remain independent of both, Hamilton saw only one party (the Republicans), and believed that it was the goal of all “real” Americans to do whatever was needed to defeat that faction. This ideological difference between the two men resulted in their personal disdain for one another and eventually their split on the French issue.

Introduction

National politics in the early American republic was a very uncertain venture. The founding fathers had no historical precedents to rely upon. The kind of government created in the American constitution had never been attempted in the Western World; it was a piecemeal system designed in many ways more to gain individual state approval than for practical implementation. Furthermore, while the fathers knew they wanted opposition within their political system, they rejected political parties as evil and dangerous to the public good. This tension between the belief in opposition and the rejection of party sentiment led to confusion and high tensions during the early American republic.

The presidential elections of 1796 and 1800 in particular reflected this tension between the acceptance of legitimate opposition and the fear of dangerous factions. The 1796 election was important because for the first time America could not unite behind the hero, George Washington, but had to have an openly competitive election. The 1800 election was even more important because this was the first time in history that a party in power peacefully gave up power to an opposition party. This peaceful shift of power set a monumental precedent for American democracy, helping to legitimize the existence of opposing parties.

The relationship between John Adams and Alexander Hamilton illustrates the confusion of early politics and the sorting process between legitimate political opposition and factional partisanship. Both Adams and Hamilton were highly influential in early presidential elections and politics; Adams as Vice-President and President and Hamilton as cabinet member and highly respected member of the Federalist Party. The enmity between Adams and Hamilton has been well-documented by political historians of the early republic. It is also commonly accepted that by 1798 there was a clear division within the Federalist Party between Hamilton supporters (High Federalists) and Adams supporters (Moderate Federalists). Though the split originally sprung from personal tensions and political rivalry, it became openly hostile during the height of French-American tension between 1797 and 1799. This open division served to rip apart the Federalist Party and led to the Republican Party's victory in the 1800 presidential election, a pivotal moment in the history of our nation.

In what follows, I explore the conflict between Hamilton and Adams and the role this played in the unfolding drama of Federalist and Republican politics. Why did Adams and Hamilton hate each other? Were there irreconcilable ideological or policy differences between the two that led to their mutual distrust? Or was the source of their enmity more personal? Was this enmity an important cause of political change, or was it a consequence of that change? By answering these questions, I hope to increase our understanding of this critical moment in the political history of our country.

The Quasi-War with France is an excellent case study of these issues. It was the main political issue for Adams and the rest of the Federalist Party between 1797 and 1800. As such, there are a lot of works and documents talking about Adam's and Hamilton's views on it. Also, the potential war with France led to huge changes, including the creation of a strong navy, the

increase in taxes and the repressive Alien and Sedition Acts. These acts exacerbated the differences not only between the Federalists and the Republicans, but also between the High Federalists, who were radical Federalists and tended to follow Hamilton, and the Moderate Federalists, who were more bi-partisan and tended to support Adams. Finally, there is strong evidence that it was Adam's decision to avoid war with France that turned his relationship with Hamilton to open hostility. This issue was the defining issue of the Hamilton-Adams relationship and the one that polarized the members of the Federalist Party as either Adams or Hamilton supporters.

At first, the views of John Adams and Alexander Hamilton on the potential conflict with France were very similar. The main source of animosity between these two stemmed from their views on party politics. This disagreement would eventually develop into a significant policy conflict between the two men on war with France. Hamilton believed in the existence of only one party (the French Party) and as such, justified overtly partisan behavior on the grounds that it was necessary to defeat America's enemies. Adams, on the other hand, saw both the Federalists and the Republicans as corrupt political parties, and determined to remain above their influence. Hamilton, who was viewed by many as the leader of the Federalist Party, was unable to control Adams in the way he could other party members. This tension revealed itself for the first time on an important public policy issue during the French conflict, and served as the catalyst for the formal split within the party.

It was largely Adam's distrust of Hamilton that led him to reopen negotiations with France after Hamilton was named to be second in command of the provisional army. This decision, based in large part on their personal battle for control, was the tipping point that ultimately led to a complete break between Adams and Hamilton which spread through the rest

of the party. Thus, the ultimate sources of the Adams-Hamilton distrust were ideological differences, which translated into personal distain and then revealed themselves in the catastrophic defeat at the hands of Thomas Jefferson and the Republicans in 1800.

Background

Political Parties

Richard Hofstadter in his work *The Idea of a Party System* lays out the basic ideology of political actors in the early Republic with regards to parties. The framers and early American politicians were and continued to be against parties or factions for almost all of their lives.¹ While all agreed in the principle of opposition, they were not sure in what form this opposition would take. They saw factions as dangerous, and instead preferred public officials to use “disinterested good judgment on behalf of the public welfare” and be a man “free from [the] distortions of judgment” that parties often led too.² The founders’ distrust of parties came from two sources; historical precedent in England and philosophers who wrote on the subject, like Henry of Bollingbroke and David Hume. For the founders, “party was associated with painfully deep and unbridgeable differences in national politics....with treason and the threat of foreign invasion, with instability and dangers to liberty.”³

The irony is that at the same time that early political leaders were denouncing political parties as evil, they were helping to develop the first party system. They justified this seeming contradiction by denouncing the other party as illegitimate usurpers, indebted to minority interests and foreign governments. The Federalists and Republicans hated each other, viewing

¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System*. (Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California, 1969), 11.

² Ibid., 13.

³ Ibid., 12.

the other side as treasonous and uninterested in the common good. They both believed that they were the “true” party of the people and their goal was to completely destroy the opposition party.

Alexander Hamilton was the quintessential example of this self-justifying approach. In his letters, he often referred derogatively to Jefferson and the Republicans as “Jacobins” under the control of the French government.⁴ The goal of the “Jacobins,” according to Hamilton, was to create “a *new model* [for] our constitution under the *influence* and *coercion* of France” and make America, essentially a “province of France.”⁵ Hamilton became especially convinced of this after the passage of the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, which claimed that the states could nullify federal laws. Hamilton wrote to a friend in October of 1799 that these resolutions can “be considered in no other light than as an attempt to change the government... [the Republicans] have followed up the hostile declarations... with an actual preparation of the means of supporting them by force.”⁶ While Hamilton saw the Republicans as a dangerous faction of French-supporters intent upon taking up arms, he saw the Federalists as true Americans. He believed that “there is in this country a decided *French Faction* but no other foreign faction.”⁷ As such, Hamilton believed, like Adams, that he was above foreign influence and private ambitions. However, his belief in the singular existence of a French party allowed him to justify overtly party behavior as noble and unselfish in purpose. If parties are bad, and the “Jacobins” are the only party, then it makes sense that the true “friends” of America should unite to defeat them.

John Adams likewise saw party sentiment as dangerous to the new Republic. The key difference between Adams and Hamilton is that Adams saw both factions as dangerous special

⁴ Harold C. Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXI*. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1974), 81.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 467.

⁶ Harold C. Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXIII*. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1976), 595.

⁷ Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXI*, 452.

interests. Adams “abhorred partisan factions, even his own.”⁸ Despite his ideological identification with the Federalist Party, for much of his political career he viewed many members of his own party as threatening as Republicans to America. Adams wrote to his wife Abigail about his fear that American factionalism would lead to the downfall of the American experiment. He feared that “at the next election England will sett[sic] up Jay or Hamilton and France Jefferson and all the Corruption of Poland will be introduced.”⁹ Unlike Hamilton, he saw the existence of a British faction in American politics. During his 1796 campaign for President, Adams wrote that “the English Party have outgeneraled the French and American both”¹⁰ in convincing the south to give Adams no electoral votes. Putting aside the narcissism of Adam’s statement, it shows that Adams saw the American political system as divided into three warring factions: French, English and American. Adams then declared his intention to be “not guilty of any sin of Omission or Commission”¹¹ in the political maneuvering for election of which the French and English parties were guilty. Adams was proud to be a true member of the “American” party, a man above foreign influence and private ambitions, whose interest lied solely in the best interests of the American people.

