

Serenading the President: John Adams, the XYZ Affair, and the 18th-Century American Presidency

Christopher J. Young

*Behold the chief who now commands,
Once more to serve his country stands.
The rock on which the storm will beat,
But arm'd in virtue, firm, and true,
His hopes are fix'd on Heav'n and you.*
— Joseph Hopkinson, “Hail Columbia,” 1798

The XYZ Affair became a public issue when Congress ordered that the diplomatic dispatches from France be published. News of the treatment of the American envoys and the seemingly preposterous French demands created a sea change in American public opinion toward the French Republic. Enjoying near unanimous American public support since its onset in 1789, the French Revolution was heralded as the next great step in an anti-monarchical epoch that had begun with America's own Revolution. However, when news of Louis XVI's execution hit American shores, a schism in public support for events in France began to emerge, a split that closely corresponded with domestic political dispositions. From the beginning of Washington's second term and into Adams's presidency, opinion regarding the French Republic closely mirrored domestic political tastes.



President John Adams responded personally to the many addresses of support that he received from people and organizations throughout the United States in the aftermath of the XYZ Affair.

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While there had been fluctuations in American opinion toward revolutionary France during the early to mid-1790s, sentiment began to change in earnest in the wake of the decision to publicize the XYZ dispatches during the spring of 1798. The popular response was immediate and heated, and debate continued throughout the summer. The same month that Congress decided to publish the dispatches, First Lady Abigail Adams noted with pleasure the shift in the American political mood while attending the theater in the young nation's capital: "Since the Change in the publick opinion respecting France, the people began to lose the relish for [French tunes], and what had been harmony, now becomes discord." The spectacle of a Philadelphia theater audience engaging in a sort of musical battle royal revealed the ongoing polarization of the American public. By the next year, public sentiment toward the Gallic Republic had shifted to such an extent that the President observed to his Secretary of State that France's "charm is dissolved. Their magic is at an end in America."¹ There is no better proof of this reality than that even the Francophile Thomas Jefferson began to distance himself from the French.²

Not surprisingly, historians of the XYZ Affair have focused on the diplomatic particulars of the American mission to France during the Adams administration. Other studies have focused on how the popular response helped shape American national identity during the late 1790s. However, the effects of these events on the executive office and its relationship to the public have not received much attention.³

By looking at the effect that the XYZ Affair had on the American public, I will argue that it solidified the relationship between the newly established office of President of the United States and the American people. Furthermore, I will con-

¹ The congressionally mandated publications did not appear until August 1798. See, Thomas M. Ray, "'Not One Cent for Tribute': The Public Addresses and American Popular Reaction to the XYZ Affair, 1798–1799," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 3, no. 4 (Winter, 1983), 389–412; Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, Apr. 26, 1798, *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788–1801*, ed. Stewart Mitchell (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973, orig., 1948), 164; John Adams to Timothy Pickering, Aug. 6, 1799, Charles Francis Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, Vol. 9 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854), 11.

² Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1785–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). For a succinct discussion of the changing mood toward President John Adams following the diplomatic revelations in 1798, see Stephen G. Kurtz, *The Presidency of John Adams: The Collapse of Federalism, 1795–1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), 298–301.

³ Alexander DeConde, *The Quasi-War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France, 1797–1801* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), esp. 36–84; William Stinchcombe, *The XYZ Affair* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980); Matthew Rainbow Hale, "'Many Who Wandered in Darkness': The Contest over American National Identity, 1795–1798," *Early American Studies* (Spring 2003), 127–75; While Thomas Ray explores this issue, he does not consider the impact on the executive office. See Ray, "'Not One Cent for Tribute.'"

tend that the relationship between the President and the people that emerged during the Adams administration was, in this (overlooked) respect, like in others (less overlooked), a continuation of the Washington administration and its relationship to the governed. Just as Washington and his Federalist supporters in and out of government had done when the proclamation of neutrality created a domestic challenge, or when the Jay Treaty ignited a public outcry, President Adams and his Federalist supporters recognized and utilized domestic public opinion during a crisis in foreign affairs. Whether Adams reciprocated a petition of support with a public letter to a local community that was then published and read nationally, or more dramatically, when a group of young male supporters marched to the executive mansion in Philadelphia to sing their support for the Commander-in-Chief, these activities generated not only news but favorable public opinion. Following the precedents established by his predecessor in this regard, President Adams's acknowledgement of this opinion, however amorphous it may have been, advanced the imagined relationship between the President and the people.

