
Timeline of American Politics During the 1790's

American politics have always been a heavily debated topic. The government has been shaped by different views ever since its creation. During the administrations of George Washington and John Adams, the young country faced many domestic and foreign problems that would shape its future. By 1790, America had accumulated a large foreign debt, prompting the creation of the First National Bank. In addition, conflicts had arisen between America and Europe.

The British had begun seizing American ships in French ports, resulting in a treaty that would end up fueling a conflict with France, but the conflict didn't stop there. Deep divisions had started forming within the US. Following the creation and ratification of the Constitution in the late 1780s, many divisions and factions began to emerge in the young country. The country had split into pro-constitution Federalist and Anti-Federalist. As certain factions gained more power, political parties began to erupt in the United States. To keep America in one piece, the government had to make many changes. The formation of a Bill of Rights was used to help unify the divided country. However, the early government's Federalist party under George Washington still saw heavy opposition from the new Democratic-Republican Party, founded by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson.

The 1790s had begun with a major victory for the young government; however, success was far from guaranteed. Following the ratification of the Constitution, the power of the United States government had been increased tremendously. Compared to the previous Articles of Confederation, the US Constitution had given the government a much stronger role. The US government now had power over separate state governments, and the ability to enforce the previously ignored tax collections. This radical new change in the government was supported by a powerful group of people known as the federalists.

Although George Washington disapproved of factions, he and Alexander Hamilton were considered major contributors to the party. The Federalist Party believed in a strong central government with fiscal roots. The party mostly consisted of the wealthier class of citizens, and many of them wished for a stable economy in the US. Throughout the decade, the Federalist party supported the repayment of Revolutionary war debts, better treatment of US shipping, a strong tariff system, and especially the creation of a central bank. With their current position in power, the Federalist Party sought to accomplish their goals. The Federalist party's saw its success under the Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton. Alexander Hamilton was a West Indies-born New York lawyer and a former army officer. (Wilentz 55) He was convinced that the constitution did not guarantee the survival of the new government. Following the Revolutionary War, France, Spain, and Amsterdam sought to collect the money that the new country owed it for their help.

Throughout the Revolutionary War, America accumulated about two million dollars worth of foreign debt. (U. S. Debt and Foreign Loans, 1775–1795) Hamilton believed that if they were unable to pay off their foreign debt, the country would not be able to receive loans in the future, or even worse, the countries they owed money to would try to take matters into their own hands, destroying the young country. Hamilton wrote in Federalist 30, "that without an eligible mode of supplying public wants, the government must sink into a fatal atrophy, and, in a short time,

perish". (Wilentz 55) Hamilton's solution to this problem was the National Bank. The Bank acted as the federal government's fiscal agent. The bank was responsible for collecting tax revenues, securing the government's funds, making loans to the government, transferring government deposits through the bank's branch network, and paying the government's bills. The bank also managed the US Treasury's interest payments to European investors, establishing the US as a reliable investment. (Hill)

Even though Hamilton's bank was created to help the United States, it did see resistance in the government. Hamilton's once long-time friend, James Madison, argued that the National Bank was unconstitutional. Jefferson argued that the Constitution did not grant the government the authority to establish corporations, including a national bank. James Madison was also afraid that a national bank would create a financial monopoly. He believed that the national bank would undermine state banks and adopt policies that favored financiers and merchants of the north, over the plantation owners and family farmers of the south. (Hill) However, even with this opposition, George Washington approved Hamilton's proposal establishing the first national bank of the United States. The creation of a stable national bank was a major victory for both the country and its interest in foreign affairs. Even so, America's foreign relationships were far from stable.

While economic relations in the United States were getting better, political relations with America's old ally were crumbling. Tensions with Britain were high after the Revolutionary War. Following the Treaty of Paris in 1783, Britain continued to create challenges for the young country. British exports continued to flood U. S. markets, while American exports were blocked by British trade restrictions and tariffs. The British had also continued to occupy northern forts that the British Government had agreed to vacate in the Treaty of Paris. (John Jay's Treaty, 1794–95) Even so, relations didn't drop dramatically until The French Revolution. The French Revolution in 1793 had led to war between France and Britain. Originally the United States aided its old ally France by sending naval and military supplies to the country. However, when Britain began to seize neutral American ships heading to their enemies ports, the US and Britain came close to the brink of war. Fearing the repercussions of a war with Britain, President George Washington sided with Alexander Hamilton's plan to relieve tensions and increase trade with Britain and sent pro-British Chief Justice John Jay to negotiate with the British Government.

However, when Jay went to Britain he didn't have much to bargain with. The only thing he could offer was that the United States would not join the Danish and the Swedish governments in defending their neutral status and resisting British seizure of their goods by force of arms. (John Jay's Treaty, 1794–95) However, Hamilton had already contacted Britain independently stating that America had no intention of doing this, leaving Jay with very little leverage to make Britain comply with US demands. At the end of the day, the treaty was much more beneficial for Britain than for America. The only goals that Jay obtained was a surrender of the northwestern posts and a commercial treaty with Great Britain that granted the United States most favored nation status, but seriously restricted U. S. commercial access to the British West Indies. (Longley) The treaty had delayed war with Britain for the time being, but France was outraged. France believed that the Jay's Treaty had violated earlier treaties between the United States and Britain.

In response, France went on to seize a substantial number of American merchant ships. (Nix) In 1797, President John Adams sent a three-person delegation to restore peace between the two

countries. Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, John Marshall and Elbridge Gerry tried to meet with France's foreign minister, Charles de Talleyrand. The foreign minister refused to meet them and eventually had three agents inform the U. S. commissioners that in order to see him they would have to pay him a hefty bribe and provide France with a large loan. The United States became outraged and a cry for war spread across the Nation. When Congress asked to see the diplomats' reports regarding what had happened in France, Adams handed them over with the names of the French agents replaced with the letters X, Y and Z, dubbing it the XYZ Affair. (Nix) In response, congress prepared for war. Congress had authorized the creation of a Navy, and the construction of warships.

Then, in July 1798, congress authorized American ships to attack French vessels, launching an undeclared naval war that came to be referred to as the Quasi-War. The United States had commissioned 25 ships, including 3 warships to combat France. The USS Congress, the USS Chesapeake, and the USS President patrolled the southern coast of the United States and the Caribbean, hunting down French privateers. The hostilities would not be settled until the Convention of 1800, also known as the Treaty of Mortefontaine, which was ratified in 1801.

The John Jay Treaty had indirectly led to the creation of an official US Navy and an unofficial war with France. Meanwhile, as the United States international conflicts shaped the countries foreign policies, conflict within the country would lead to major changes that would affect the country forever.