

President	John Adams
Chronological Order	2
Life Span	1735-1826
Home State	Massachusetts
Elected	1796



Political Party	Federalist
Vice President	Thomas Jefferson
First Lady	Abigail Smith Adams
Children	3 sons, 2 daughters
Physical Attributes	5' 7" tall, stout, light brown hair, blue eyes
Undergraduate Education	Harvard College (now Harvard University)
Military Service	None
Profession	Attorney, Farmer
Other Political Offices	Delegate to Continental Congress, Signer of the Declaration of Independence, Diplomat to France, Minister to Holland, Minister to Great Britain, Vice President
Nickname	The Atlas of American Independence
Family Lineage	English
Religious Affiliation	Unitarian

- Biographical Notes
1. Before becoming President in 1797, John Adams earned a reputation as a blunt-speaking man of independent mind. A fervent patriot and an expert on governments, Adams served as a delegate from Massachusetts to the Continental Congress from 1774 to 1777, as a diplomat in Europe from 1778 to 1788, and as vice president during both terms of the Washington administration.

He was intelligent, argumentative, irascible, and exceptionally honest. Benjamin Franklin described him: "I am persuaded that he means well for his Country, is always an honest Man, often a wise one, but sometimes and in some things, absolutely out of his senses."
  2. The Founding Fathers all had different strengths. George Washington was the best leader; Thomas Jefferson was the best writer; James Madison was the best legislator; Alexander Hamilton was the financial genius. John Adams was the best lawyer, especially when it came to verbal arguments. Before the American Revolution, he was an outstanding trial lawyer in Massachusetts. As a result of his brilliant courtroom presentation and closing argument, the British soldiers involved in the Boston Massacre were acquitted of murder. When the Second Continental Congress was debating whether or not to declare independence from Great Britain, Adams led the floor fight and gave the closing argument for the pro-independence side. He negotiated crucial loans for the United States from Holland during and after the Revolutionary War. While negotiating the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Revolutionary War, he won good terms for the United States.
  3. Born into a comfortable, but not wealthy, Massachusetts farming family on October 30, 1735, John Adams grew up in the tidy little world of New England village life. His father, a deacon in the Congregational Church, earned a living as a farmer and shoemaker in Braintree, roughly fifteen miles south of Boston. Adams said later that he would have preferred a life as a farmer, but his father insisted that he receive a formal education, hoping that he might become a clergyman. John attended a local school designed to teach the rudimentary skills of reading and writing, followed by Braintree Latin School, which prepared students for college. He excelled at his studies, entered Harvard College at age fifteen, and graduated in 1755. Young John, who had no interest in a ministerial career, taught in a Latin school in Worcester, Massachusetts, to earn the tuition fees to study law, and from 1756 to 1758, he studied law with a prominent local lawyer in

Worcester. He was admitted to the bar in 1759. When his father died in 1761, he inherited a house and a farm, and he set up his first law office in the house.

4. The best decision John Adams ever made was to marry Abigail Smith in 1764. Abigail was intelligent, articulate, well-read, and an excellent judge of people. She was John's most trusted advisor and an equal partner in all their endeavors. For example, the night before his famous closing argument in the Boston Massacre case, Abigail read his draft and explained to him why it would not work. John then stayed up late, revising it to address her concerns. As president, he valued and trusted her political judgment more than the members of his cabinet.

Abigail tended the family farm and raised the children while John was at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia or off doing diplomacy in Europe or serving as vice president. When John was in Philadelphia in June 1775, Abigail and their seven-year-old son John Quincy saw the Battle of Bunker Hill in the distance from a hill near their home; the next day, they melted down Abigail's prized set of pewter spoons to make musket balls for the Americans. At one point, John and Abigail were separated for four years while he was overseas, which was extremely hard on her. But they always stayed in contact by mail, a total of 1,160 letters over forty years. Their letters to each other began: "My Dearest Friend." They were happily married for fifty-four years.

According to traditional family accounts, Abigail's mother initially opposed the match. Abigail was the daughter of a well-respected clergyman and the granddaughter of Colonel John Quincy, the longtime Speaker of the Massachusetts colonial legislature, and her mother felt that Abigail was marrying beneath her station. But Abigail and John's attraction to each other – like steel to a magnet, according to John – was more than enough to carry the day.

5. Before the American Revolution, Adams had a law office in Boston, and he eventually got involved in politics. The first news of the Stamp Act reached the American colonies in May 1765 and sparked an immediate uproar, especially in Massachusetts and Virginia. The Stamp Act, passed by the British Parliament, required that most printed materials used in the colonies be produced on stamped paper from London, which included an embossed revenue stamp. These printed materials included legal documents, diplomas, magazines, playing cards, and newspapers, but not books. The stamped paper was expensive and had to be paid for in British currency, not local paper money. The new law, the first British attempt to tax Americans directly, had been passed by Parliament to help pay the cost of the French and Indian War and to meet the expense of maintaining a colonial military force to prevent Indian wars.

In response, Adams wrote what became known as the Braintree Instructions – instructions from the citizens of his hometown to their delegates in the Massachusetts legislature – which, when printed in the *Boston Gazette*, "rang" throughout the colony. Adams wrote, "We have always understood it to be a grand and fundamental principle of the [English] constitution that no freeman should be the subject of any tax to which he has not given his own consent." In other words, there must be no "taxation without representation." Since no colony had a representative in Parliament, the Stamp Act violated this precept. The Braintree Instructions were adopted by forty-two towns very quickly, something that had never happened before. Great Britain eventually repealed the Stamp Act.