In short, the American response to the XYZ Affair of 1798 and the relationship it fostered between the Chief Executive and the governed exhibited a continuation of Federalist know-how from the Washington era. When it came to cultivating the delicate relationship between an executive authority who seized the initiative in foreign affairs and an empowered public, who communicated its ideas and feelings to their national leader during these early years of the American republic, John Adams did not depart from proven methods employed by Federalists during the Washington administration. A closer view of Adams's cultivation of public involvement and opinion revises our interpretation of presidential leadership in the first two administrations. We begin to see that the first Chief Executives were not as detached from the public as previously thought. Indeed they had begun to develop the kind of leadership techniques and communication with the people that has been described as the "rhetorical presidency," and President Adams's conduct during the XYZ Affair reveals that those efforts had become a feature of the office not merely a matter of personal disposition.

The Proposed Chief Executive and the Public

One of the more controversial issues at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia and during the ratification debates that followed was how much authority the Chief Executive of the United States should wield. In the *Federalist Papers*, a series of essays that appeared in New York newspapers, Alexander Hamilton argued that the proposed position of President of the United States ought to be one of energy and authority. Critics worried that the American President would become

essentially a republican version of the king of Great Britain. Hamilton assured Americans that they need not worry; the proposed executive would not only be less powerful than the British monarch, but also less so than some of the current state governors, particularly New York's chief executive.⁴

Hamilton and his co-essayists, James Madison and John Jay, acknowledged the importance of public opinion by engaging head-on the greatest public concerns in a public forum. In the essays that focused on executive authority, Hamilton acknowledges that a relationship would exist between the President of the United States and the people. In fact, at one point he suggests that public opinion would serve as a safeguard against undue authority in the executive branch. However, except for this brief aside, the role of the people, as imagined by Hamilton at this point, was solely in the context of elections.⁵

In practice, however, the relationship went beyond the quadrennial event of electing or reelecting a President. The French Revolution, and then the wars associated with the French Republic, captured the interest of the American public. Since President Washington seized the initiative in foreign affairs, most notably during the neutrality crisis and the Jay Treaty controversy, the President became a central feature in the American public's imagination. With the need to win over public opinion for the administration's policies, Washington, Hamilton, and supporters of the administration utilized their persuasive powers and strategic acumen to win over public support. The relationship between the newly established office of President of the United States and the public was established in the public mind.⁶

Antecedents: President Washington and the Public

During his first term in office, President George Washington toured both New England and the southern states with the hope of gaining a sense of the public mood. As he entered each American hamlet he received acclamations and addresses from the

⁴ *The Federalist No. 69*, Mar. 14, 1788, *New York Packet*. For a larger discussion regarding the debate surrounding executive authority during the Constitutional Convention and the ratification debates, see Thomas E. Cronin, "The President's Executive Power," in Thomas E. Cronin, ed. *Inventing the American Presidency* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 183–93.

⁵ *The Federalist No. 68*, *ibid.* The purpose of the essays that make up the *Federalist Papers* was to engage the public and persuade it of the merits of the proposed Constitution. For the rhetorical strategies used by the authors of the *Federalist Papers* to reach their intended audience, see Todd Estes, "The Voices of Publius and the Strategies in *The Federalist*," *The Journal of the Early Republic* 28 (Winter 2008), 523–58.