Adams saw himself in the middle of a two-front war; the Jacobins on one side and the Hamiltonians on the other. In his political writings, Adams had expressed the view that the main role of the executive branch was to act as a balance between political parties in the system. As early as 1787, Adams wrote that “the great desideratum in a government is a distinct executive

⁸ Frank Donavon, *The John Adam’s Papers*. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1965), 258.

⁹ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 17 March 1797 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/“Making of America.”>

¹⁰ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 16 December 1796 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

¹¹ Donovan, *The John Adams Papers*, 271.

power of sufficient strength and weight to compel [parties] to submit to the laws.”¹² Adams unique view of the political landscape and the role of the executive put him in a position where no matter what he did he would lose. The Republicans knew of his Federalist leanings and because of that never supported him much. On the other hand, on those occasions when he tried to exert his independence, the “English Party” denounced him and he had very little support upon which to fall back.¹³ This ideological split set the stage for a conflict between those who, like Hamilton, saw the French Party as the only party, and Adams, who attempted to resist the deluge of party sentiment coming from all sides.

Franco-American Relations

In order to fully understand the quasi-war with France and its ripple effect on American politics, we must first have a general sense of early American foreign policy and relations with France. America and France united through the Treaty of Alliance of 1778 against the British Empire. Although this treaty would help America win its independence, it would ultimately serve as the catalyst for French-American tensions of the 1790’s. When France and England went to war in 1793, France expected America to enter the war in support of France under the terms of the 1778 treaty. Instead President Washington, a strong isolationist, decided that America was to stay neutral during the conflict. This decision was solidified in 1794 by the ratification of Jay’s Treaty, which settled various differences between America and Britain since

¹² Kurtz, Stephen G. "The French Mission of 1799-1800," *The Academy of Political science*, 80, no.4 (Dec., 1965). JSTOR, via American University Library, <http://www.library.american.edu/>, 546.

¹³ For more on the struggle of Adams to assert his political independence and a larger history of American Presidential politics, see: Skowronek, Stephen. *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton*. Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997.

the revolution. Jay's Treaty and "the decision to remain neutral [were] widely regarded as a betrayal of a sacred promise made to any ally."¹⁴

In reaction to America's perceived "betrayal," France reneged on its 1778 treaty promise to respect the rights of "neutrals to trade with belligerent or warmaking nations"¹⁵ without fear of confiscation of nonmilitary materials. France began to treat American ships as they did British ships. American ships could be stopped, searched and confiscated by the French navy and other shipping vessels. Furthermore, any American serving on a British ship could be captured, and treated like an enemy prisoner.¹⁶ When Washington sent Charles Cotesworth Pinckney of South Carolina to France to resolve the issue, the French government "refused to receive him and warned that failure to leave the country would lead to his arrest."¹⁷ Ultimately, America's decision to remain neutral between Britain and France, although understandable in geo-political terms, led to heightened tensions and a potential conflict with the new French republic.

1796 Election

The first overt signs of tension between Adams and the Hamiltonian Federalists occurred during the 1796 presidential election. When Washington announced his retirement in September of 1796, John Adams seemed the obvious successor for the office. His prominent status as a senior statesman and Vice-President made him, to many, the legitimate successor to the illustrious Washington.¹⁸ However, the current mode of electing the President, and the politics surrounding that mode, made the election of Adams a lot more difficult than it might have been.

¹⁴ Howard P. Nash Jr, *The Forgotten Wars*. (South Brunswick and New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1968), 41.

¹⁵ Howard Jones, *The Course of American Diplomacy*. (New York: Franklin Watts, 1985), 8.

¹⁶ Nash, *The Forgotten Wars*, 41.

¹⁷ Jones, *The Course of American Diplomacy*, 35.

¹⁸ Richard P. McCormick, *The Presidential Game*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University, 1982), 52.

The original mode of electing the President and Vice President as written into the constitution stipulated that each presidential elector would cast two votes for President. The candidate who received the most number of votes became the President, and the candidate who got the second highest number of votes became the Vice President. Electors did not cast one vote for President and the other for Vice President, rather each vote was counted as a vote to be President. This system, originally put into place in order to increase the likelihood of a small-state candidate being elected President, confused the Presidential election process and defined presidential election strategy during this time.

The Federalists knew that Adams would not likely receive electoral votes in the largely Republican South. However, the Federalists' proposed Vice President, Charles Pinckney, was assured at least a few second votes from southern delegates, especially in his home state of South Carolina. Thus the plan set forth by many Federalists, and pursued vigorously by Hamilton, was to get the northern Federalists to vote straight down the line for Adams and Pinckney, knowing that Pinckney would pick up a few second southern votes meaning that Pinckney, and not John Adams, would be elected President.¹⁹

Historians debate the primary motive behind Hamilton's plot to throw the election to Pinckney. The dominant historical view on the subject is that Hamilton disliked Adams and his policies personally and as such wanted Pinckney in office instead. Elkins and McKittrick in their work *The Age of Federalism* argue that there is "little doubt that what Hamilton really wanted was to get Adams out of the way altogether...and ease in the more tractable Pinckney as President."²⁰ Richard P. McCormick in *The Presidential Game* also argues that Hamilton

¹⁹ Stanley Elkins, *The Age of Federalism*. (New York, Oxford: Oxford University, 1993), 524.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 524.

disliked Adams and as such wanted to slip Pinckney into the Presidency. McCormick wrote that Adams “was not a favorite of the Hamiltonian circle” and that Hamilton and his friends knew that “he could not be thrust aside, but another Federalist might, through the ‘defect’ in the electoral system, be brought ahead of him.”²¹ Historians largely believe that Hamilton attempted to manipulate the electoral process to slip Pinckney ahead of Adams and into the Presidency.

John Harper’s *American Machiavelli* challenges that traditional view. He argues that rather than attempting to deprive Adams of the Presidency, the main focus of the Hamiltonians was to ensure that Jefferson would not become president. Hamilton, knowing Adams’s unpopularity in the south, encouraged northern electors to vote for both Adams and Pinckney rather than throwing a vote away to give Adams the Presidency. Giving a vote to both Adams and Pinckney, Hamilton wrote to a friend “would be to take two chances against Mr. Jefferson.” Hamilton added that “the exclusion of Jefferson is far more important than any difference between Mr. Adams and Mr. Pinckney.”²² Furthermore, Harper argues, Adams surprising defeat in Pennsylvania led many to doubt his chances of victory. Harper writes “there is no evidence that Hamilton urged New England electors to back Pinckney equally with Adams *before* the news from Pennsylvania...it is possible that after that shock, Hamilton simply believed that Pinckney had a better chance to defeat Jefferson than did Adams.”²³ This position is supported by a letter Hamilton wrote to Rufus King, saying “it is now decided that neither Jefferson nor Burr can be President. It must be either Adams or Pinckney, the first most probably.”²⁴ Harper offers a strong and persuasive counter to the traditional view of Hamilton’s motives during the 1796 election.

²¹ McCormick, *The Presidential Game*, 52.

²² John Lamberton Harper, *American Machiavelli*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), qtd. in 196.

²³ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, qtd. in 197.

In reality, some of Hamilton's motive was indeed to keep Adams out of the Presidency. Hamilton was acutely aware of the political situation and surely saw that with southern votes Pinckney might have a better chance to win the election. However, just because he was more likely to win, does not mean that Hamilton would automatically want to support him. Hamilton clearly saw Pinckney as a reasonable alternative to Adams. Furthermore, there is evidence from after the election that suggests that Hamilton did indeed have personal reasons for supporting Pinckney over Adams. In the mid 1800's Hamilton recounted his plan to have Pinckney elected President, saying "it is true that a faithful execution of the plan would have given Mr. Pinckney a somewhat better chance than Mr. Adams... [Mr. Pinckney has] every essential qualification for the office, added a temper far more discrete and conciliatory than that of Mr. Adams."²⁵ However, these words are hardly scathing criticism, and simply imply a preference, not a plot. Furthermore, this letter was written *after* Hamilton and Adams had split on the French issue. Thus, although it is likely that Hamilton harbored some ill feelings towards Adams during the 1796 election, the main reason why he decided to support Pinckney was out of political practicality, not personal disdain.