6. In 1770, Boston was full of British troops – sent in 1768 to keep order, as Parliament imposed another round of taxes – and the atmosphere in the city turned incendiary. Incidents of violence broke out between townsmen and soldiers, the hated "Lobsterbacks."

On March 5, 1770, several hundred Bostonians converged on the Customs House, which was being guarded by eight British soldiers with loaded muskets and fixed bayonets, their captain with drawn sword. Shouting and cursing, the crowd pelted the soldiers with snowballs, chunks of ice, oyster shells, and stones. In the melee, the soldiers suddenly opened fire, killing five men. (Allegedly, the first shot was an accidental discharge.) The incident became known as The Boston Massacre, and the soldiers were arrested and charged with murder.

The next day, John Adams was asked to defend the soldiers because no one else would. He agreed, and, eventually, there were two trials. At the first trial, the captain was acquitted because there was no evidence that he told the soldiers to fire their weapons. At the second trial, as a result of Adams's skillful recreation of the event, six of the soldiers were acquitted, and two were found guilty of the lesser charge of manslaughter, for which they were branded on their thumbs. The effect of Adams's closing arguments on the packed courtroom during the second trial was said to be "electrical." In particular, he knew the jurors resented the presence of the soldiers in Boston, and he emphasized that they must put those feelings aside and make their decision base on the facts of the case. He told the them, "Facts are stubborn things, and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictum of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence."

Many Bostonians criticized Adams for defending the captain and his men, and he lost some clients as a result. However, he felt strongly that everyone deserves competent legal representation and a fair trial. Reflecting on the incident as an old man, Adams said the defense was “one of the most gallant, generous, manly, and disinterested actions of my whole life, and one of the best pieces of service I ever rendered for my country.”

7. For much of the late 1760s and early 1770s, Adams held that while British actions against the colonies had been wrong, open insurrection was unwarranted, and peaceful petition with the view of remaining part of Great Britain was preferable. His ideas began to change around 1772, as the British Crown assumed responsibility for paying the salaries of Governor Thomas Hutchinson and the colony's judges, rather than the Massachusetts legislature paying the salaries. Adams wrote in the *Boston Gazette* that these measures would destroy judicial independence and place the colonial government in closer subjugation to the Crown. After discontent arose among members of the legislature, Hutchinson delivered a speech warning that Parliament's powers over the colonies were absolute and that any resistance was illegal. Adams, his cousin Samuel Adams, and Joseph Hawley drafted a resolution adopted by the colony's House of Representatives, threatening independence as an alternative to tyranny. The resolution argued that the colonists had never been under the sovereignty of Parliament: their charter, as well as their allegiance, was exclusive to the King.

The Boston Tea Party, a demonstration against the Tea Act and the British East India Company's tea monopoly over American merchants, took place on December 16, 1773. The Sons of Liberty, encouraged by Samuel Adams, dumped 342 chests of tea from three British schooners into Boston Harbor. Forty-six tons of tea were destroyed, worth approximately \$1.7 million in 2025 dollars. John Adams applauded the destruction of the tea, calling it the "grandest event" in the history of the colonial protest movement, and writing in his diary that it was an "absolutely and indispensably" necessary action.

In response to the Boston Tea Party, the British Parliament passed the Coercive Acts (a.k.a. the Intolerable Acts) to punish Boston and the rest of Massachusetts. The acts (a) closed the Port of Boston, (b) took away Massachusetts' colonial charter and put it under the control of the British government, (c) allowed the royal governor to order the trial of an accused royal official to take place in Great Britain, and (d) specified that British troops could be quartered in any unoccupied building. Also, an additional 3,000 British soldiers were sent to Boston.

The Intolerable Acts sparked outrage and indignation across the other 12 colonies. In response to the Intolerable Acts, the committees of correspondence between the colonies, which were the brainchild of Samuel Adams, organized the First Continental Congress, which was held in Philadelphia in September and October of 1774.

8. In the fall of 1774, Samuel and John Adams went to Philadelphia as two of the four delegates from Massachusetts to the First Continental Congress. The Congress adopted the Suffolk Resolves, a measure drafted by several counties in Massachusetts, which included a declaration of grievances and urged each colony to establish and train its own militia. The Congress drew up a Petition to the King requesting redress of their grievances and the repeal of the Intolerable Acts. It agreed to reconvene in May 1775 if Great Britain failed to address the grievances.

On April 19, 1775, the Massachusetts militia clashed with the British army at Lexington and Concord when the Redcoats tried to seize the Patriots' stores of ammunition and arrest Samuel Adams and John Hancock. The Second Continental Congress met in May 1775 to address this issue and sent the Olive Branch Petition to King George III, hoping for a peaceful resolution of the difficulties. On June 17, the Massachusetts militia and the British Army fought the Battle of Bunker Hill near Boston, and over 226 British soldiers were killed and 828 were wounded. In response to the Battle of Bunker Hill, King George III issued his Proclamation of Rebellion in August, declaring the thirteen colonies to be in a state of open rebellion and ordering "all Our officers ... and all Our obedient and loyal subjects, to use their utmost endeavors to withstand and suppress such rebellion." He ordered that all who discontinued their rebellion would be received back into his good graces, and all who continued rebelling would be hanged by the neck until dead.