⁶ Christopher J. Young, "Connecting the President to the People: Washington's Neutrality, Genet's Challenge, and Hamilton's Fight for Public Support," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011), 435–66; Todd Estes, *The Jay Treaty Debate, Public Opinion, and the Evolution of Early American Political Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).

*The favorite new
Federal Song*

*Adapted to the
President's March*

Rebaptize the Chief who now commands!

Sung by M^r. FOX

Written by J. HOPKINSON Esq^r.

For the Voice, Piano Forte, Guittar and Clarinett.

Hail! Columbia happy land hail ye Heroes heavn born band Who fought and bled in
freedoms cause who fought & bled in freedoms cause and when the storm of war was gone on -
joyd the peace your valor won let Indepen - dence be our boast ever mindful
what it cost ever grateful for the prize let its Altar reach the Skies
2^d time Chorus
Firm uni - ted let us be rallying round our Li - ber - ty as a band of

Joseph Hopkinson composed "Hail Columbia," and Gilbert Fox performed it for the first time on April 25, 1798, at the New Theater in Philadelphia. President Adams was not in attendance, but his wife, Abigail, was. She reported that the song was enthusiastically received by the audience who "broke forth in the Chorus whilst the thunder from their Hands was incessant, and at the close they rose, gave 3 Huzzas, that you might have heard a mile."

citizens. The President replied with words of thanks to an adoring public. As historian Sandra Moats writes, George Washington hoped the tours would "establish the national government's authority in the places he visited, and more importantly, to forge the crucial sovereign bond between the government and its citizens that would ensure the successful launching of republican government." These celebrations of the Chief Executive and his public expressions toward his national constituency acted out

a unity of purpose that illustrated the Federalist understanding of the appropriate relationship between the governor and the governed. For the Federalists who cultivated this relationship, deference and a shared sense of purpose were essential attributes in this understanding that linked the people with their leader.⁷

When he was not touring, the first President maintained a correspondence with friends asking them to keep him informed of public sentiment. Through an exchange of letters, the President hoped to keep his finger on the pulse of America, especially his home state of Virginia. For instance, writing from New York City in 1790, President Washington told a friend from the Old Dominion that he would be “glad to learn from you in what temper and state of politics you found the Country, such information would be *always* satisfactory; and *may be* very useful.” As the partisanship and political discourse sharpened during the early months of his second term, Washington commented to the Governor of Virginia that though he had “done no public Act with which my Mind upbraids me, yet it is highly satisfactory to learn that the things which I do . . . are generally approved by my fellow Citizens.” This type of information became increasingly important as the partisan cacophony threatened to disturb what he believed to be a unified relationship between the people of the United States and their government.⁸

Access to information and the Federalist vision of a unified relationship between the federal government and the public received a boost from the Post Office Act of 1792. This important and often overlooked piece of legislation allowed newspapers to be delivered by the United States Post Office at little cost to the printer. Moreover, the legislation mandated that there be an increase in the number of post offices and postmasterships as well as an expansion of post road mileage. Subsequently, communities throughout the United States petitioned Congress requesting that a post road come through their town. In the end, Congress listened and created thousands of miles of post roads. A consequence of this legislation—and the infrastructure to support it—was a plethora of published material moving throughout the country. A truly national discussion was now possible.⁹

⁷ Sandra Moats, *Celebrating the Republic: Presidential Ceremony and Popular Sovereignty, from Washington to Monroe* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 50.

⁸ George Washington to David Stuart, Apr. 11, 1790, and George Washington to Henry Lee, July 21, 1793, *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008). President Adams likewise relied on these “private epistolary networks” when he considered policy. See Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, “Private Letters and Public Diplomacy: The Adams Network and the Quasi-War, 1797–1798,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 31 (Summer 2011), 283–311.