Nevertheless, Adams was well aware of Hamilton's political scheming and was not happy about it. Adams wrote to Abigail in December of 1796 that "there have not been wanting Insinuations to make me believe that Hamilton... [has] insidiously intrigued to give Pinckney a Sly shade over my head."²⁶ In another letter soon after that, Adams called Hamilton "a conceited hypocrite with debauched Morals... As great an [sic] Hypocrite as any in the U.S. *His Intrigues in the Election I despise....* I shall...retain the same Opinion of him I always had and maintain

²⁵ Ibid., Qtd. in 200.

²⁶ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 18 December 1796 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

the same Conduct towards him I always did, that is keep him at a distance.”²⁷ Adams’s dislike of Hamilton was reinforced and heightened as a result of his plots during the 1796 election.

The French Issue

Upon Entering Office

Adams was well aware of the challenges he would face as President. The two main obstacles that he correctly foresaw as his biggest challenges were international relations (specifically with France) and a growing division within the Federalist Party. He also predicted correctly that it would be difficult for him to balance the competing pressures of the office and wondered whether he even really wanted to be President. On December 7th of 1796, Adams wrote his wife “the Election is a Lott at this hour and if my Reason were to dictate I should wish to be left out. A. P[resident] with half the Continent upon his Back besides all France and England old Tories and all Jacobins to carry will have a devilish Load. He will be very apt to Stagger and stumble.”²⁸ Later that month, Adams again wrote his wife, saying “[I] must be an intrepid to encounter the open Assaults of France and the Secret Plotts of England, in concert with all his treacherous Friends and open Enemies in his own Country.” This is what Adams faced as President: the uneasy neutrality between England and France, and maneuvering between two equally threatening political parties.

Prior accounts of the Adams Presidency have failed to emphasize that Adams saw a growing split among the Federalists *before* coming into office. As the 1796 election was winding down, Adams saw a Federalist Party “divided and crumbling to pieces.” He further lamented

²⁷ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 9 January 1797 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

²⁸ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 7 December 1796 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

“almost all the ablest and best Men[of the party] are discouraged and many of them retiring.”²⁹ He saw the results of this “crumbling” in the Federalist response to his Inaugural address. While the Republicans commented mostly favorably on the speech, he noted that his Federalist colleagues were “silent as the grave. [They] All Seem to be afraid to approve any Body but Washington.”³⁰ Along with Washington’s retirement, Adams believed that the “French Finesse and Intrigue” was also a cause of the Federalist division. Upon entering office, Adams saw a divided Federalist party as a result of Washington’s retirement and the current unresolved issues with France.

Adams viewed much of this division as opposition to him personally. His suspicion of his own party was heightened by their cool response to his inaugural address. In a letter shortly after his address, he expressed concerns that High Federalists may interfere in his administration. He wrote “if the Federalists go to playing pranks I will resign the office and let Jefferson lead.”³¹ Strangely enough, Adams had no qualms about keeping Washington’s cabinet completely in place. Secretary of War James McHenry, Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, and Treasury Secretary Oliver Wolcott were all Hamilton men, they wrote him on a regular basis for his advice and counsel. Often James McHenry would simply forward Hamilton’s letter directly to Adams as his ideas. Despite his fear of Federalist meddling and disdain for Hamilton, Adams mysteriously saw little problem with the arrangement. Adams wrote of his cabinet “Pickering and all his colleagues are as much attached to me as I desire. I have no jealousies from that

²⁹ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 31 January 1797 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

³⁰ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 17 March 1797 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

³¹ *Ibid.*

quarter.”³² Besides the one quote, there is practically no evidence to suggest why Adams agreed to keep Washington’s cabinet despite his scruples about Hamilton and Federalist interference. Historian Alexander Deconde suggests that Adams hoped to “win over Washington’s following by retaining his cabinet.”³³ However, this is not supported by any evidence but is simply posited as a plausible explanation. Furthermore, in none of the primary source material does Adams discuss his reasoning for keeping the cabinet in place. Nevertheless, his decision to keep Washington’s cabinet would prove fateful for Adams, as the cabinet’s loyalty laid much more with Hamilton than with him.

Adams’ position with regards to France upon taking office was very simple. He would pursue every peaceful means to reach reconciliation with France, but he would not compromise America’s honor or dignity in the process. Adams laid out his official position on the conflict in his inaugural address, saying:

My entrance into office is marked by a misunderstanding with France, which I shall endeavor to reconcile, provided that no violation of faith, no stain upon honor, is exacted. But if infidelity, dishonor, or too much humiliation is demanded, France shall do as she please, and take her own course. America is *not scared*.³⁴

In his private letters, he reiterated his determination to keep peace with France while also remaining neutral in her conflict with England. Adams wrote to his wife “I dread not a War, with France or England, if either forces it upon Us, but *will make no Aggression upon either*, with my

³² Donovan, *The John Adams Papers*, 252.

³³ Neilson, Jonathan M. *Paths Not Taken*. (Westport Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2000), 14.

³⁴ Ibid. qtd. in 254.

free Will, without just and necessary Cause and Provocation.”³⁵ He later added that he would “Support the course taken of the United States, and *the system of impartial Neutrality* but, if belligerent Powers, untill it should be other wise ordained by Congress -- consistent with that Duties I should be allways *friendly to the French*.”³⁶ Adam’s position with regards to France was clear; he would make all attempts to keep the peace.

Despite Adams’s clear support for a peaceful resolution to this conflict, his personal letters show that Adams had little affection for the French. Despite serving as minister to France during the Revolutionary War, Adams consistently lambasted France, especially its government, in his letters. Adams believed that America had been “insulted by France,” and that these insults had divided America.³⁷ Despite his fear of both the French and British factions in America, he thought that the “French have plundered and wronged Us twice as much as the English.”³⁸ In one letter, he went after the character of all Frenchmen and French society in general. He strongly criticized the French people, writing:

The French Character whether under Monarchical or Republican Government is not the most equitable, nor the least assuring of all Nations. The Fire, Impetuosity, and Vehemence of their Constit Temperament is apt to be violent, immoderate and extravagant. The Passions are always outrageous. A Frenchman in Love, must shoot

³⁵ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 27 November 1796 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

³⁶ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 3 January 1797 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

³⁷ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 31 January 1797 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

³⁸ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 16 January 1797 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

himself or succeed. A Frenchman in Anger must shed the Blood of his Object, and so of the rest.³⁹

Adams, like most of his Federalist colleagues, was predisposed to dislike France and favor England in foreign affairs.

The French government was well aware of Adam's views, and responded to his election with the order to treat American ships as enemy vessels. American politician Joel Barlow shortly after the election wrote from France that "the French saw that the character of the new President would be a criterion by which the friendship or enmity of the United States for France could clearly be seen...when the election of Adams was announced here it produced the order [to treat American vessels as enemy ships], which was meant to be little short of a declaration of war."⁴⁰

Shortly after learning of the order, Adams sent a message out to his new cabinet, asking what steps they should now take toward reconciliation with France. Secretary of War James McHenry promptly asked for Hamilton's opinion on the matter, and then forwarded Hamilton's response verbatim to the President but in his own name.⁴¹ Hamilton's view on America's potential response was remarkably similar to that of Adams. In a letter to his friend William Loughton Smith on April 9th of 1797, Hamilton wrote that "I would disarm them of all pleas that we have not made every possible effort for peace."⁴² He added in a letter a few days later "my idea is another attempt to pacify by negotiation."⁴³ Like Adams, however, he refused to make peace at the expense of honor. Hamilton was "disposed to make no sacrifices to France. [He] had

³⁹ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 4 December 1796 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

⁴⁰ Donovan, *The John Adams Papers*, 254.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, qtd. in 255.