John Adams was a delegate to the Second Continental Congress. He successfully lobbied for support of the Massachusetts militias fighting the British in Boston. Adams nominated George Washington to be the commander of these troops – the new Continental Army – and the Virginian was elected unanimously.

During the Second Continental Congress, Adams sat on ninety committees, chairing twenty-five, an unmatched workload among the congressmen. In June 1776, Adams became head of the Board of War and Ordinance, in charge of raising, equipping, and fielding the Continental Army. He maintained extensive correspondence with Continental Army officers on supplies, munitions, and tactics. Adams emphasized to them the role of discipline in maintaining an effective army. He also authored the "Plan of Treaties," laying out Congress's requirements for a treaty with France.

9. During the summer of 1776, the delegates to the Second Continental Congress were entertaining the idea of declaring independence from Great Britain, with Adams firmly on the affirmative side of the question, but with others strongly opposed. When independence was proposed on June 7, the delegates debated until June 10, at which point they: (a) agreed upon a twenty-day hiatus on the question so that representatives could consult with their colonies, and (b) appointed a five-man committee (John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Robert R. Livingston, and Roger Sherman ) to draft the Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson suggested Adams should write the draft, but Adams refused and insisted that Jefferson should do it. When Jefferson asked why, Adams stated his reasons: "Reason first, you are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second, I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third, you can write ten times better than I can." Jefferson replied, "Well, if you are decided, I will do as well as I can." Adams's ability to recognize talent was extraordinary. He chose George Washington to be commander in chief of the Continental Army, Thomas Jefferson to be the author of the Declaration of Independence and, later, John Marshall to be Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

The delegates returned to the question of independence on July 1. Presumably, everything that could or needed to be said on the matter had been exhausted. Presumably, the question could be put to the vote and decided. But it was not to be. John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, the fiercest opponent of independence, had resolved to make one last appeal, and someone would have to respond. After Dickinson finished, no one spoke; no one rose to answer him; then Adams got to his feet. No transcription was made; no notes were kept. There would only be Adams's recollections, plus those of several others who would recall that Adams gave the most powerful and important speech heard in the Congress since it first convened. It was the greatest speech of his life.

Jefferson said that Adams's address was neither "graceful nor eloquent" but that he spoke "with a power of thought and expression that moved us from our seats." Recalling the moment long afterward, Adams would say that he had been "'carried out in spirit' as enthusiastic preachers sometimes express themselves." To Richard Stockton of New Jersey, Adams was "the man to whom the country is most indebted for the great measure of independency. ... He it was who sustained the debate, and by the force of his reasoning demonstrated not only the justice, but the expediency of the measure." Stockton called Adams "The Atlas of American Independence." After Adams's speech, the delegates agreed to take the final vote the next day. On July 2, twelve colonies voted for independence; New York abstained.

On July 3, Congress met to review the Declaration of Independence being proposed by the five-man committee and to suggest changes. For Thomas Jefferson, this was a painful ordeal because more than eighty changes were suggested. Most were minor – his beautiful preamble was untouched – but the members of Congress did make some substantial changes. Jefferson, who hated public speaking, remained silent during the discussions, but John Adams fought "fearlessly for every word," according to Jefferson. One congressman said that with regard to the Declaration of Independence, Adams "was the pillar of its support on the floor of Congress, its ablest advocate and defender against the multifarious assaults encountered." At approximately 11 a.m. on July 4, the debate on the Declaration of Independence was closed, and the vote was taken. Again, as on July 2, twelve colonies voted in the affirmative, and New York abstained. Afterwards, Benjamin Franklin quipped, "We must all hang together, or we assuredly shall hang separately." (N.B. New York approved the Declaration of Independence on July 9, 1776.)

10. In February 1778, with the Revolutionary War raging, John and his son, John Quincy (age ten), traveled to France, where John was posted to help Benjamin Franklin convince the French to support the American cause. On their frigid journey across the Atlantic, their ship, the Continental frigate *Boston*, was pursued for two days by a British frigate but managed to escape in a storm. If the frigate had captured the *Boston*, John Adams would have been hanged from the yardarm as a traitor, and John Quincy would have been impressed into the British Navy.

John brought along a French grammar book and asked a French passenger to teach John Quincy the language during their six-week voyage. The boy was an eager student and made rapid progress. In Paris, John enrolled John Quincy in a private boarding school, and the boy was writing letters in French after a month. When Adams arrived in Paris, he discovered that Franklin had already negotiated the desired treaty with France. Shortly after, Franklin was appointed America's Minister to France. Since Adams was no longer needed in Paris, he and John Quincy returned to the United States in June 1779.

11. Upon his arrival back in Boston, Adams was chosen as a delegate to the state constitutional convention. He was then selected to be on a three-man subcommittee to draft the constitution, and then the other two members – Samuel Adams and James Bowdoin – asked Adams to write the draft. Hence, Adams was the primary author of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, which was founded on the dual principle of the separation and balance of powers. It declared that in Massachusetts, "the legislative,

executive and judicial power shall be placed in different departments, to the end that it might be a government of laws, and not of men.”

The Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts had many of the features found later in the U.S. Constitution. There would be two branches of the legislature, a Senate and a House of Representatives; an executive, the governor, who would have veto power over the acts of the legislature; an independent judiciary with the judges of the Supreme Court appointed for life. There was also a Declaration of Rights that included free elections, “freedom of speaking,” “liberty of the press,” freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, and trial by jury.