⁹ Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 25–63; Richard R. John and Christopher J. Young, “Rites of Passage: Postal Petitioning as a Tool of Governance in the Age of Federalism,” *The House and Senate in the 1790s: Petitioning, Lobbying, and Institutional Development*, eds. Kenneth R. Bowling and Donald R. Kennon (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 100–38.

As mentioned earlier, President Washington made a point to visit each state in order to solidify the newly established federal government in the minds of the governed. During his second term, and in the midst of high-profile events such as the arrival of the French Republic's Foreign Minister, Edmond Genet, the rise of the pro-French Revolution Democratic Societies, the Neutrality controversy, and the Jay Treaty debate, President Washington and his supporters continued to actively engage the public. As occurred during President Washington's northern and southern tours during his first term, these developments associated with foreign affairs likewise stimulated a number of public meetings that led to resolutions addressed to the President. In turn, Washington responded in kind. Subsequently, these communications between the assembled citizens and the President were published locally and nationally. However, the crises and controversies with foreign countries and personalities during Washington's second term and the effect of these crises and controversies on domestic politics infused these communications between the President and the people with a palpable urgency. Federalist victories in each of these contests demonstrated President Washington's leadership skills as well as the Federalists' ability to bring public opinion over to their side on the big issues, even at bleak moments such as when the contents of the Jay Treaty first became known.¹⁰

No one was better at appealing to public opinion, if only to seize it, than Alexander Hamilton. Under his leadership, the Federalists successfully mobilized public opinion. Particularly useful to the Federalists were organized meetings that would end with a resolution of support for the Chief Executive of the United States. They used this method to good effect during both the Neutrality crisis of 1793 and early 1794 and the Jay Treaty contention of 1795 and 1796.¹¹ During the foreign crisis of 1798, this method would once again make an appearance.

President Washington responded to these resolutions of the early to mid-1790s by expressing his gratitude for the public's understanding and support for his administration's policy decisions. The ensuing dialogue solidified the relationship between the people and the newly established office of President. It affirmed the

¹⁰ Moats, *Celebrating the Republic*, 35–62; Todd Estes, "The Art of Presidential Leadership: George Washington and the Jay Treaty," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 109, no. 2 (2001), 127–58.

¹¹ Since the 1990s, historians have been taking another look at the Federalists and their contribution to American public life. See Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Doron S. Ben-Atar and Barbara Oberg, eds. *Federalists Reconsidered* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998); Young, "Connecting the President to the People"; Estes, *The Jay Treaty Debate*.

executive's role in dealing with America's foreign affairs—an issue that continued to irk Republicans, many of whom saw in foreign policy decisions a power grab by the executive branch at the expense of Congress.

The Rhetorical Presidency of John Adams

John Adams's tenure as President began inauspiciously. Foreign crises and partisan politics continued to consume the American public as they had during the Washington presidency. Like his predecessor, Adams aimed to rise above party politics. Arguably one of the most theoretical Presidents, Adams believed that it was imperative for the Chief Executive to remain independent of both the legislature and popular capriciousness.¹²

The frustration of both Federalists and Republicans was an ongoing testament that John Adams would be his own man—just as he believed he was constitutionally required to be. While he understood that he must remain independent of public opinion, Adams maintained the office's relationship to the public that had begun under his predecessor.

One way to approach presidential communication is by using a model that political scientists call the “rhetorical presidency.” Most closely associated with Jeffery Tulis, the “rhetorical presidency” involves dividing the sweep of the American presidency into two eras: the constitutional (or traditional) presidency and the rhetorical (or modern) presidency. According to the theory, the so-called traditional Presidents were prevented by constitutional constraints from discussing policy with the public. The modern Presidents had no such constraints. However, when it comes to the rhetorical presidency, political scientists pay little attention to America's two 18th-century executives. The debate tends to pivot on the question of which 20th-century President, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, or Franklin Roosevelt, initiated the modern rhetorical presidency.¹³

There have been attempts to apply the model to the early presidency, but even these go back only to the Jacksonian and antebellum eras of the 19th century. It

¹² Bruce Miroff, “John Adams and the Presidency,” in Thomas E. Cronin, ed. *Inventing the American Presidency*, 304–25; Ralph Ketcham, *Presidents Above Party: The First American Presidency, 1789–1829* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984), 93–99.