⁴² Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXI*, 21.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 26.

rather perish [himself] and family than see the country disgraced”⁴⁴ and he advocated that America “do everything that *honor permits* toward accommodation.”⁴⁵ Thus, do we see that after the initial rejection of diplomats from France Adams and Hamilton had essentially the same position on a potential conflict with France.

However, the one key difference between the two men was their motivation for maintaining the peace with France. While Adams never cites one specific reason (but rather the general well-being of America) as his reasoning for maintaining peace, Hamilton had a clear reason to desire peace with France. Hamilton wanted to “avoid rupture” with France in order to keep the “Jacobin criticism” silent and to unite the American people. Hamilton argued that the government should “keep in view as a primary object union at home”⁴⁶ and to “unite the opinions of all good Citizens of whatever political denomination”⁴⁷ behind whatever action the government ended up taking. A month later, he declared his goals for the second mission more specifically, writing that “a principle object of [the mission is] the silencing of Jacobin criticism and promoting union among ourselves.”⁴⁸ This last quote suggests a political motive on the part of Hamilton, as he desires to keep the opposition quiet and unite the country behind his political party. Nevertheless, early on in the crisis, we see a very different Hamilton than the war-hawk often portrayed in other narratives. Hamilton, like Adams, sought peace without honor, and ultimately hoped that this course of action would help to unite the new nation.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 81.

The “XYZ” Affair and the American Response

Adam’s initial response to the refusal of American diplomats, like his response throughout the crisis, was harsher in words than in action. In a special session of Congress, Adams chided the French government, saying that its refusal to receive their minister “until we have acceded to their demands without discussion and without investigation, is to treat us neither as allies, nor as friends, nor as a sovereign State.”⁴⁹ He further chided France for attempting to “separate the people of the United States from the government” and vowed that America would show with their response that “we are not a degraded people...fitted to be miserable instruments of foreign influence, and regardless of national honor, character, and interest.”⁵⁰ France, in not receiving America’s ministers, had denied her sovereignty and her dignity.

Despite the harsh words, Adams merely appointed a new mission to France to settle the differences. Furthermore, Adams made only mild proposals to increase military strength and did not propose a more severe military escalation until after the failure of the second mission. Adams appointed a three-man commission made up of Federalists Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and John Marshall, and the Republican Elbridge Gerry. The mission arrived in France on October 4th 1797 to a cool reception from the French directory. Three French officials met the diplomats, but refused to let them meet with French minister Talleyrand until they had received promises of “an apology for disparaging remarks Adams made about France in his recent message to Congress, a payment of \$250,000 and a loan of \$12 million.”⁵¹ When the diplomats refused to pay the bribe, the French sent some concubines into the room to attempt to change their minds. This attempted

⁴⁹ Donovan, *The John Adams Papers*, 255.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁵¹ Jones, *The Course of American Diplomacy*, 35.

bribe would later be known as the “XYZ Affair” and would lead America even closer to a military conflict with France.

Although they would later claim moral outrage, Pinckney, Marshall and Gerry knew bribery and prostitution were common in European diplomacy. They refused to pay the bribe not out of moral outrage but out of political practicality. They had no money to pay the bribe, and they had no guarantees that if they paid it France would still agree to see them.⁵² More importantly, any loan to France would have violated America’s neutrality in the war and potentially caused a war with England.⁵³ After a few months of frustration, Pinckney and Marshall left France while Gerry stayed behind, believing that he could still reach an agreement with Talleyrand.

When news reached the public about the happenings in France, war sentiment was very high. Twice insulted by the French directory, most Americans were ready for war. War sentiment became so strong, that “numerous Quakers set aside their pacifist beliefs and called for honor at the cost of war.”⁵⁴ More significantly for Adams, many Republicans started to support a war with France as well.⁵⁵ War hawks chanted “Millions for Defense but Not One Cent for Tribute,” a quotation falsely attributed to Pickering upon hearing the Directory’s request for a bribe.⁵⁶ The patriotic song “Hail Columbia” was written to heighten nationalist feelings. The Alien and Sedition Acts were passed, making it illegal for Americans to speak in any way against the government. The American public for the first time nearly universally supported a potential war with France.

⁵² Nielson, *Paths Not Taken*, 15.

⁵³ Jones, *The Course of American Diplomacy*, 35.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁵ Nielson, *Paths Not Taken*, 16.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, qtd. in 17.

Government actions mirrored the heightened war sentiments of the public. During the summer of 1798, “several steps toward war short of a formal declaration” were enacted by Congress with the support of President Adams. Among these steps included the enlistment of a provisional army of 10,000, the creation of a marine corps and the Navy Department, and an increase in American warships from 30 to 40.⁵⁷ Americans for the first time seemed ready and willing to take on the French and defend their national honor.

Among the most prominent political figures agitating for a formal declaration were the High Federalists, many of whom believed a war would ensure Federalist Party domination for the foreseeable future. However, contrary to popular belief, Alexander Hamilton was not one of those agitating for an immediate war with France. Historian Alexander Deconde portrays Hamilton as the leading war hawk after the XYZ affair, with his motive being to unite the country behind Federalist rule. However, a more accurate analysis of Hamilton’s writings supports Elkin and McKittrick’s view that “the advice Adams received from Hamilton...might [] have been the most rational of any.”⁵⁸ Hamilton, before news of the French refusal of the American delegates returned from France, advised the President through McHenry that *even if* the new mission to France failed, that “there is a strong aversion to War in the minds of the people...by a formal war with France there is nothing to be gained.” He instead advised that “a truly vigorous defensive plan, with the countenance of a readiness still to negotiate, is the course advisable to be pursued.”⁵⁹ In another letter to his friend Timothy Pickering a few weeks later, Hamilton re-stated his hope that the President would “still [leave] the door open to

⁵⁷ Jones, *The Course of American Diplomacy*, 37.

⁵⁸ Elkins, *The Age of Federalism*, 584.

⁵⁹ Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXI*, 342.

accommodation open & not proceeding to a final rupture.”⁶⁰ Hamilton’s belief that the peace should be maintained remained intact even after the events in France at the beginning of the year.

It is of course possible that Hamilton did indeed desire a war with France but chose to accomplish it in an indirect manner. However, why would Hamilton, knowing full well that his assessment would likely be handed over to the President as McHenry’s work, not try and convince Adams to declare war on France? He had nothing to lose by doing so and he may have indeed succeeded in convincing Adams, who was at that point on the fence about what to do. Furthermore, why would he lie in a letter to his good friend, and fellow Federalist Timothy Pickering about what actions he desired the President to take? Again, Hamilton had no reason to lie to his friend. Although it is true that Hamilton strongly supported vigorous defensive preparations (including an army of 20,000 as opposed to the 10,000 that ended up being formed)⁶¹, so did Adams and nearly every other political figure of the time.

There is plenty of circumstantial evidence to suggest that Hamilton may have desired a declaration of war with France; his past disagreements with Adams, his eventual change of heart on this issue, his dislike of the French and his position as unofficial leader of the High Federalists all suggest that Hamilton may have desired a conflict with France. However, there is no direct evidence to support that he, in any active way, campaigned for that to happen until months after the XYZ affair. In fact, all the evidence supports the idea that Hamilton temporarily maintained the desire to restore peace between America and France and not jump into a war declaration.

On the other hand, Adams’ initial response to the mission’s failure was quite belligerent, and it seemed likely that a declaration of war was imminent. Immediately after word of the poor

⁶⁰ Ibid., 365.