12. John and John Quincy returned to Paris in November 1779. John’s assignment was to be prepared to negotiate, along with Franklin, a peace treaty with Great Britain when the time was right.

With little to do in Paris, Adams went to the Netherlands to seek loans for America from the Dutch. Initially, he had no success because the Dutch feared America would lose the war and be unable to repay the loans. However, Adams persisted, and the Dutch agreed to a \$2 million loan after the American victory at Yorktown in 1781. Adams became America’s first Minister to the Netherlands in 1782. He also secured other loans from the Dutch that were crucial to the economic survival of the United States.

13. In late 1782, Great Britain agreed to negotiate the end of the Revolutionary War with the United States of America. The first sentence of Article I of the subsequent treaty stated, “His Britannic Majesty acknowledges the said United States ... to be free, sovereign, and independent states.”

The American delegation of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and John Jay met with British representatives in Paris. After recognizing American independence, the four fundamental questions to be dealt with were: the boundaries of the United States, debts owed by Americans to British merchants, possible compensation for American Loyalists, and American fishing rights on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland.

The Americans insisted that Great Britain cede all territory between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River, and the British agreed, thus doubling the size of the United States. The all-important right of the United States to navigation on the Mississippi was also granted. On the question of debts incurred by Americans before the war, Franklin and Jay argued that property destroyed by the British army had offset these, but Adams disagreed. Debts contracted in good faith should be paid, he insisted, and such a clause was added, though it would ultimately prove ineffective. The Americans had no sympathy for Loyalists, so no compensation was granted. Adams lobbied hard for American fishing rights and won. The final agreement – the Treaty of Paris – was signed in September 1783.

To Thomas Jefferson, Adams would one day write, “My friend, you and I have lived in serious times.” And of all the serious events of the exceedingly eventful eighteenth century, none compared to the arrival upon the world stage of the new, independent United States of America. As time would tell, the treaty that Adams, Franklin, and Jay had made was as advantageous to their country as any in American history. It was a great victory for American diplomacy.

14. After the Treaty of Paris was signed, Adams and Jefferson were both stationed in Paris, tasked with promoting American commercial interests. They were not very successful, but during that time, they became the best of friends. Jefferson also became good friends with Abigail, who had joined John in Paris. It was rare for the irascible Adams to have such an intimate and close friend, and Abigail Adams commented to Jefferson that he was “the only person with whom my Companion could associate with perfect freedom and unreserve.” Jefferson also became a mentor to seventeen-year-old John Quincy Adams, with the young man noting in his diary: “Spent the evening with Mr. Jefferson, whom I love to be with.” Later, Adams himself said to Jefferson that, when they were in Paris together, his son John Quincy “appeared to be almost as much your boy as mine.”

15. Adams was appointed the United States’ first Minister to Great Britain in April 1785. His tenure in Britain was complicated by both countries failing to follow their treaty obligations. The Americans were delinquent in paying debts owed to British merchants, and, in response, the British refused to vacate their forts in the Northwest Territory as promised. Adams’s attempts to resolve this dispute failed, and he was often frustrated by a lack of news of progress from home. The news he received of tumult at home, such as Shay’s Rebellion, heightened his anxiety. He then asked Jay to be relieved; in 1788, he took his leave of George III, who engaged Adams in polite and formal conversation, promising to uphold his end of the treaty once America did the same. (N.B. The Northwest Territory was the land west of Pennsylvania, east of the Mississippi River, north of the Ohio River, and south of the Great Lakes.)

While Adams was posted in London, French economist and political theorist Anne Robert Jacques Turgot criticized the governments of the American states by arguing against bicameralism (a two-house legislature) and the separation of powers. Turgot preferred a more straightforward unicameral approach. Adams

responded by writing *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, a three-volume work published in 1787 and 1788. Adams argued that a system involving multiple branches—specifically a bicameral legislature, an independent executive, and a judiciary—was the best way to protect liberty and prevent corruption. Americans, he asserted, require an executive to lead them, a senate to deliberate for them, and a popular legislature to speak for them. Adams did receive some criticism from Americans for being too complimentary towards the British system of government, in which the executive is the king.

16. As specified by the Constitution, the president was chosen by the Electoral College. In 1788, the method for selecting electors was decided by each state legislature—by public vote in some states and by the state legislators in others. Each state had as many electors as senators and representatives. The election was held in only 10 states because Rhode Island and North Carolina had not yet ratified the Constitution, and quarreling New York failed to choose its electors in time. Each of the sixty-nine electors was instructed to vote for two different candidates for president. George Washington received the support of all sixty-nine electors and was elected president. John Adams, who received thirty-four votes, was the runner-up and was thus elected vice president. Thirty-five votes went to minor candidates.

Adams was disappointed that he had received votes from less than half the electors. Later, he found out that Alexander Hamilton had contacted two electors from Connecticut, two from New Jersey, and three or four from Pennsylvania to convince them not to vote for Adams, because he feared that Washington and Adams might tie for the presidency.

17. The Constitution was vague when it came to the makeup of the executive branch of government. In particular, there was no reference to a Cabinet. It merely stated that the president “may require the opinion, in writing, of the principal officer in each of the executive departments, upon any subject relating to the duties of their respective offices.”