¹³ Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Richard J. Ellis, “Introduction” in Richard J. Ellis, *Speaking to the People: The Rhetorical Presidency in Historical Perspective* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 1–15; Ryan Lee Teten, “‘We the People’: The ‘Modern’ Rhetorical Popular Address of the Presidents during the Founding Period,” *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 60, no. 4 (Dec. 2007), 669–82.

is surprising that this recognizably important component of the American presidency—that is, the relationship between the Chief Executive and the public—is so overlooked when it comes to the early development of one of the most significant political institutions in the United States.¹⁴

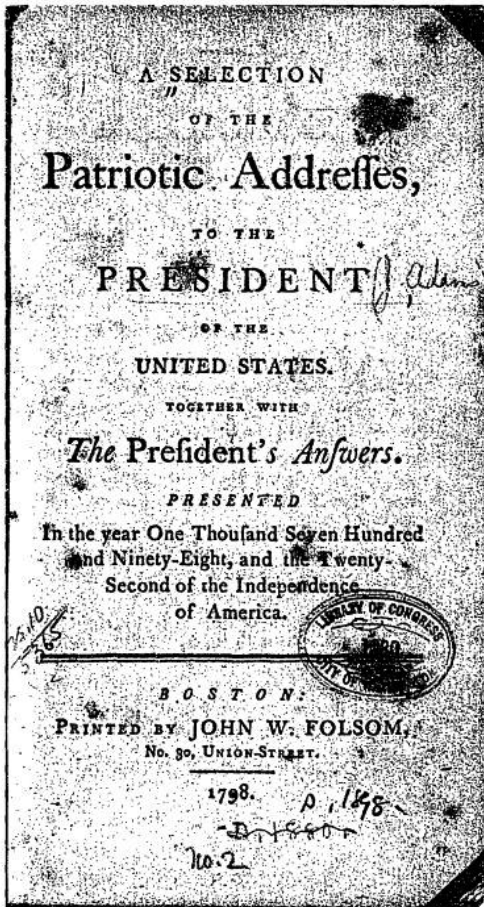
However, in some ways it is not surprising that the Adams presidency is overlooked. If it is remembered at all, his presidency is probably imagined by the public as no more than an “interlude,” as one historian described it. After all, John Adams’s one-term presidency succeeded and preceded two-term presidencies. Moreover, Adams’s successor and predecessor were giants in their time and remain so in ours. And unlike most presidencies, Adams’s four years as President was focused almost exclusively on a single issue—relations with France—and of that time worrying about France, Adams spent a quarter of it at his home in Quincy, Massachusetts, rather than in the executive mansion in Philadelphia or, for a short time, in Washington City.¹⁵

At the same time, it is remarkable that such a vocal and passionate person remains under the radar of the rhetorical presidency. Along with other Presidents that he categorizes as “nineteenth-century presidents,” Tulis argues that Adams rarely, and only then, reluctantly, engaged the people out of a sense of constitutional restraint. In fact Tulis does not take into account the hundreds of resolutions of support that President Adams received from the citizenry during the XYZ Affair controversy and to which he responded personally—to the point of exhaustion, according to his wife. Not only did he engage the populace, Adams did not feel the need to limit himself to statements of gratitude and thanksgiving. He expressed his personal feelings and reminisced about a shared revolutionary past as well as commented on policy concerns—especially French threats to American sovereignty and possible American responses. These communications, David Waldstreicher observes, “joined president to citizens through direct forms of address.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Richard J. Ellis and Alexis Walker, “Policy Speech in the Nineteenth Century Rhetorical Presidency: The Case of Zachary Taylor’s 1849 Tour,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37, no. 2 (June 2007), 248–69. Moats’s *Celebrating the Republic* and Teten’s “‘We the People’: The ‘Modern’ Rhetorical Popular Address of the Presidents during the Founding Period” are fairly recent exceptions to this trend.