⁶¹ Ibid., 343 and 365.

treatment of American diplomats reached Adams in March of 1798, he decided to sit down and write a declaration of war to send to Congress.⁶² Although he would eventually decide against this measure, Adams initial predilection for war was repeated many times in the months to follow. Adams, who was wildly popular for the first time in his public life, reveled in his popularity and catered to the public's war sentiment. In many public addresses, Adams took a belligerent stance, in some cases implying that war was inevitable. Wearing full military garb, the president would declare that "the finger of destiny writes on the wall the word: War."⁶³ Other times he appealed more directly to the audience, saying "to arms, then, my young friends,"⁶⁴ and "let us have war."⁶⁵ Adams reveled in the patriotic fervor, keeping war sentiment high throughout the spring and summer of 1798.

In fact Adams was *more* predisposed to the potential war than Hamilton. How did they go from this place to the position they were in 1799 and 1800, with Hamilton pushing for war and Adams defending his peace policies? While it is clear that Hamilton did not initially push for an armed conflict with France, his ideological preferences made him likely to support an eventual conflict should it start. Furthermore, Adams' distrust of Hamilton and pride in being "above parties" would ultimately lead Adams to assert his independence at the expense of Hamilton and a potential war with France. The pivotal event of the resulting Hamilton-Adams conflict was the debate over who would be second-in-command of the new provisional army. This conflict, and the resulting victory of Hamilton, started the rotation of the two men's view of a potential conflict with France, ultimately leading to their public split which spread through the rest of Federalist Party.

⁶² Nielson, *Paths Not Taken*, 15.

⁶³ Ibid., qtd in 17.

⁶⁴ Donovan, *The John Adams Papers*, 265.

⁶⁵ Nielson, *Paths Not Taken*, qtd. in 17.

The Command Crisis

Now that Congress had approved the creation of a provisional army, Adams had to name officers to head the provisional force. That the official first-in-command of the forces would be General Washington was a given. On July 6, 1798, Adams sent a letter to Secretary of War McHenry telling him to journey to Mount Vernon as soon as possible to ask Washington to be the “commander-in-chief” of the provisional army. Washington of course agreed that he would, but stipulated “that the principal Officers in the line, and of the Staff, shall be such as I can place confidence in; and, that I shall not be called into the field until the Army is in a situation to require my presence, or it becomes indispensable by the urgency of the circumstances.”⁶⁶ These two stipulations set the stage for the conflict over the second-in-command position; with Adams on one side and Hamilton and Washington on the other. Washington over the next few months would frequently point to his first stipulation that he be allowed to pick the principal officials under him in his letters to Adams. Furthermore, his second stipulation, that he not be called into service until it was completely necessary, made the decision ever more important, as the second-in-command would virtually be the first-in-command until Washington was called to service. This made the decision a very important and contentious one.

Throughout their lives, Hamilton and Washington had a very close friendship. Hamilton once noted in a letter to his uncle “that since the commencement of my connection with General Washington to the present time, I have possessed a flattering share of his confidence and friendship.”⁶⁷ As such, Washington wished Hamilton to be his second-in-command. In his initial letter to the President, Washington ranked Hamilton as Inspector General (second-in-command)

⁶⁶ Harold C. Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXII*. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975), 19.

⁶⁷ Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXI*, 78.

followed by Charles C. Pinckney and Henry Knox as Major Generals directly underneath them.⁶⁸

Adams, while agreeing that Hamilton should be one of the major officers, did not think that Hamilton deserved to be second-in-command. Although he forwarded the appointments to Congress in the order set by Washington, Adams later denied that any rank at all was implied in the appointments. Adams went on to express his opinion that the correct chain of command should be Knox, Pinckney and then Hamilton.⁶⁹

Although the opposition was undoubtedly in large part personal, the reasons Adams most commonly cited for his position on Hamilton's rank were previous military experience and popularity among the people. Adams was "not and never was of the opinion that public opinion demanded General Hamilton for this first."⁷⁰ This opinion of Hamilton's popularity was reinforced by his wife Abigail, who wrote, "[people] say He is not a Native, and besides He has so damnd himself to everlasting Infamy, that he ought not to be Head of any thing. The Jacobins hate him and the Federalists do not love him."⁷¹ Furthermore, Adams insisted, previous rank during the Revolution should determine their rank. Adams wrote that he believed the officers he appointed would be "rank[ed] according to antecedent services."⁷² Adams argued that Hamilton was not qualified for the rank of Inspector General.

Hamilton had long desired the creation of a standing army to protect American interests, going back to the days immediately after the Revolution.⁷³ Therefore, that he wanted to oversee personally the growth and development of the provisional army was no surprise, and had a lot to

⁶⁸ Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXII*, 25.

⁶⁹ Donovan, *The John Adams Papers*, 267.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 269.

⁷¹ Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 12 January 1799 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

⁷² Donovan, *The John Adams Papers*, 267.

⁷³ Gilbert L. Lycan, *Alexander Hamilton & American Foreign Policy*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 77.

do with factors outside of his differences with Adams on political parties. However, there are two strong connections between Hamilton's desire to control the army and the ideological differences between him and Adams. First, evidence suggests that it was right around this time in Adam's administration that Hamilton first began to "develop his serious doubts about Adams' temperament and political strategy."⁷⁴ Hamilton thus believed that the only way to avoid disaster was to "seize the helm" of the provisional forces from Adams.⁷⁵

More importantly, the creation of a standing army was consistent with Hamilton's ideology of early political parties. One of the major reasons that Hamilton wanted to create a standing army was to protect America from internal factions that threatened its unity. The main source of this instability, as Hamilton saw it, was the "French Faction" (The Republicans) who desired to take over the government and fundamentally change America (see p. 5). The solution for Hamilton was the creation of a standing army controlled by "true Americans" to put down the rising threat of the Republicans. His desire to create a standing army flowed directly from his ideological belief in the existence of only one American party, a belief that Adams did not have. For Adams, instead, the creation of a standing army would be dangerous no matter who controlled it, but would be especially so in Hamilton's hands. As such, he tried at all turns to limit the size and power of the provisional force and Hamilton's ability to control it. Therefore, Hamilton's belief in a standing army and his desire to head the provisional forces were directly influenced by his views on current party politics and his distrust of Adams, who did not see the system the same way.

⁷⁴ Harper, *American Machiavelli*, 218.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Through Washington, Hamilton pushed hard to be second-in-command of the provisional army. Even before Adams had officially asked Washington to be commander-in-chief, Hamilton had impressed upon Washington his desire to a military position one below him. On June 2nd of 1798, Hamilton wrote to Washington “if I am invited *to a station in which the service I may render may be proportioned to the sacrifice I am to make*--- I shall be willing to go into the army. If you command, the place in which I should hope to be most useful is that of Inspector General.”⁷⁶ Furthermore, once the controversy began, Hamilton confidently wrote to Washington that public opinion was in favor of him as second-in-command, the exact opposite assertion that John and Abigail Adams were making. Hamilton wrote “there is a flood of evidence that a great majority of leading federal men were of the opinion, that in the event of your declining command of the army, it ought to devolve upon me, and that in the case of your acceptance...the place of second in command ought to be mine.”⁷⁷ Hamilton consistently pressured his good friend Washington to ensure his ranking in the provisional army. Despite Hamilton’s moderate stance on a potential conflict with France, he deliberately positioned himself to be at the head of provisional forces before and after they were officially formed.

Hamilton also used his Federalist allies in Adams’ cabinet to get the second-in-command position. In late August of 1798, Hamilton wrote to Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, asking him to tell Washington that Hamilton “verily believe[d] to be an undoubted fact—that New England would rather see high command in my hands than those of General Knox.”⁷⁸ A few weeks later, after Adams had not changed his mind and Hamilton had threatened resignation if he did not get his way, the cabinet turned to Treasury Secretary Oliver Wolcott, Adams’ most

⁷⁶ Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXI*, 78.

⁷⁷ Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXII*, 36-37.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

trusted cabinet member, to attempt to change his mind. Wolcott reminded the President that “because he had requested Washington’s opinion and then submitted his list to the Senate, both Washington and the public expected Hamilton to be second-in-command.”⁷⁹ Around that same time, Adams received a letter from McHenry which suggested that Washington would resign if the chain of command was not as he had suggested. Everyone was turning against Adams and in favor of Hamilton.