As the commanding general in the Revolutionary War, when an important decision was to be made, George Washington would call a council of war, listen to his staff's opinions, and then make his decision. As President, he decided to do the same by establishing what is now referred to as the Cabinet, composed of the heads of the three major departments (State, Treasury, and War), plus the attorney general. For his Cabinet, Washington chose Thomas Jefferson (VA) for State, Alexander Hamilton (NY) for Treasury, Henry Knox (MA) for War, and Edmund Randolph (VA) for Attorney General. On almost every significant issue during his first term, Washington met with these four men and discussed what needed to be done.

It is interesting to note that Washington did not include Vice President John Adams in his Cabinet. Adams and Washington did not have a great relationship. The Massachusetts native was fearful of tyranny and had fought in the Continental Congress against Washington's desire to build a long-term, professional army. Also, at the beginning of Washington's first term, Adams tried hard to get Congress to require the use of the title “His Highness, the President of the United States of America, and Protector of Their Liberties” for Washington, instead of just “President.” Washington thought Adams's suggestion was ridiculous, and the episode made him question his vice president's judgment. The House and the Senate rejected the Adams proposal.

As vice president, Adams largely sided with the Washington administration and the emerging Federalist Party. His chief role was to preside over the Senate and cast tie-breaking votes when needed, which he did 29 times — the third most in American history. When an amendment threatened to waylay the historic Dinner Table Bargain between Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison, Adams cast the tie-breaking nay vote in the Senate.

During Washington's second term, he consulted Adams more, especially after Jefferson and Hamilton left the Cabinet. One issue Washington consulted Adams on was Jay's Treaty. The British had been raiding American trading vessels and impressing American sailors, and John Jay was sent to London to negotiate an end to hostilities. When he returned in 1795 with a peace treaty on terms unfavorable to the United States, many people opposed it. However, Adams urged Washington to sign it to prevent war with Great Britain. Washington did so, igniting protests and riots. The President was accused of surrendering American honor to a tyrannical monarchy and of turning his back on the French Republic, which had been our ally during the Revolutionary War. John Adams predicted in a letter to Abigail that ratification of the treaty would deeply divide the nation, which it did.

18. Heated conflict broke out early among Washington's Cabinet members, especially Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, over the shape the new nation would take, as well as over divisive foreign policy issues. By late 1792, two political parties had emerged. The Federalists, led by Hamilton, supported a strong central government that favored industry, banking interests, merchants, and close ties with Great Britain. The Federalist Party was strong in the Northeast. The Republicans, led by Jefferson and James Madison,

advocated for limited federal powers. They favored an agrarian economy, personal liberty, and close ties with France. The Republican Party was strong in the South and among landowners. Adams was a Federalist, but he was not vehemently pro-British and anti-French like some members of his party.

19. During the Washington administration, John Quincy Adams wrote, under a pen name, newspaper articles in favor of the president's policies, and this caught Washington's attention; he knew who the real author was. On May 19, 1794, Washington appointed John Quincy Minister to Holland, just as his father had been before him. The next day, John Adams had the rare pleasure of presiding over his son's confirmation in the Senate. Here was the splendid start, "in the cabinet or the field," that John and Abigail Adams had hoped for their firstborn. The assignment would not require critical decisions but would serve as a listening post for European affairs. Since John Quincy spoke Dutch, French, and German, he was uniquely suited for this post.

John Adams, who had been a diplomat in Europe for a decade and a Minister to both Holland and Great Britain, immediately began preparing John Quincy for his new job. He directed his son to learn more about international law and diplomacy, to observe the views and actions of belligerent powers, and to attend to his dress and person. In a letter to John Quincy, he wrote a kind of primer for late-eighteenth-century American diplomacy:

You must make yourself master of all our disputes with England, Spain, France, etc. You must study the lines and boundaries of the United States. You will have to watch the English ambassador and all the Anglomani[ac]s. ... It is a serious trust that is about to be committed to you. I hope you will reflect upon it with due attention, collect yourself, let no little weakness escape you, and devote yourself to the service of your Country.

John Quincy would go on to be the most accomplished American diplomat of his generation, and one of America's greatest secretaries of state. He was also President of the United States for one term, just as his father had been before him.

20. Since George Washington had been elected president unanimously in 1788 and 1792, the election of 1796, which pitted Federalist John Adams against Republican Thomas Jefferson, was the first contested presidential election in American history. The contest was decided primarily along sectional lines. Adams, a New Englander, received only two electoral votes south of Maryland; Jefferson, a Virginian, received no electoral votes in New England, New York, New Jersey, and Delaware. The electoral votes were split in Pennsylvania and Maryland.

Adams narrowly defeated Jefferson, 71 to 68 electoral votes. Under the rules of that time, the second-place finisher became vice president; so, for the only time in American history, the offices of president and vice president were held by men of different political parties. George Washington was glad to be stepping down. At Adam's inauguration, he whispered to the new president, "I am fairly out, and you are fairly in. See which of us will be the happiest."

Jefferson drafted a friendly letter to congratulate Adams, which might have led to cooperation between the two old friends, but James Madison convinced him not to send it. He reminded Jefferson that they would have to oppose Adams's Federalist policies and that if a letter supporting Adams were exposed, it would hurt their Republican causes. As a result, Jefferson did not send the message and did not take part in the Adams administration; instead, he was the leader of the opposition.

