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Presidential Saber Rattling in the Early American Republic

On May 16, 1797, President John Adams delivered a message to a special session of Congress about developing hostilities with France. In his speech the president expressed outrage over French depredation of American shipping. He indignantly described insults by the French government toward the new American ambassador to Paris. The president also accused the French of attempting to "produce [partisan] divisions fatal to our peace." He stated that "Such attempts ought to be repelled with a decision which shall convince France and the world that we are not a degraded people, humiliated under a colonial spirit of fear and sense of inferiority, fitted to be the miserable instruments of foreign influence, and regardless of national honor, character, and interest." Further showing his pugnacity, Adams called on Congress to implement "effectual measures of defense" by increasing U.S. naval power and creating a provisional army capable of repelling any foreign invader (Richardson 1907a).

Of course, the French had earlier been an important American ally. In 1778 the two countries signed the Treaties of Alliance and Commerce, binding them together in perpetual friendship and support. These treaties were the basis for French assistance critical to the success of the American Revolution. The Commerce Treaty established the principle that "free ships make free goods," meaning that neither country would attack the other's maritime commerce. Indeed, the two countries had promised to protect one another's shipping from mutual enemies.

Yet the French were attacking American ships as early as 1793, with intensified hostility as President Adams took office (Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 537–38). What caused this turnabout? The French Revolution, an ensuing European war, and American ratification of the Jay Treaty with Great Britain were all important factors. The French Revolution, which began in 1789, had overthrown the French monarch, Louis XVI, who had originally signed

the Treaties of Alliance and Commerce. The new French government may no longer have felt obligated by the treaties.

The upheavals of the French Revolution threatened monarchies across Europe, both philosophically and physically. In April 1792 the new French republic declared war on the Austrian Empire. In January 1793 the French executed their former monarch, and during this same month Spain and Portugal entered the war as part of the anti-French coalition. In February the French declared war on Great Britain and the Dutch. The French revolutionary spirit directly challenged the divine right of sovereigns, and those challenged responded accordingly. All of Europe was engulfed in a war that seemed remote from American interests.

There were, of course, factions in the United States that favored the French in their European war. Democratic-Republicans, mainly from the South, were sympathetic, as were various private Jacobin societies in both the North and the South. French Ambassador Edmund-Charles Genet was sent to the United States to cultivate support by soliciting money, provisions, and even an invasion force to attack Spanish Florida (Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 330–36; Ferling 1992, 337–38; McCullough 2001, 444–45; Sharp 1993, 69–91). American support for the French would, in fact, have been consistent with the Treaties of Alliance and Commerce.

However, most Federalists preferred stronger ties with Great Britain. Such ties were more conducive to commerce beneficial to the mercantile interests of the Northeast. President George Washington also viewed honoring the 1778 treaties as dangerous to a fledgling nation in need of unity and stability. He did not view U.S. involvement in the European war as consistent with these goals, especially with emerging partisan differences about whether to favor the French or British. Therefore, he declared a policy of neutrality, effectively disregarding the Treaties of Alliance and Commerce.

Washington's decision to assert American neutrality greatly offended the French, who believed that the United States should be its natural ally. Their earlier support of the American Revolution and presumption that the American and French Revolutions were similar in spirit formed the basis for this belief. With the failure of Ambassador Genet to secure American support, relations with France deteriorated (Ferling 1992, 339). Rubbing salt in the wound, President Washington sent an emissary to Great Britain to negotiate a treaty with the British. On August 14, 1795, the president signed the Jay Treaty, which effectively normalized trade relations with Britain and resolved various foreign policy disputes. The Jay Treaty was viewed by the French as favoring the British in their European war and as a violation of the principle of neutrality.

In response to these developments, the French Directory (the executive leadership of the new French republic) issued a decree on July 4, 1796. They announced their intention of dealing with neutral vessels in the same manner as London had earlier treated such vessels (Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 537–38; Ferling 1992, 339–42). In other words, American shipping would be seized

and confiscated. In the spring of 1797 Secretary of State Timothy Pickering reported that the French had seized more than 300 American ships since the decree. American seamen had been wounded. There were reports that "French captors . . . had tortured [an] American captain in an unsuccessful attempt to make him say that he was carrying British cargo" (McCullough 2001, 486–87). As President Washington left office in March 1797 and John Adams assumed the presidency, the conflict with France had boiled over.