Realizing the political reality of the situation, Adams reluctantly gave in to Washington and Hamilton’s demands. Adams wrote officially to Washington on the subject saying that “if controversies should arise [over the rank of commanders], they will, of course, be submitted to you as Commander-in-Chief, and if after all, anyone should be so obstinate as to appeal to me from the judgment of Commander-in-Chief. I was determined to confirm that judgment.”⁸⁰ Adams had officially been politically outmaneuvered by Hamilton and his supporters within his own administration.

The whole situation upset the fiercely independent Adams, who correctly saw the Hamiltonians as controlling his administration. In this category he also included Washington, although he never dared to directly attack the former President. Adams wrote during the controversy over the appointments that although Washington had “through the whole, conducted with perfect honor and consistency,” he expressed frustration at his attempts to control his administration’s actions. He further wrote “if I could resign to [Washington] the office of President, I would do it instantly...but I never said I would hold the office, and be responsible

⁷⁹ Harper, *American Machiavelli*, 220.

⁸⁰ Donovan, *The John Adams Papers*, 268.

for its exercise, while he should execute it.”⁸¹ He quickly added that Washington had never inferred as such, and had always left the ultimate decision up to him as President. Nevertheless, the message of Adam’s statement is unequivocally clear. He resented Washington’s attempt to control the course of his administration.

Adams was also well aware of his cabinet’s role in the “intrigues” surrounding the nominations. In responding to a letter in which Adams wrote that there were too many “intrigues” surrounding these nominations, Secretary of War James McHenry inquired the President as to whether he believed that McHenry had partaken in the intrigues. Adams responded to McHenry’s question bluntly, saying:

I have suspected...that extraordinary pains were taken with you to impress upon your mind that the public opinion and the unanimous wish of the Federalists was the General Hamilton might be first, and even Commander-in-Chief; and that you might express this opinion to General Washington more forcible than I should have done; and that this determined him to make the arrangement as he did.⁸²

For the first time Adams clearly saw his cabinet as serving Hamilton’s interests over his. This realization would ultimately lead to further accusations, the firing of numerous cabinet members, and most importantly, his shift in policy on a war with France.

The conflict over who would have *de facto* control of the provisional army re-enflamed the tensions between Adams and Hamilton, while also serving as a catalyst for each man’s shift on their positions on war with France. While Adams stewed over the successful manipulation of his presidency that he had long feared, Hamilton quickly moved on with the business of

⁸¹ Ibid., 267.

⁸² Donovan, *The John Adams Papers*, 269.

organizing the provisional army. Even before the conflict had officially been resolved, Hamilton sent and received a flurry of letters during August and September of 1798 discussing who should make up the rest of the officer corp. In the months following his official appointment, Hamilton jumped into his position with incredible rigor. As expected, Hamilton had almost complete control of the army, with Washington generally watching from the sidelines.⁸³

Hamilton was now much more of a war-hawk than he had been before the officer appointment scandal. On October 2nd of 1798, Hamilton wrote for the first time that he believed it was necessary “to have a decisive rupture” with France. In response to a letter from Rufus King about the possibility of a formal declaration of war with France from a month earlier, Hamilton mentions the “very moment that it became unequivocal that we must have a decisive rupture with France.”⁸⁴ What is not clear, however, is when and how Hamilton decided that a rupture with France was “unequivocal.” In letters in January and March of that year following the XYZ Affair, Hamilton still expressed a belief that peace could be maintained with France. Between then and October, the situation between France and America did not strategically change in any considerable way. Furthermore, up until that point, Hamilton had not expressed any change in opinion on his part about the potential war. Hamilton’s first clear shift from “avoiding rupture” to a rupture being “unequivocal” did not occur until *after* his appointment as second-in-command of the provisional forces.

Hamilton, for the first time since the election of 1796, started to write publicly against Adams. Rather than attacking Adams for practical political reasons, he started to attack Adams on a personal level. Resentful of Adam’s attempt to keep him from the spot of second-in

⁸³ Harold C. Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXIII*. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1976), 86 .

⁸⁴ Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXI*, 192.

command, and sensing the President's position among Federalists starting to weaken, Hamilton publicly attacked the President more than he had before. In the same letter to Rufus King cited earlier in which Hamilton mentions the "unequivocal" moment when a rupture with France was unavoidable, he goes on to attack the leadership abilities of President Adams. He wrote:

Of [Adams] I need say little you know its excellent dispositions, its general character and the composition of its excellent parts. You know also how widely the different the *business* of Government is from the *speculation* of it, and the energy of the imagination, dealing in general propositions, from that of *execution* in *detail*.⁸⁵

Granted, Hamilton's attack on Adams was hardly scathing, and something most certainly that had been said before about Adams. Nevertheless, it shows that Hamilton, after the command crisis was willing to openly criticize Adams, a member of his own party, in letters to his friends. This was the first step toward an open break with Adams, a break that would fully come to fruition after the Murray Mission and during the election of 1800.

The Murray Mission and the Federalist Explosion

While Hamilton started to think that a war with France was increasingly more likely, Adams responded to Hamilton's appointment by asserting his independence from Hamilton and his followers by re-opening the door for a peaceful reconciliation with France. Shortly after the command issue had been settled, Adams sent a letter to his cabinet asking if it was expedient in his next message to Congress to call for the nomination of another minister to France to be ready in case they received assurances of a peaceful reception from France. Hamilton and his cabinet together drafted a response to Adams, in which they wrote "to make a new attempt at negotiation

⁸⁵ Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXI*, 192.

would be an act of humiliation to which the United States ought not to submit.”⁸⁶ The letter that Adams eventually sent to Congress was written completely by Wolcott at the direction of Hamilton, but with one significant alteration. While still retaining the position of armed neutrality, Adams left the possibility of another mission to France open. In the original wording of the letter, Wolcott wrote that “the sending [of] another minister to make a new attempt at negotiation would be an act of humiliation to which the United States ought not to submit.”⁸⁷ Adams changed the message to instead say “but to send another minister *without more determinate assurances that he would be received*, would be an act of humiliation to which the United States ought not to submit. It must, therefore, be left to France, if she is indeed desirous of accommodation, to take the requisite steps.”⁸⁸ Adams first act of defiance against the Hamiltonians was to publicly declare the possibility of another French delegation.

Adams backed up his words a few months later, when the French Directory sent assurances that a new American mission would be received respectfully. Although the assurances were vague, Adams disgust at “Hamilton’s Army” and his cabinet intrigues made him “disposed to receive evidence, scanty though it may seem, that France had experienced a change of heart toward the United States.”⁸⁹ When he received news from Eldridge Gerry, who had remained in France after the previous mission broke up, that France was now willing to meet with America on respectful terms, Adams jumped on the opportunity. In February of 1799, without consulting any of his cabinet members, Adams sent a message to congress in which he nominated William Vans Murray to be minister to France.

⁸⁶ Donovan, *The John Adams Papers*, 272.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Elkins, *The Age of Federalism*, 606.

Adams decision to nominate a third mission to France opened the flood-gates and led to a complete split between the Moderate and Hamiltonian Federalists. After the announcement Hamilton angrily called Adams “a mere old woman and unfit for a President.”⁹⁰ Later, in a more serene manner, Hamilton wrote that Adams’ plan “would astonish, if anything from the corner could astonish.”⁹¹ However, criticism of Adam’s announcement was not restricted to just Hamilton. Adams’ cabinet, who had not been consulted before he made the decision, wrote to Hamilton of their frustration with Adams’ decision. Timothy Pickering wrote on behalf of the cabinet that “we have all been shocked and grieved at the nomination of a minister to negotiate[sic] with France.” He went on to lament Adams’ decision to “(against our unanimous opinions) leave open the door for degrading and mischievous measure of sending another minister to France, even without waiting for *direct* overtures from her.”⁹² Theodore Sedgwick, Federalist Speaker of the House join the chorus of dissent, calling Adam’s measure “the most embarrassing and ruinous [...] possible.”⁹³ The Federalist rank and file in the Senate and Congress were “graveled and divided; some for opposing, others know not what to do.”⁹⁴ Chaos and confusion reigned within the Federalist ranks after Adam’s announcement of the Murray Mission.