Alexander Hamilton was up to his usual tricks during this election, trying to influence electors to swing the presidency to Thomas Pinckney, a Federalist he could control. When Abigail found out about this, she passed her judgment of Hamilton on to John in a letter:

Beware of that spare Cassius, has always occurred to me when I have seen that cock sparrow. Oh, I have read his Heart in his wicked Eyes many a time. The very devil is in them.

21. When Adams became president, there was no tradition, as there is now, of cabinet secretaries resigning when administrations change. Additionally, Adams had watched Washington struggle to find qualified replacements when Jefferson, Hamilton, and Knox resigned from his cabinet. Therefore, Adams retained the members of Washington's cabinet: Secretary of State Timothy Pickering (MA), Secretary of the Treasury Oliver Wolcott (CT), Secretary of War James McHenry (MD), and Attorney General Charles Lee (VA). Retaining Washington's cabinet was a significant mistake. The first three men were extreme Federalists (a.k.a. High Federalists). They belonged to the ardently pro-British, anti-French wing of the party and considered Alexander Hamilton to be their leader, not John Adams. Moreover, they looked down on Adams because they had been part of Washington's cabinet, and he had not. For his part, Hamilton hoped to run the government from his New York City law office through Pickering, Wolcott, and McHenry.

22. After Adams's 1796 victory, George Washington sent him an unsolicited letter expressing the "strong hope" that as President, Adams would not withhold "merited promotion" from John Quincy in order to avoid the appearance of nepotism. "It is my decided opinion," Washington wrote, "that Mr. [John Quincy] Adams is the most valuable public character we have abroad, and there remains no doubt in my mind that he will prove himself to be the ablest of all our diplomatic corps." Shortly after his inauguration, Adams appointed John Quincy as Minister to Prussia, a more significant position than his previous post in the Netherlands. From Berlin, John Quincy provided his father with extensive political intelligence, especially on France. For example, he informed his father when France was ready to negotiate seriously for peace during the Quasi-War. When John Adams lost the election of 1800, he recalled his son from Berlin.

23. When Jay's Treaty was ratified by the Senate in 1795, France viewed it as a betrayal: its American Revolutionary War ally (the U.S) was allying with France's greatest enemy (Great Britain). Shortly after Adams was inaugurated in March 1797, France retaliated by (a) refusing to receive the new American Minister to France, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, and (b) issuing a decree launching an undeclared war on American shipping everywhere. The crisis with France had come to a head; Adams faced the threat of all-out war.

Adams went to Congress and called for both a "fresh attempt" at negotiations with France and a buildup of American military strength. After giving his speech, he appointed two envoys who, along with Pinckney, would comprise a new negotiating team to proceed to Paris. In response to Adams's request for military aid, Congress provided funds to equip and man three frigates — the *USS Constitution*, the *USS United States*, and the *USS Constellation* — which had been built during the Washington administration but had never been equipped or manned for service.

When the three American envoys arrived in Paris, they were kept waiting for several days before being granted a meeting with French Foreign Minister Talleyrand, which lasted only 15 minutes. More days of waiting followed. Then began a series of meetings with three agents representing Talleyrand (code-named X, Y, and Z in secret American dispatches), who demanded a \$250,000 bribe for Talleyrand and a \$10 million loan for France before negotiations could begin. When the Americans refused, X reminded them of the "power and violence of France" and demanded their answer on the spot. Pinckney replied, "No! No! Not a sixpence." When the gist of the "XYZ Affair" was made public in the United States, many Americans, especially Federalists, were enraged and expected Adams to ask Congress for a declaration of war.

In response to the XYZ Affair, Adams asked Congress for measures necessary to defend the nation in the event of an attack, but he did not ask for a declaration of war. Congress swung into action in April 1798. Measures were passed for arming merchant ships. Nearly a million dollars was voted for harbor fortifications and cannon foundries. A bill was passed empowering American warships to capture any French privateers or cruisers found in American waters. A bill for a 10,000-man army was passed. A new Department of the Navy was established, separate from the War Department, and a new Secretary of the Navy was chosen. Incidents, some bloody, soon took place on the high seas. Historians refer to this undeclared war with France as the Quasi-War.

24. Many Federalists in the House and Senate felt frustrated when Adams did not ask for a declaration of war against France and decided to lash out at those living in the United States who were sympathetic to France by passing the Alien and Sedition Acts. These were four sets of laws passed by the Federalist-dominated 5th Congress and signed into law by Adams. The alleged purpose of the acts was to curb domestic dissent during the Quasi-War.

The Alien Friends Act of 1798 allowed the president to deport any foreigner who was determined to be "dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States." This law was never directly enforced, but it led to the voluntary departure of many foreigners who feared they would be charged under the act. The Alien Enemies Act of 1798 grants the government additional powers to regulate the activities of foreigners in times of war and invasion. It allows the president to authorize the arrest, relocation, or deportation of any male over the age of 14 who hails from a foreign country. The Naturalization Act of 1798 made it much harder for immigrants to become citizens, extending the waiting period from 5 to 14 years. The Sedition Act of 1798 made it a federal crime to excite "the hatred of the good people of the United States" against the federal government, Congress, or the President.