Diplomatic relations had also deteriorated. At the time of Adams's inauguration, Washington had recalled the U.S. ambassador, James Monroe, and appointed Charles Coteworth Pinckney of South Carolina to fill the post in Paris. Upon arrival, Pinckney learned that the French Directory had not only refused to accept him as ambassador but ordered him out of the country as well. He left for the Dutch republic to await instructions from the president (Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 550–51). When President Adams received word of the French treatment of Ambassador Pinckney, there was also word of new French seizures of American shipping. Additionally, the French Directory issued a new decree in March 1797 explicitly abrogating the French-American treaties of 1778 and ordering the seizure of neutral vessels transporting goods bound for Great Britain (Ferling 1992, 342).

This was the foreign policy environment within which President Adams made his address to the special session of Congress. In his message, the president sought to give an impression of strength and resolve in the face of French hostility. However, he did not seek war. He stated, "It is my sincere desire . . . to preserve peace and friendship with all nations; and believing that neither the honor nor the interest of the United States absolutely forbid the repetition of advances for securing these desirable objects with France, I shall institute a fresh attempt at negotiation, and shall not fail to promote and accelerate an accommodation on terms compatible with the rights, duties, interests, and honor of the nation" (Richardson 1907a).

The president's special message to Congress was like the well-known presidential seal, an American eagle with arrows in one talon and an olive branch in the other. The president engaged in saber rattling toward the French, presumably to project American strength and resolve in defending her interests. At the same time he expressed a desire for peace.

President Adams had concluded even before his inauguration that he would send a new mission to France to negotiate an agreement similar to the Jay Treaty. He tried to convince prominent Democratic-Republicans, Thomas Jefferson (his vice president) and James Madison, to undertake the mission. However, partisan Federalists in his cabinet adamantly opposed their appointment. Furthermore, Jefferson, Madison, and other prominent Democratic-Republicans refused to undertake the mission (Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 541–44; Ferling 1992, 341). Democratic-Republicans had strongly opposed the Jay Treaty with Great Britain and believed that Adams was insincere in his effort toward reconciliation with France.

Nevertheless, in the months after his speech the president did send a new set of emissaries to France. The representatives consisted of Charles Coteworth Pinckney (still waiting in the Dutch republic), John Marshall (a Federalist judge from Virginia), and Elbridge Gerry (a trusted friend and Democratic-Republican from the president's home state of Massachusetts). The charge to the delegation was to negotiate an agreement giving France the same commercial rights as had been given to Great Britain under the Jay Treaty. However, the president insisted on an American right to neutral trade with whatever nation it pleased. The diplomats were also told explicitly that the United States would extend neither aid nor loans to France as long as it remained at war, because to do so would involve the nation in that war (Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 555–61, 562–63; Ferling 1992, 344–45). In July and August 1797 Marshall and Gerry sailed to Holland to join Pinckney.

Meanwhile, President Adams left Philadelphia for four months to await word of the outcome. While waiting he hoped for the best but expected the worst. During the third week of November 1797 he returned to the capitol to deliver another message to Congress. His speech indicated little hope for success, and he again asked Congress to approve his request for a naval and military buildup (Richardson 1907b). As with his earlier request, Congress remained unconvinced of the urgency of the situation and did little (Ferling 1992, 348–52).

Then, on March 4, 1798, word arrived from the envoys that they had again been rebuffed. French Foreign Minister Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord refused to receive the American diplomats without preconditions. Talleyrand asked for an official apology for President Adams's alleged warlike remarks in his May 16, 1797, special message to Congress. Furthermore, he demanded that all unpaid French debts contracted to American suppliers be assumed by the U.S. government. All claims for French spoliations of American commerce were to be assumed by the U.S. government. They sought extension of a $6 million loan before negotiations could begin. There was also an implicit threat of war if America failed to comply with these demands. Finally, and perhaps the worst of it, Talleyrand demanded a bribe of £50,000 sterling as a precondition for negotiations to begin (Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 571–79; Ferling 1992, 352–53).