Unsure of what to do next, the Federalists in Congress looked to Hamilton and Speaker Sedgwick for their next move. In a series of letters between February 19th and February 25th of 1799, Hamilton and Sedgwick agreed that the best way to oppose the mission was to attack Murray, and insist that Adams name two more delegates to go to France with him. Hamilton

⁹⁰ Donovan, *The John Adams Papers*, 272.

⁹¹ Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXII*, 493.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 500.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 488.

⁹⁴ Donovan, *The John Adams Papers*, 272.

wrote to Sedgwick, that the Federalists should let the measure “go into effect with the additional idea of a Commission of three.”⁹⁵ Sedgwick reluctantly agreed, adding that if Adams’ plans prove “unalterable,” that he would be forced to vote “against the appointment.”⁹⁶

Adams, unfazed by the Federalist whirlwind surrounding him, continued to attack the “enemies” of his own party. Shortly after his announcement of the Murray Mission, Adams angrily attacked Speaker Sedgwick like he had McHenry a few months earlier, accusing Sedgwick of being part of a “combined effort, among those who call themselves the friends of government to annihilate the essential powers given by the President.”⁹⁷ In all his attacks on the Hamiltonians, Adams never cited dangerously high war sentiment against France. In fact, Adams at one point believed that a war was nearly inevitable. Rather, Adams resented their attempts to control his actions as an independent executive. Adams most explicitly stated this complaint in a letter to his Attorney General Charles Lee, in which he wrote, “anyone who entertains the idea that...I am in the power of a party, they shall find that I am no more so than the Constitution forces upon me.”⁹⁸

Adam’s passionate belief in an independent executive branch, combined with his mistrust of Hamilton’s motives, made a new peace mission imperative. Shortly after his confrontation with Speaker Sedgwick, Adams told Eldridge Gerry that “he thought Hamilton and a Party were endeavoring to get an army on foot to give Hamilton the command of it & then to proclaim a Regal Government, place Hamilton at the Head of it & prepare the way for a Province of Great Britain.”⁹⁹ So great was Adams’ fear of the Hamiltonians that he feared a potential military coup.

⁹⁵ Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXII*, 493.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 495.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 471.

⁹⁸ Donovan, *The John Adams Papers*, 276.

⁹⁹ Elkins, *The Age of Federalism*, qtd. in 617.

The only way to prevent a further military build-up, and thus defuse Hamilton's growing influence, was to make peace with France. However, Adams' decision actually had *very little* to do with France or a potential war with them. Instead, Adams' motivations were too keep control of his administration, to be independent of all party sentiment, and to keep power away from Hamilton.

The Hamiltonians' view, on the other hand, had *everything* to do with a conflict with France, and the political consequences of backing down. The Federalist Party made substantial gains in both houses of Congress in the 1798 election, mainly because of a high level of patriotic fervor against France. An exerted effort to make peace with France would give legitimacy to the pro-French opposition, lessening the Federalist claim as the "true party" of America. Furthermore, the creation of a large standing army had been something that many Federalists (including Hamilton) had advocated for years, and they saw provisional forces, as a step in that direction. Once they made that "commitment" to the creation of the army and a warlike position with France, it was not politically advantageous for them to alter course. They could not have "both their army, and a new mission to France;"¹⁰⁰ they had to go with one or the other, and it made more sense to go with the army.

To be fair to the Hamiltonians, there were legitimate reasons to oppose a new mission to France. Two previous missions had been sent, and they had been rudely treated by the French and sent back home without even negotiations. There was no unequivocal evidence that France would this time accept their delegates this time, and France and America had been fighting an undeclared naval war since the XYZ Affair that showed no signs of letting up. Nevertheless, it is

¹⁰⁰ Elkins, *The Age of Federalism*, 621.

clear that the Federalists had political motives to reject any peaceful signs from France and keep tensions with France high.

Adams originally rejected the idea of increasing the delegation. He let his opposition known in an outburst at the committee hearing for Murray's nomination, in which he again attacked the Federalists for trying to control his Presidency. However, Adams eventually agreed to add two more members to the delegation; Chief Justice Oliver Ellsworth and Federalist governor William R. Davie. Despite this minor victory, the new army quickly started to wither away along with the increased patriotic sentiment of the last year. Adams no longer supported the build-up of the army, seeing it unnecessary and dangerous in the hands of Hamilton. Despite the efforts of Secretary of War McHenry and Hamilton to organize the forces, the army "persistently failed to heave itself into more than a halfway state of being."¹⁰¹ George Washington in March of 1799 called the army "an embryo," and did not believe it would ever get past the point.¹⁰² He later wrote that month that "the golden opportunity is passed...the zeal, enthusiasm and indeed resentments, which warmed the breasts of the American youth [has] evaporated, and a listlessness has supplied its place."¹⁰³ Adams announcement of the Murray Mission, as he had hoped, took the sails out the Hamiltonians' desire for a new army, leaving it unable to ever become more than just an outer shell of an army.

In a last ditch effort to stop the mission, the Hamiltonians attempted to indefinitely delay the sending of the mission. In order to delay the mission's departure, Federalists worked through Secretary Pickering, to hold up mail, question orders, and disseminate confidential

¹⁰¹ Elkins, *The Age of Federalism*, 621.

¹⁰² Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXII*, 544.

¹⁰³ Elkins, *The Age of Federalism*, qtd. in 621.

information.¹⁰⁴ They also tried to convince Adams that the French monarchy would soon be restored, and that the mission should hold off until that situation would work itself out. The amount of success that the Hamiltonians had in delaying the mission is debatable. Although the mission did not get launched until October of 1799, Stephen G. Kurtz argues that there were also legitimate reasons to delay the mission, and that Adams had not been taken in by his cabinet members intrigues.¹⁰⁵

Either way, it is clear that Adams was aware of their sabotage efforts, and that by late October had grown tired of their games. Adams wrote to his wife on October 30th that “[he] hope[d] soon to hear that our Envoys have sailed from Rhode Island, that there may be no longer room for impertinent paragraphs fabricated by busy bodies who are forever meddling with Things they understand not.”¹⁰⁶ However, the last straw for Adams came a few weeks earlier when Hamilton and other High Federalists visited Adams personally in Trenton. For the first time throughout the controversy, the two men met in person to discuss the situation. Very little evidence exists to suggest what occurred at the meeting. All we know is that Hamilton again urged the President to delay the mission’s departure. Adams, as expected, refused Hamilton’s request and “in defiance...ordered the envoys to set sail as soon as possible.”¹⁰⁷ The delegation set sail for France on November 3rd, 1799.

The peace mission would end in success about a year later with the signing of the “Convention of 1800,” which released America from all treaty obligations to France in return for \$20 million dollars in damages to French citizens for ships destroyed during the undeclared naval

¹⁰⁴ Kurtz, *The French Mission of 1799-1800*, " *The Academy of Political science*, 553.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 553-554.

¹⁰⁶ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 30 October 1799 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

¹⁰⁷ Deconde, *Paths Not Taken*, 21.

warfare.¹⁰⁸ The treaty not only ended the currently hostilities with France, but ended all formal ties America had with France, allowing America to remain neutral in foreign affairs without fear of another incident. As Adams had hoped, he was able to ease tensions with France, re-gain control of his administration and keep Hamilton away from a military position of authority. However, Adams did so at a tremendous cost. The Federalist Party was in shambles and bitterly divided. Adams had taken on arguably the most powerful Federalist in the country, and he would suffer the consequences during his campaign for re-election. Hamilton and many other High Federalists went directly after Adams during his re-election campaign, much more forcefully than they had done in 1796, leading to the unintended consequences of a Jefferson victory and the division of the Federalist Party.

