

## Political Partisanship in the Fledgling Republic

After finally emerging victorious from the Revolutionary War, the newly-independent America was faced with another problem: political partisanship. The Democratic-Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson, championed state power and individual liberty, and the Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton, advocated for a strong, centralized federal government. They had distinctly different visions for America: Hamilton wanted America's economy to revolve around manufacturing and urbanization, while Jefferson favored a farm-based society. The Constitution was written as a compromise between the two sides; however, their contrasting beliefs would breed further problems. As time went on, the difference in ideology between the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans polarized society into two distinct factions, which damaged the legitimacy of the Washington, Adams, and Jefferson presidencies in the eyes of the opposing political party.

George Washington, America's first president, tried to occupy the middle ground between the fledgling parties; however, he still leaned towards the Federalists, and there was little he could do about the parties' divergent reactions to the foreign relations crises during the 1790s. One of these crises was Jay's Treaty, which was written by Hamilton and aimed to diffuse tensions and establish trade relations with Britain. The treaty came under public scrutiny; in a letter to fellow Democratic-Republican James Monroe written on September 6, 1795, Thomas Jefferson commented, "So general a burst of dissatisfaction never before appeared against any transaction ... [Jay's Treaty brings on] an embarrassing and critical state in our government."<sup>1</sup> Jefferson's stance, common among Democratic-Republicans, claimed that its articles conceded

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, Monticello, 6 September 1795, *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed January 4, 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-28-02-0353>. [Original source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 28, 1 January 1794–29 February 1796, ed. John Catanzariti. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 448–451.]

too much to the British, weakening American trade rights. He also accused the “embarrassing” government of being disloyal to the people because the treaty supported the British economy, a symbol of monarchy. Jay’s Treaty was one of many incidents that started to exacerbate the differences in ideology of the nascent nation.

Before leaving office, Washington recognized the dangers of the two-party system that his successor would encounter. In his farewell address in 1796, he warned against the potential pitfalls of a party system: “I have already intimated to you the danger of parties in the state ... The alternate domination of one faction over another ... is itself a frightful despotism.”<sup>2</sup> Here, Washington feared for the nation’s welfare, saying that a party system would divide America and result in misrepresentation of the citizens. Above all, Washington was afraid that people would disregard public good to support their own faction, rather than making decisions based on their own moral beliefs. The crises of the 1790s signaled the beginning of a deeper political divide in America, and Washington’s fears were realized with the Adams and Jefferson presidencies.

Federalist John Adams had little success with his foreign policies, which provoked animosity between the Democratic-Republicans and the Federalists. Because Jay’s Treaty favored Britain ahead of France, tensions rose between the U.S. and France, bringing about the fear of French spies living in America. To combat this, Adams produced the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798. The Alien Act stated that “whenever there shall be a declared war between the United States and any foreign nation ... all natives, citizens, denizens, or subjects of the hostile nation ... who shall be within the United States ... shall be liable to be apprehended, restrained, secured and removed, as alien enemies.”<sup>3</sup> This act meant that during times of war, the

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<sup>2</sup> “George Washington, ‘Farewell Address,’ 1796,” *The American Yawp Reader*, The American Yawp, (New York: 1861), 5-6, 10-, 13-14, 16-17, 20-21, accessed January 4, 2021, <https://www.americanyawp.com/reader/a-new-nation/george-washington-farewell-address-1796/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Alien and Sedition Acts: Primary Documents in American History,” *Library of Congress*, accessed January 9, 2021, <https://guides.loc.gov/alien-and-sedition-acts>.

government could deport citizens of the enemy nation who they thought were suspicious of plotting against the U.S. This policy was disliked, especially by foreigners living in America, because it limited their activities; innocent immigrants could also be unfairly deported.

The Sedition Act aroused even more controversy than the Alien Act: it allowed the government to fine or imprison anyone who defamed or slandered the government. The act declared “That if any person shall write, print, utter or publish ... any false, scandalous and malicious writing ... with intent to defame the said [American] government ... then such person ... shall be punished by a fine ... and by imprisonment ...”<sup>4</sup> This act sparked widespread public outrage as it clearly violated the First Amendment. Furthermore, whether or not something was deemed “false”, “scandalous”, or “malicious” was subjective, leading to a number of questionable prosecutions. Madison and Jefferson, both Democratic-Republicans, were especially alarmed by this, and wrote resolutions that denounced the Sedition Act. Both the Alien Act and the Sedition Act came under intense public scrutiny, causing Adams to lose popularity.