President Adams was infuriated by what he perceived as French malevolence. His initial reaction was to prepare a militant and raging message to Congress denouncing the outrageous French demands. However, the message he actually delivered struck a more moderate tone. His address to Congress on March 19, 1798, was terse and sought to guard against overreaction. He said, "it is incumbent on me to declare that I perceive no ground of expectation that the objects of [the envoys'] mission can be accomplished on terms compatible with the safety, the honor, or the essential interests of the nation."

The president again urged Congress to adopt measures "for the protection of our seafaring and commercial citizens, for the defense of any exposed

portions of our territory, for replenishing our arsenals, establishing foundries and military manufactures, and to provide such efficient revenue as will . . . defray extraordinary expenses . . . occasioned by depredations on our commerce" (Richardson 1907c). Contrary to past policy, the president also unilaterally authorized the arming of American merchant vessels. However, what was most important about the president's speech is what it did not say. It did not divulge the insulting nature of the French response to the American peace mission (Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 585–86; Ferling 1992, 353–54).

Congress's reaction was again less than what the president wanted. Jefferson referred privately to Adams's message as "insane." Democratic-Republicans sought to remove the president's discretionary authority to arm merchant vessels. They believed that Adams sought to provoke a war with France and had exaggerated French malevolence. Accordingly, Democratic-Republicans demanded that he release the envoys' actual dispatches. Federalists also demanded the dispatches but for a different reason. They suspected the dispatches would reveal behavior more malicious than the president had depicted (Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 587–88; Ferling 1992, 353–54).

Adams complied and gave the dispatches to Congress. However, he urged in his cover letter that they be considered in private until members of Congress could fully assess their implications. After considering the dispatches, Democratic-Republicans voted to keep them quiet, fearing they would provoke a war. However, Federalists immediately published 50,000 copies and distributed them as handbills across the nation. The threats and insulting behavior of the French became public knowledge (Beschloss 2007, 40; Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 587–88; Ferling 1992, 354–55; McCullough 2001, 496–99).

This episode, known in diplomatic history as the XYZ Affair (with X, Y, and Z representing the concealed names of the three French diplomats delivering the outrageous demands), had important implications for relations with France and the domestic status of the American president. After publication of the XYZ dispatches, Federalists clamored for war. In contrast, many Democratic-Republicans tried to explain away French behavior as a natural response to Adams's earlier bellicosity. The "lower class of people," as Abigail Adams had begun to refer to most Americans, were "now roused" and abandoning their "Jacobean" leanings toward the French republic. A period of intense public acrimony toward the French ensued, as did a sense of national unity and newfound fondness for the president (Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 589–90; Ferling 1992, 354–55; McCullough 2001, 499–502).

Adams's popularity surged as he began to speak hawkishly in public (McCullough 2001, 499–502). Between April and August 1798 the president wrote seventy-one separate responses to patriotic letters he had received. Many of these letters were printed in newspapers or published as handbills. His responses were consistently truculent (DeConde 1966, 80–84; Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 588–89). For example, he suggested that it would be cowardly not to respond to the French insults. He told one group, "[N]either Justice nor

Moderation, can secure us from Participation in the War." To another he said war is "less Evil than national Dishonour." He consistently urged his readers to adopt a "warlike character" and noted that the American people would lose their "Character, moral, political, and martial" if they did not resist (Ferling 1992, 357). French songs and support for French republicanism disappeared and were replaced by Federalist banners and cries for war.

People paraded on Adams's behalf. Patriotic marches were played in the president's honor at concerts and before theater performances. When Adams traveled, he was accorded "every mark of distinguished attention." According to one Federalist, when he went to New York in the summer of 1798, he received the "most splendid" reception ever given a political leader, former President Washington notwithstanding. Some people believed that Adams's stature was now equal to Washington's and that "no man . . . will go down to posterity with greater luster." President Adams reveled in this adulation and began to appear in a full military uniform with a sword strapped to his side. His public rhetoric consistently referenced the patriotic sacrifices of earlier generations. He noted that these forebearers would feel "disgust and Resentment" if America did not act on his recommendations (Ferling 1992, 356).

Against this backdrop, newspapers published a rumor that an invasion armada was gathering off the French coast and would soon sail for America. They also reported that French operatives were inciting a slave rebellion in South Carolina and that secret agents of the French government had been sent to torch the nation's capitol and assassinate the nation's leaders (DeConde 1966, 84–89; Ferling 1992, 356; Sharp 1993, 174–75).