These laws were partisan. The aliens the Federalists feared were the French and the Irish, who both hated the British and usually joined the Republican Party. The Naturalization Act suppressed the Republican vote. The Sedition Act was used to imprison and fine Republican, not Federalist, newspaper editors and contributors. At least two dozen Republicans, including Benjamin Franklin's grandson, were arrested, and some were imprisoned. Jefferson and Madison strongly believed the Sedition Act was unconstitutional because it violated freedom of speech. The Alien Friends Act expired two years after its passage, and the Sedition Act expired after three. The Naturalization Act was repealed in 1802. The Alien Enemies Act is still

the law and was invoked during the War of 1812, World War I, and World War II. In 2025, President Donald Trump invoked the Alien Enemies Act to justify the deportation of Venezuelan nationals alleged to be gang members. Since the U.S. is not currently at war or under invasion by a foreign power, the Supreme Court is reviewing the validity of his actions.

The passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts was one of the worst mistakes of the Adams administration. Resentment of the acts energized the Republican voter base and helped Jefferson defeat Adams in the election of 1800.

25. Adams asked George Washington to command the new army, if it was needed. Washington said he would accept the command only if he was allowed to choose his own officers and told Adams he wanted Alexander Hamilton as his second-in-command. Adams was very reluctant to agree to this because, in practice, Washington, due to his age, would probably not take the field, hence it would be Hamilton's army. Behind the scenes, Hamilton was lobbying for precisely this result. In a letter to Washington, he wrote, "The President has no relative ideas, and his prepossessions on military subjects in reference to such a point are of the wrong sort," meaning, presumably, that Adams cared more for the navy than the army. In addition, Secretary of War McHenry and Secretary of State Pickering were secretly working to facilitate Hamilton's taking control of the army by supplying him with copies of secret government documents. In the end, Washington left Adams no way out. The ex-President's prestige was essential to raise the new army, and Hamilton, McHenry, Pickering, and Wolcott all understood this. On September 30, 1798, Adams relinquished the final say on officers to Washington, and Hamilton was made Inspector General of the Army.

26. In the meantime, Adams sought a peaceful solution to the Quasi-War, if it could be obtained on honorable terms. In mid-January 1799, he received intelligence from his son John Quincy, indicating a French willingness to talk, and in February, he surprised both Federalists and Republicans by requesting the Senate to approve sending a new set of envoys to negotiate a peace treaty with France, if France guaranteed the envoys would be treated with the proper respect. In August, French Foreign Minister Talleyrand sent word that the French government would receive the American diplomats in this manner, and Adams announced his intention to send three envoys to France.

Before the envoys could be sent, the French government changed hands, and, in light of this, Pickering, McHenry, Wolcott, and Hamilton wanted the peace mission cancelled, so that America could prepare the army for war. Hamilton had a two-hour, one-on-one meeting with Adams in which he tried to convince him to do so, but the President refused to agree. The next day, at a cabinet meeting, Pickering, McHenry, and Wolcott adamantly opposed the peace mission, but Attorney General Lee and Secretary of the Navy Stoddert supported it. Adams went ahead with it, much to Hamilton's dismay.

By the time the American envoys reached Paris, Napoleon Bonaparte had become the head of the French government. After several weeks of negotiation, the American envoys and Napoleon signed the Convention of Mortefontaine on September 30, 1800, which ended the Quasi-War. Adams subsequently said that the honorable peace he had arranged was the great jewel in his crown after nearly twenty-five years of public service. In the process, Adams created an archenemy in the person of Alexander Hamilton, who had hoped to ride to glory and power as the head of the American army, which was now no longer needed. Unfortunately for Adams, word of peace with France did not arrive until November 1800, too late to help him in the election of 1800.

27. Adams was a proponent of U.S. naval power throughout his career and is often referred to as the "Father of the U.S. Navy". During the Second Continental Congress, he served on the Naval Committee and helped organize the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Marine Corps. During his administration, the Navy grew from almost nothing to 50 ships and 5,000 officers and seamen, and the Department of the Navy was established. His choice for the first Secretary of the Navy, the able and energetic Benjamin Stoddert, brought a truly loyal ally into his administration. The Navy's effectiveness played a significant role in the negotiations to end the Quasi-War with France. (N.B. When Adams and the rest of the Naval Committee met to organize the U.S. Navy, the meeting was held while they were drinking in a Philadelphia tavern, which seems appropriate given the reputation of sailors over the years.)

28. Adams' problems with his cabinet came to a head in May 1800, after the Republicans defeated the Federalists in the election of the New York legislature, a crucial election that would determine New York's electoral votes for president. In a private meeting with McHenry, Adams exploded with anger, accusing McHenry of working with Hamilton to undermine his administration. Adams said Hamilton was "an intrigant ... a man devoid of moral principle, a bastard ... a foreigner." Then he let fly with what, to any faithful Hamiltonian, was the ultimate insult. Jefferson, Adams declared, was a better man than Hamilton and would make a better president. Adams then fired McHenry and Pickering.

29. On November 1, 1800, John Adams became the first president to take up residence in the White House. The next day he wrote to Abigail: "I pray Heaven to bestow the best of blessings on this House, and all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof." Franklin D. Roosevelt had Adams's blessing carved into the mantel in the State Dining Room.

30. The presidential election of 1800 was one of the dirtiest in American history. Both Jefferson and Adams were subjected to abuse in the press. In Federalist newspapers and pamphlets, Jefferson was decried as a hopeless visionary, a weakling, more Frenchman than American, and therefore a bad man. He was charged with infidelity to the Constitution, being a spendthrift, and having a sexual relationship with Sally Hemings, one of his slaves. Adams was excoriated in the Republican press as a monarchist, more British than American, and therefore a bad man. He was ridiculed as old, addled, and toothless.