¹⁵ Fred I. Greenstein, “Presidential Difference in the Early Republic: The Highly Disparate Leadership Styles of Washington, Adams, and Jefferson,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, no. 3 (Sept. 2006), 373–90.

¹⁶ Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 25–94; Abigail Adams’s to Mary Cranch, May 13, 1798, *New Letters*, 172–73. For the addresses and Adams’s responses, see John W. Folsom, *A Selection of the Patriotic Addresses, to the President of the United States. Together with the President’s Answers* (Boston, 1798) and Charles Francis Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, Vol. 9 (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1854); David Waldstreicher, “Federalism, the Styles of Politics, and the Politics of Style,” in *Federalism Reconsidered*, eds. Ben-Atar and Oberg, 112.



A Selection of the Patriotic Addresses, to the President of the United States, together with The President's Answers. (Boston, 1798). The addresses from citizens throughout the United States to President Adams, and his answers to these addresses, helped forge a relationship between Americans and their Chief Executive, especially during a time of foreign crisis.

Representative of the written interaction between citizens and the President of United States is a statement from the inhabitants of Arlington and Sandgate, Vermont. “Long have we seen foreign influence prevailing, and endangering the peace and independence of our country,” they told President Adams. He responded with empathy by stating “so have I” and then commended them for demonstrating the “genuine character of true Americans” by not forming an “exclusive friendship for any foreign nation,” which was an unsubtle commentary on the administration’s Republican critics. To the young men of Richmond, he replied to their address by explaining that the “conduct of the French government towards us, is of a piece with their behaviour to their own citizens, and a great part of Europe” before complimenting the men thus: “[your] sensibility to their insults and injuries to our country . . . and your resolution to resist them, do you honor.” While writing to a specific group, organization, or town, Adams shared himself with a national audience since newspapers throughout the United States published the addresses and the President’s answers.¹⁷

To Separate the People from Themselves

Adams shared with Washington and other Federalist-leaning Americans the conviction that a unified relationship existed between the federal government and the public—or that it ought to. From the onset of Adams’s presidency, his speeches underscored this theme. Like his predecessor’s famed Farewell Address, Adams

¹⁷ Folsom, *A Selection of Patriotic Addresses*, 9, 11–12, 288.

worried that foreign intrigue was directed toward separating the American people from their government. Federalists suspected agents of the French government, from high-level officials to visitors, of working to create a rift between the people and their elected officials at the federal level. They believed that the French hoped to accomplish their goal by undermining the confidence that the American people had in their own government, which was still less than a decade old.¹⁸

Adams carried forward Washington's policy of neutrality (which was codified by Congress in 1794). He also carried forward his predecessor's concern that forces were at work to undermine the federal government's relationship with the public. In his inaugural address, Adams referred to foreign influence as the "angel of destruction." At another point, Adams recognized that the "affections of the people" were the "only solid foundation" for a government. President Adams was seriously alarmed, as were many Federalists, at what they believed were "endeavors . . . to foster and establish a division between the Government and people of the United States."¹⁹

The Republican opposition thought Adams's idea that the government and the people were one was preposterous. A writer for the *Aurora* suggested that the President wished that it be believed that the people of the United States and the government were one only because he wanted to be considered "an officer of the people." This, the writer instructed the newspaper's readers, must be counteracted, "for it is untrue—he was not the immediate choice of the *people*, and the[r]efore, as a department of the government, he and the people are not the same."²⁰

This critic of the administration reminded the public that the President squeaked by electorally in the recent election, and that some of the electors emanated from legislatures rather than the people themselves. By pointing this out, the writer hoped to challenge Adams's view—as well as those of other Federalists—that there existed a unified relationship between the government and the governed. Washington actively defended this relationship during his time as President. Adams shared this view and was determined to protect it as well. Much of the disagreement between the Federalists and the Republicans during the 1790s stemmed from their competing views regarding the relationship between the federal government and the people.