After winning the highly-contentious presidential election of 1800, which was the first transition of power between two different political parties, Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson inherited a nation troubled by foreign affairs. In his first term, Jefferson sought to create his vision of an agrarian America, acquiring the huge Louisiana Territory from France for just \$15 million. However, the Constitution does not give the government any power to add foreign territory into the U.S., bringing into question the legality of Jefferson’s purchase. On March 4, 1803, Timothy Pickering wrote a letter to fellow Federalist Rufus King criticizing Jefferson for the Louisiana Purchase, exclaiming, “I am disgusted with the men who now rule, and with their measures. The cowardly wretch at their head [Jefferson] ... would feel an infernal

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<sup>4</sup> “An Act in Addition to the Act, Entitled ‘An Act for the Punishment of Certain Crimes Against the United States (Sedition Act),’” *The Avalon Project*, Lillian Goldman Law Library of Yale Law School, accessed January 9, 2021, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/sedact.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/sedact.asp).

pleasure in the utter destruction of his opponents.”<sup>5</sup> Pickering says that Jefferson, the “cowardly wretch” at the head of the Democratic-Republicans, would revel in the downfall of the Federalists. He continues by accusing those in power of substituting integrity for corruption. Pickering deems the Louisiana Purchase to be unconstitutional and illegitimate, echoing the sentiments of all Federalists in feeling betrayed by the government.

Jefferson’s second term is largely remembered for the Embargo Act, which Congress enacted to combat Britain’s impressment of American ships. The act closed American ports to all foreign trade, in the hopes of ending impressment while also hurting the British economy. In reality, Britain’s economy was barely affected; on the contrary, it was the American citizens that suffered. Due to the closing down of ports, New England, which relied on manufacturing and shipbuilding, was hurt the most; that New England was a Federalist stronghold made matters worse. In a British political cartoon about the Embargo Act by Isaac Cruikshank in 1808, Jefferson, albeit claiming to be “the common man’s leader,” babbles on about his doctrinaire philosophy, ignoring his disgruntled American citizens.<sup>6</sup> The common people voice their complaints about practical matters, including “My family is Starving” and “My goods are Spoiling”, which highlights Jefferson’s lack of care for his citizens. The Embargo Act was considered by the public to be the biggest failure of Jefferson’s presidency, and it proved to be a major detriment to the American economy.

Far from being a haven of liberty and opportunity, the newly-independent United States had a range of issues, ranging from internal rebellions to foreign relations; political partisanship

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Pickering to Rufus King, 4 March 1803, in *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, vol. 3, ed. Max Farrand (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1911), 399-400.

<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/letters-protesting-the-louisiana-purchase/>.

<sup>6</sup> Isaac Cruikshank, “The happy effects of that grand system [sic] of shutting ports against the English!!” *The British Museum*, American, 1808, [London: Pubd. by Walker, Octr. I5] accessed January 9, 2021, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1868-0808-7693](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1868-0808-7693).

between the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans exacerbated these problems. The two factions' contrasting viewpoints increasingly threatened the stability of the new nation and can be tracked through the reign of the first three presidents. Although the original Federalist vs. Democratic-Republican divide waned after Jefferson's presidency, partisanship would return to cause more polarization twenty years later when the Jacksonian Democrats split off from the original Democratic-Republican Party.

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## Biography

Born in Shanghai, China in 2005, Jiayang Jin moved to New York City at the age of five. He is a current junior at the Hunter College High School, as well as a precollege student at the Manhattan School of Music (MSM). He has achieved a score of 1590 on the SAT and has an unweighted GPA of 96.83.

He is a self-motivated learner, seasoned classical pianist, passionate soccer fan and player, and citizen of the world. He is also an active leader and team player in community service inside and outside of school. He is the co-founder and co-host of a Fantasy Premier League podcast, vice president of Hunter's Asian Cultural Society (ACS), staff writer for Hunter's newspaper *What's What*, and co-president of Studio 94, a music club dedicated to performing for senior citizens. He is also a volunteer with Gens Connect, and has been making weekly phone calls to a paired elder since 2020.

As the first prize winner of many international youth piano competitions, he has debuted on prestigious stages such as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Steinway Hall, and 92Y, and been awarded distinguished scholarships at MSM and consecutively honored on the Precollege Dean's List. He serves as a Youth Ambassador of the NGO Concerts in Motion, and has performed over 50 virtual recitals for homebound elders since the pandemic started. His community concerts and music dialogues during summer breaks in China have benefited over 800 audience members.