One significant difference in the attacks on Adams was that they came from both Republicans and High Federalists. In particular, the High Federalists attacked him for not being partisan enough and for not going to war with France. The High Federalist coup de grace was a fifty-four-page pamphlet published in late October by Alexander Hamilton entitled *A Letter from Alexander Hamilton, Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq., President of the United States*. Hamilton berated Adams in every possible way, especially his character, his "bitter animosity" towards his cabinet, and his handling of relations with France. Pickering, Wolcott, and McHenry helped Hamilton prepare the pamphlet.

The margin of victory between Adams and Jefferson was *extremely* thin. According to Adams biographer David McCullough, a difference of 250 votes in New York City would have given New York State and its 12 electoral votes to Adams and re-elected him. Aaron Burr, the Republican Party's vice-presidential candidate, was from New York City and campaigned vigorously there. The final tally was: Jefferson 73 electoral votes, Burr 73, Adams 65, and Pinckney 63. Jefferson won the runoff in the House.

31. After the election, during the lame-duck session of Congress, the Federalists passed the Judiciary Act of 1801, which doubled the number of circuit courts to six and increased the number of federal judges by twenty-three. Adams filled almost all these positions with Federalists about a week before Jefferson's inauguration. Jefferson objected to these appointments since they had come after his election and, therefore, did not reflect the will of the people. The appointees became colloquially known as "midnight judges," and there were other "midnight appointments" as well.

Adams chose not to attend Jefferson's inauguration, even though Washington came to his. On Inauguration Day, he took the 4 a.m. public stage to Massachusetts.

32. In January 1801, Adams named John Marshall, a Virginia Federalist and long-time Jefferson antagonist, Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Marshall went on to serve for thirty-four years under the administrations of Jeffersonian Republicans (Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe) and their successors (John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson). He kept on handing down Federalist decisions long after the Federalist Party ceased to exist. Marshall did more than anyone else, except Hamilton, to engraft the Hamiltonian concept of a powerful central government upon the American political system. He is widely acknowledged as the most influential Supreme Court Justice in American history.

33. After his presidency, Adams retired to his farm in Quincy, Massachusetts. He mellowed considerably and was no longer as argumentative or irascible as before. He did not get involved in politics, but, of course, he followed John Quincy's career closely and mentored him when it was appropriate. John Quincy's wife, Louisa Catherine, had a delicate personality and was embarrassed when her father's financial difficulties prevented him from providing her with a dowry. At first, Louisa Catherine felt intimidated by the Adamses, especially Abigail, but John Adams liked her right away and welcomed her into the family. She and John became the best of friends.

34. By 1812, Jefferson was in retirement at Monticello, Adams had retired to his farm "Peacefield" near Quincy, Massachusetts, and the two former friends had not written to each other in eleven years. But then a mutual friend, Benjamin Rush, gently coaxed them into resuming their correspondence.

Rush's efforts initiated the most remarkable correspondence between two politicians in American history. Over the next fourteen years, Adams sent Jefferson 109 letters, and Jefferson sent Adams 49. The letters covered a wide range of topics, including philosophy, religion, politics, the French, the British, the French Revolution, American Indians, the U.S. Navy, slavery, and, of course, the American Revolution. Adams told Jefferson: "You and I ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other." Jefferson kept a bust of Adams in his study near his writing table.

During this time, someone asked Adams how he could possibly be on good terms with Jefferson after all

the abuse the Republicans had heaped upon him during the election of 1800. Adams replied, "I do not believe that Mr. Jefferson ever hated me. On the contrary, I believed he always liked *me*, but he detested Hamilton and my whole administration. Then he wished to be the President of the United States, and I stood in his way."

Adams and Jefferson both died on July 4, 1826, exactly fifty years after the Second Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence. One of the last things Adams said was, "Thomas Jefferson survives." But he was wrong. Jefferson had died approximately five hours earlier.

35. When John Quincy Adams won the presidency in 1824, friends and family gathered at Peacefield to celebrate, and eighty-nine-year-old John Adams cried tears of joy. However, he told the gathering, "No man who ever held the office of President would congratulate a friend on obtaining it." John Quincy was the sixth President of the United States, and he and John were the first father-son duo to become president. George H.W. Bush and his son George W. repeated the feat 176 years later.

36. Of all the wonderful letters Jefferson and Adams exchanged, one stands out for its grace and kindness – Jefferson's condolence letter to Adams upon Abigail's death in 1818. Jefferson knew the couple for more than forty years and knew how much they loved each other. He also knew what it was like to lose a wife you adored. Jefferson wrote:

I know well, and feel what you have lost, what you have suffered, are suffering, and have yet to endure. The same trials have taught me that, for ills so immeasurable, time and silence are the only medicines. I will not therefore, by useless condolences, open afresh the sluices of your grief nor, altho' mingling sincerely my tears with yours, will I say a word more, where words are vain, but that it is of some comfort to us both that the term is not very distant at which we are to deposit, in the same cerement, our sorrows and suffering bodies, and to ascend in essence to an ecstatic meeting with the friends we have loved & lost and whom we shall still love and never lose again. God bless you and support you under your heavy affliction.

See the next page for a list of references.

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