

Chapter 8: Washington and Adams

1. President Washington

Taking Action

When the founders created the executive office, they knew that George Washington was going to be the first president. When Washington took office in 1789, he had a lot of work to get done.

The United States suffered from a large national debt left over from the Revolutionary War. Washington's Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, solved the problem by passing **tariffs**, getting new foreign loans, and putting a sales tax on whiskey. To get support for his program from the southern states, Hamilton agreed to support building the nation's **capital**, to be called Washington D.C., on the Potomac River.

Washington also signed a bill to create a national bank to help coin money, pay debts, and aid business growth. Some claimed the bank was unconstitutional because the Constitution failed to mention any power given to the federal government to create a bank in the first place.

Foreign Problems

In 1793, Britain and France went to war. Americans argued about who to support in the war. Washington wanted to avoid getting pulled into a European war as it would divide the country and cost a lot of money.

Chief Justice of the Supreme Court John Jay went to Britain to discuss how to keep America out of the war. The result was Jay's Treaty of 1795. Britain agreed to remove troops from American territory and America gave Britain trading rights. War was avoided.

Whiskey Rebellion

All governments need money to operate. That is why governments create taxes. However, the American Revolution was started because many people believed they were being taxed unfairly.

In 1791, Congress passed the whiskey tax, a tax on whiskey to help pay government debts. People in Pennsylvania complained that the tax was unfair and began to **rebel**.

President Washington disagreed and wanted to show that the new federal government could enforce its policies. He sent the army in 1794 into Pennsylvania and quickly put down the rebellion.



George Washington was the only president to be elected to office unanimously. He also set the example of serving no more than two terms in office until Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected to a third term in 1940.

Stuart Gilbert. *Athenaeum Portrait*. 1796. Painting. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Farewell

Despite pleas from friends, politicians, and citizens, Washington refused to run for a third term. He was tired of being in the public eye and wanted to retire. In his farewell speech in September of 1796, he said Americans should be united as a people, respect the Constitution and make changes to government only through amendments and not rebellion, keep political parties from power because they will work to take power away from the people and give it to themselves, and avoid foreign alliances as they will pull the United States into needless wars.

2. President Adams

Political Parties

With Washington's retirement from public life, several people ran for president in 1796. Two **political parties** formed: the Federalists who supported John Adams for president and the Democratic-Republicans who supported Thomas Jefferson for president.

At this time in U.S. history, the person who got the most votes became president and the person who got the second-most votes became vice president. John Adams won the presidency with 71 votes and Thomas Jefferson won the vice presidency with 68 votes. Adams and Jefferson, once good friends, now found themselves in different political parties but now having to work together.

The XYZ Affair

After signing Jay's Treaty with Britain in 1794, France started attacking American ships. President Adams sent three **ministers** to France to avoid war. The French foreign minister demanded a bribe before he would talk peace. Insulted, President Adams angrily refused to pay the bribe.

The Federalist Party demanded war for insulting the United States. Between 1798 and 1800, the United States was in an undeclared war with France. All of the fighting took place on the ocean.

To avoid further bloodshed, Adams sent a minister to France who negotiated the Treaty of Mortefontaine (1800) that ended the fighting and renewed the friendship between the two countries.

Alien and Sedition Acts

Democratic-Republicans accused the Federalists of wanting to start a war with France. To weaken public support for the Democratic-Republicans, the Federalists and President Adams signed the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798. These laws made it easy to send non-citizens out of the country and to imprison anyone who criticized the federal government.

The Federalists hoped to win the election of 1800 by silencing the Democratic-Republicans. It failed to work. The public got angry at the Federalists for trying to take away the people's First Amendment rights of freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

The Election of 1800

John Adams lost the election. Thomas Jefferson became the next president. Also, the people voted out many of the Federalists and gave control of Congress to the Democratic-Republicans.

Bitter over his defeat, Adams spent his last days and hours as president appointing Federalists to serve as judges in the judicial branch. Adams wanted the Federalists to control at least one of the three branches of the government.

Out of spite, Adams refused to attend Jefferson's inauguration. The two men would not talk to each other for many years but eventually became friends again in their old age. Both men died on July 4, 1826, fifty years to the day of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.