It was within this hysterical milieu that Congress finally enacted a series of defensive measures. Beginning in April 1798, Congress gave the president everything he had requested, and much that he had not asked for. Provision was made for completion of three large frigates that were already under construction. Congress authorized the acquisition of twelve new sloops of war and ten galleys for the protection of shallow coastal waters. Twelve additional warships were authorized in June and three more in July. Money was appropriated to fortify harbors and to create foundries for the manufacture of artillery. An independent Department of the Navy was established to oversee the development of U.S. naval power. The new navy was authorized by Congress to attack French vessels preying on American shipping and could retake any American ships already captured. Congress also commissioned 1,000 privateers to capture or repel French vessels.

Furthermore, an embargo was imposed on all trade with France and its colonies, and all treaties with France were formally abrogated. A standing army of 10,000 men was created, with provision for increasing it to 50,000 if the president deemed necessary. President Adams was also authorized to call up 80,000 militiamen if the need arose (Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 589–90; Ferling 1992, 356). Congress levied a tax of $2 million to pay for the

defensive buildup, a measure that later proved unpopular. The Federalists also enacted legislation to curtail domestic dissent, the Alien and Sedition Acts, which President Adams later used to silence his Democratic-Republican critics (Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 589–90).

The aftermath of the XYZ Affair would have readily enabled President Adams to call for a congressional declaration of war. To be sure, such a request would have been granted because of strong public sentiment in that direction. Federalists controlled Congress and were more inclined toward war than peace (McCullough 2001, 504). However, President Adams from the beginning did not seek war. Rather, the president wanted to produce an image of strength and resolve in the face of French hostility.

Adams favored a strong navy to make the United States independent of European powers. However, he was distrustful of a standing army, fearing it might potentially endanger the republic. Indeed, he saw little need for a standing army. In October 1798 he revealed privately to Secretary of War James McHenry that "[T]here is no more prospect of seeing a French army here, than there is in Heaven" (Ferling 1992, 369). Thus, despite his earlier bellicose rhetoric and success in persuading Congress to build up American defenses, the president actually believed that a French invasion was unlikely (Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 614–15; Ferling 1992, 372–80).

Although there was no declaration of war, a state of "quasi-war" did exist between 1797 and 1800. Before the U.S. naval buildup, the French ravaged American shipping at will. During 1798 several naval engagements occurred in U.S. coastal waters, demonstrating the prowess of the new American navy, but there was still significant danger to American shipping. However, in August 1798 the British navy under Admiral Horatio Nelson defeated French naval forces at the Battle of the Nile. After this, the French were no longer able to muster sufficient naval power to dominate the American coast. There were at least ten ship-to-ship naval actions after this, the last occurring in November 1799 (DeConde 1966, 124–30, 161).

During this same month a change occurred in France that significantly altered relations between the two countries. Napoleon Bonaparte led a successful coup d'état against the French republic that effectively ended the French Revolution. This event changed French policy toward the United States and other neutral powers. Napoleon desired the support of neutral Denmark and Sweden for his upcoming military ventures. Accordingly, he stated a new policy in December 1799 that neutral ships make for neutral goods. French depredations of American shipping fell precipitously after the new policy.

American diplomats in The Hague (William Vans Murray) and Berlin (John Quincy Adams) sent word to President Adams that France wanted to negotiate. Murray reported that a war on the United States would be unpopular in France. Furthermore, it had become clear that French aggression was counterproductive. French malevolence had shifted American public opinion from pro- to anti-French. America had been driven toward the British.

Thus, Talleyrand (still the French foreign minister) sent a letter to President Adams stating that "every plenipotentiary whom the Government of the United States will send to France . . . will undoubtedly be received with the respect due to the representative of a free, independent, and powerful country" (see also DeConde 1966, 174–180; Ferling 1992, 375). In response, President Adams again dispatched official peace envoys to France.

Adams's "about-face" on war with France was politically costly. The president had aroused public passions. He had successfully prepared the nation militarily. As a result, Federalist partisans and the president enjoyed renewed electoral strength. However, the Federalists' presumed leader suddenly reversed course to take away the most potent issue for the 1800 elections. Predictably, many Federalists viewed Adams as a traitor for quenching the flames of a pending war. Adams's turnabout also produced an image of unstable judgment. At one moment the president was saber rattling; at another he was extending an olive branch of peace.