¹⁸ For example, see Richard Lowitt, "Activities of Citizen Genet in Kentucky, 1793–1794," *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 22 (1948), 252–67, and O'Brien, *The Long Affair*, 191–253.

¹⁹ John Adams, Special Session Message, May 16, 1797, James D. Richardson, ed. *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (New York: Bureau of National Literature, Inc., 1897), 223, 229.

²⁰ *Aurora and General Advertiser*, May 22, 1797.

The XYZ Affair and Public Opinion

The Quasi War and the situation surrounding it that Adams inherited quickly went from bad to worse when the French refused—and even threatened with arrest—the new American ambassador to the French Republic, Charles C. Pinckney—a minister whose purpose was to represent the federal government and the American people, “their disposition being one.” Consequently, in a special session, Adams called for the United States to make another attempt at negotiations while preparing defensively. To that end, the President commissioned the recently refused diplomat, Pinckney, as well as John Marshall and Elbridge Gerry as envoys to pursue negotiations with France.²¹

Political distrust ran rampant among Americans. The Republicans accused Adams of bellicosity and reminded him that he had only been elected by three electoral votes. A Republican U.S. senator from Virginia, Henry Tazewell, even suggested that if Adams had his own way he would have immediately gone to war in order to strengthen the executive office. Adams pursued negotiations with France, according to Tazewell, only because “the debates in both Houses, and out of door



Property protected—à la Françoise. Published in London in June 1798, this British print satirizes relations between the sister republics, the United States and France, following the XYZ Affair. While Frenchmen pillage America, as represented by a woman, other European nations, represented by five men in the background, observe, but do not intervene. All the while, John Bull, the symbolic personification of Great Britain at the time, sits in the background laughing at the unfolding scene.

²¹ John Adams, Special Session Message, May 16, 1797, Richardson, ed. *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 224.

conversations [that] manifested to him that the public mind would not be content without fresh attempts to adjust our differences [with France] by negotiation.”²² Republicans were ready to believe—even as they misread it—that public opinion forced the executive to take a more responsible course of action. Mindful of the vagaries of public opinion, and previous Federalists’ successes in this realm, pro-French partisans believed that public opinion forced Adams to take, contrary to his alleged wishes, a more pacific approach to the most recent imbroglio.

Congress debated Franco-American relations in response to President Adams’s opinion that negotiations were at an end and that the United States ought to prepare for war. In the course of the debate, a Republican congressman from Virginia, John Nicholas, called for the President to share the dispatches with Congress so they could make their own assessment regarding the situation.²³

On April 3, Adams delivered the requested dispatches to both the House of Representatives and the Senate. After closing the galleries to the public to discuss the nature of the dispatches, the House and Senate voted to publish the papers. However, before thousands of copies could be made public (which did not happen for another four months) a majority of Americans reacted negatively to what they perceived as the totally unacceptable behavior of the French and their agents—W, X, Y, and Z.²⁴

Over the next several months the President received hundreds of addresses. Adams enjoyed a unanimity that had been unheard of since the nation’s first days operating under the Constitution. It was particularly moving for the President when over a thousand young men, while being observed by another 10,000, marched to his home and presented their chief with an address. Adams answered in kind. The young men then went to the State House courtyard to read the President’s answer to the crowd gathered there. Around midnight, the young men made their way back to the executive mansion, looked up to a window, and serenaded their Chief Executive. It was a moving moment for President Adams and a revealing one for us.²⁵

²² Henry Tazewell to unknown recipient, June 3, 1797, Henry Tazewell Papers, Library of Congress.

²³ *Annals of Congress*, House of Representatives, Apr. 2, 1798, 1367–1371.