The Results

1800 Election

With the Hamiltonian Federalists now firmly against the Adams administration, the Federalists in 1800 were in a precarious position. Adams was still popular among many of the rank-and-file Federalists. The Hamiltonians had to decide who they preferred in the highest office; the “Jacobin” Jefferson or the disloyal Adams. While the Hamiltonians would turn publicly and decisively against another Adams administration, there was not a critical mass of discontent required to displace Adams from the top of the Federalist pecking order. At the same time that the Federalists were splitting between pro-Adams and anti-Adams parties, the popularity of the Republican Party surged in the years after the 1798 midterms due to the war measures passed in preparation for a French conflict. The formal split of the Hamiltonians from

¹⁰⁸ Jones, *The Course of American Diplomacy*, 39.

the Adams administration combined with the growing popularity of Republican policies led to the monumental election victory of 1800, and the first peaceful transfer of power in the new American Republic.

Hamilton did not hesitate to voice his dissent to another Adams administration. Unlike his moderate efforts at sabotage in 1796, Hamilton was vocal and very public in his attacks. He declared that he would no longer support Adams, *even if the consequences of this action led to a Jefferson victory*. His efforts began in early May of 1800, when he wrote Theodore Sedgwick saying that, “for my individual part, my mind is made up. I will never more be responsible for him by my direct support--- even though the consequence should be the election of Jefferson.”¹⁰⁹ This was an incredibly radical statement on Hamilton’s part. Jefferson was the arch-enemy of the Federalist Party, a man who Hamilton himself called “an Atheist in Religion and a fanatic in politics.”¹¹⁰ And yet he still preferred he get elected over Adams. Hamilton went on in the letter to explain his reasoning, saying that:

If we must have an *enemy* at the head of the Government, let it be one whom we can oppose and for whom we are not responsible, who will not involve our party in the disgrace of foolish and bad measures. Under Adams as under Jefferson the government will sink. The party in the hands of whose chief it shall sink with it and the advantage will all be on the side of his adversaries.¹¹¹

For Hamilton, Adams was now no different from Jefferson. He argued that they would both fail, so why would the Federalists want to be affiliated with the man who did it? Hamilton no longer saw Adams as a viable alternative to Jefferson.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 475.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 465.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 475.

Many prominent High Federalists agreed with Hamilton's analysis of the situation. Unfortunately for them, enough Federalists still supported Adams to keep him as their top choice. Some supported him as the best candidate, others out of fear of a Jefferson victory. Federalist Senator Robert G Harper wrote to Hamilton that although many Federalists would prefer that Adams not win re-election, they are "convinced that no direct attempt can safely be made to drop or supercede [him]. It would create uncertainty, division and defeat."¹¹² Prominent Federalist Fisher Ames recognized the strength of Adams' support within Federalists circle. He now believed that America was torn between three parties: the Jacobins, Adams supporters and Hamilton supporters.¹¹³ The alliance between those who truly supported Adams and those who saw him as a political necessity made it difficult for High Federalists to throw Adams aside.

However, Hamilton tried to convince Federalists to turn against Adams. Hamilton "spent the better part of June campaigning against the President in New England."¹¹⁴ He went around personally to Federalist delegates and attempted to convince them to drop Adams completely from their ballots. Hamilton's meetings were not very successful.¹¹⁵ In September of that year, Hamilton released a pamphlet in which he publicly indicted the President. In the pamphlet, Hamilton argued that Adams had "intrinsic defects in his character, which made him unfit for the office of chief magistrate."¹¹⁶ He went on to list Adams' defects and how they had led him to make serious mistakes as president. He concluded by arguing that the American government "might totter, if not fall, under [Adam's] future auspices."¹¹⁷ But the pamphlet backfired, with

¹¹² Ibid., 569.

¹¹³ James Roger Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*. (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1993), 238.

¹¹⁴ Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, 239.

¹¹⁵ For an example, see Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume XXIV*, 595-597).

¹¹⁶ Sharp, *American Politics in the early Republic*, qtd in 240.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

many from both parties decrying it as extreme and libelous. Hamilton had gone too far in his public attack on Adams, and as a result lost much of his political standing.

Hamilton's effort would prove to be fruitless, as all but one of the Federalist electors cast their ballots for both Adams and Pinckney. However, a universal backing of Adams was not enough to keep Jefferson from the highest office. Jefferson and his running mate Aaron Burr, finished with 73 electoral votes, eight more than Adams, and won the Presidency. As a last ditch effort, the Federalists tried to throw the election to Burr in the House of Representatives in a tie-breaker election, but ultimately failed to muster enough support. The worst fears of the Federalists had come true, Thomas Jefferson would be sworn in as the next President of the United States.

Conclusion

The Federalist Party would never rebound from the 1800 election defeat. With Hamilton discredited, Adams dismissed by both ends of the political spectrum, and the mood of the nation fundamentally turned against them, the Federalist Party slowly started to disintegrate. The Federalist Party would never again seriously challenge the Republicans for the Presidency, and by 1824 the party was virtually non-existent. The conflict between Adams and Hamilton, which stemmed from ideological differences and revealed itself through the French conflict, was the immediate cause of Federalist downfall. Furthermore, the divisions it created within the party contributed to their long-term inability to re-gain its prominence in American politics.

Both Adams and Hamilton deserve blame for leading the Federalist Party into the ground. Hamilton used his connections with Washington and his cabinet members to create a faction within his own party to exert influence and manipulate Adam's policies. Even before he came

out publicly against Adams, Hamilton tried to undermine his administration at every turn and made little effort to forge a personal connection with Adams. Finally, rather than hold his tongue, Hamilton decided to publicly attack Adams' character, leading to a larger break within the Federalist Party which crippled Adams re-election campaign and the party in the years to come. In his attempts to re-shape the party in his image, Hamilton helped to destroy it.

Adams did his part to ruin Federalism through his repeated assaults upon his own party and his own political inconsistencies. Through his attempts to remain his own man, he continually alienated the men with whom he was supposed to be aligned. Furthermore, his inconsistent stance on war with France set the rest of the party for disappointment. He set himself up for a Federalist backlash by his sudden change in policy. Adams indecisive stance on France and his unrelenting push for independence created the tension within the party that Hamilton would later aggravate.

This is not to suggest that Adams' final decision to keep peace was the wrong policy move. A potential war with France was growing increasingly unpopular among the people, and throwing the country into a full-scale war with France would have likely furthered divided the country and led to increased internal strife. Furthermore, the end result of the treaty, peace with France and the termination of all further obligations to the French government, allowed America to continue its politically advantageous neutrality between England and France. Thus Adams should be praised for resisting High Federalist pressure and seizing upon France's overtures for peace. However, the unintended consequence of Adams' decision was his and his party's own political demise. Ironically, by doing the right thing for America, Adams sacrificed himself and the Federalist Party on the altar of the public good.

The actions taken by these two men, and the tension between them, can be explained through their views of contemporary parties and American political life. Adams' belief in the existence of two American political parties and the importance of an independent executive led him to resist the Federalists' influence at every turn and to dislike the overtly dogmatic Hamilton. Hamilton, who saw only the existence of one party, believed that those who truly loved America must band together to defeat the Jacobins. This led Hamilton to believe that all necessary steps should be taken to defeat them, and as such opposed the more moderately minded Adams. This ideological tension, at first submerged under political necessity and self-interest, eventually exploded during the French issue over control of the provisional army. Fundamentally, their conflict was not about France, but who would exercise political power. Adams decision to assert his own independence from party-sentiment, and Hamilton's to completely turn on Adams; destroyed Adam's Presidency, Hamilton's reputation and the Federalist Party completely.

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