²⁴ *Annals of Congress*, Senate, Apr. 3, 1798, 535; William Stinchcombe, “The Diplomacy of the WXYZ Affair,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 34 (1977), 590–617. See also, Ray, “Not One Cent for Tribute.”

²⁵ Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, May 7, 1798 and May 10, 1798, *New Letters*, 168–72; Ray, “Not One Cent for Tribute,” 404. Following this event at the President’s house, the young men attacked the print shop of Benjamin Franklin Bache, publisher of the highly critical newspaper the *Aurora*, who was well known for his French sympathies. See Waldstreicher, “Federalism, the Styles of Politics, and the Politics of Style,” 113.



Whether discussing the diplomatic dispatches from France in the House of Representatives, or singing “Hail Columbia” in the New Theater, or reading President Adams’s response to the Young Men of Philadelphia in the State House courtyard located just behind Congress Hall, the area captured in this image was the scene for much of the drama that took place when the XYZ Affair became public knowledge. (Courtesy The Library Company of Philadelphia)

Evidence suggests that it was during the XYZ Affair that the intersection of foreign policy, public opinion, and executive authority seemed most obvious—and ominous—to contemporaries. The Federalists were delighted by the public’s response to the French treatment of the American ministers. The Republicans, on the other hand, were dismayed over the self-inflicted political embarrassment. (They had requested that the dispatches be made public in hopes of exposing the assumed Federalist treachery.) Moreover, since their political identity was so closely associated with republican France, the Republicans had good reason to believe that public support and anti-French sentiment might be used to bolster the authority of the executive.

Conclusion

The public airing of the diplomatic dispatches from France during the spring of 1798 are often overshadowed by the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts during the summer of that same year. While ostensibly related due to the breakdown of Franco-American relations and the prospect of war, the Alien and Sedition Acts are more likely to be associated with President John Adams in the historical and public memory because of the laws’ legacy of oppression than his positive contribution

to the continued relationship between the Chief Executive and the people that had begun during his predecessor's tenure.

The most obvious civil rights violation of the Sedition Act was freedom of speech. Freedom of speech is, of course, naturally linked to public opinion. So, it would make sense to examine the Sedition Act if one is interested in the link between the American President and the public during a time of foreign crisis.

While this approach has merit, it overlooks the role of the XYZ Affair in terms of understanding the presidency. Striking a typically Republican note, the recently convicted Vermont Congressman Matthew Lyon shared his concern with Senator Stevens Mason of Virginia that the Federalists were using the news regarding the treatment of American envoys to gain a political advantage with the public and to strengthen executive power. "The noise that has been made about the public and private negotiations of our envoys at Paris, has answered the purpose of [the] aristocrats completely," he wrote from his Vermont jail cell.²⁶

Instead of excoriating the Sedition Act as one would expect from a partisan such as Lyon, especially since the legislation was responsible for his current woes, he instead chose to discuss the political advantage that the Federalists enjoyed as a result of the XYZ Affair. Not only did the Federalists gain seats in the Congress during the midterm elections, but even the cantankerous President John Adams became a cause célèbre with the American public.

Lyon recognized what historians and political scientists tend to overlook: the 18th-century American presidency was a rhetorical presidency. Like Washington before him, Adams engaged the American people in a dialogue. It was a conversation that helped to solidify the idea in the public imagination that the American President was a popular leader, and that they, the people, had a relationship with him. When this conversation was done successfully, the Chief Executive gained public support, and the office grew in strength.

Photo credits: John Adams, "Hail Columbia," *Property protected*, Library of Congress; *Selection of the Patriotic Addresses*, Sabin Americana, Gale; Congress Hall, The Library Company of Philadelphia.

²⁶ Matthew Lyon to Stevens T. Mason, Oct. 14, 1798, in Francis Wharton, *State Trials of the United States during the Administrations of Washington and Adams* (New York: 1849), 339.