As expressed by Ferling (1992, 372–95), Adams's fellow partisans and much of the public were "thunderstruck." According to Deconde (1966, 181), one Federalist said, "there is not a Sound mind from Maine to Georgia that has not been shocked by it." Adams must have been duped by "the wiles of French diplomacy." Theodore Sedgwick, the Federalist Senate leader, decried Adams's decision as "the most embarrassing and ruinous measure." One Federalist was so angered by Adams's turnabout that he threatened the president's life: "Assassination shall be your lot" (DeConde 1966, 182).

Nevertheless, American diplomats met with Napoleon in March 1800, and negotiations ensued. The Treaty of Mortefontaine was finalized in October to end the "quasi-war" and restore friendly relations. However, word of the successful negotiations did not reach the United States in time for President Adams to benefit in the election of 1800 (Ferling 1992, 407–08). Absent this information the peace mission and resulting treaty were not seen as the success they actually were.

Dissension among Federalists over the need for war, as well as the unpopularity of higher taxes and curtailed civil liberties, cost President Adams significant support. Federalist leader Alexander Hamilton backed Charles Pinckney instead of Adams in the 1800 presidential election, resulting in a split that gave Thomas Jefferson the presidency (Ferling 1992, 396–405). Thus, efforts to resolve the dispute with France were successful but politically costly to the nation's second president.

President Adams's Saber Rattling as an Object of Scientific Analysis

The preceding vignette describing French and American hostility toward one another during the early American republic provides a theoretical hook for this more general study of presidential saber rattling. Much of what occurred during the Adams administration foreshadows the modern causes and

consequences of presidential saber rattling. President Adams's entire administration was occupied with resolving the French crisis. Thus, his behavior is itself worthy of analysis.

Was John Adams a "Statesman" President?

President Adams spoke belligerently toward France on many occasions during his presidency. What motivated his behavior? Was his saber rattling grounded in just causes and a strong conception of the national interest, or was it contrived and rooted in partisanship or self-interest? Did President Adams live up to expectations for presidents behaving in a statesman-like manner?

An argument can be made that John Adams did, in fact, behave as a statesman in his dealings with France. The nation faced *just*, rather than *pretended*, causes for war. John Jay (1788b), writing in Federalist #3, stated, "The JUST causes of war, for the most part, arise either from violation of treaties or from direct violence." America experienced both conditions during the crisis with France. The French disregarded the Treaties of Alliance and Commerce and were attacking American shipping.

Of course, it could be argued that America violated the treaties first by declaring neutrality and not providing support to the French in their European war. However, it is also clear that the treaties were not negotiated with the revolutionaries in France and may not have been binding on either French or American behavior. These arguments aside, France was attacking American shipping, and this was just cause for the president to respond.

The historical record also provides evidence that President Adams's saber rattling was driven by concern for the nation. The president wanted to build a stronger national defense to deter foreign aggression. To do so, he needed to build a case before Congress and the public that there was an external threat. Without perceptions of an external threat, it was unlikely that Congress and the public would have been supportive. Thus, President Adams's bellicosity may have been driven by his oath to defend the nation against foreign enemies.

Along these same lines, the president may have wanted to bolster the nation's foreign policy credibility through saber rattling. Projecting an image of strength and resolve sends a signal to foreign adversaries. The president was saying, "Don't Tread on Me!" Furthermore, it was not only the president who benefited from higher presidential popularity and greater national unity because of saber rattling. These domestic outcomes also benefited the nation at large. A popular American president supported by a unified nation is a powerful tool in the president's foreign policy arsenal. Indeed, increased presidential credibility might have potentially deterred French aggression and leveraged his bargaining power. Thus, there were also foreign policy incentives for presidential bellicosity.

However, despite there being just cause for belligerence toward France, it also seemed clear to the president that war was not in the nation's best interest. France was a Great Power, whereas America was a fledgling nation with a

fragile political and economic system. The outcome of a war with France was, in all likelihood, predetermined. War would have accentuated political divisions. It would have devastated the American economy. It may also have resulted in loss of territory or independence. President Adams recognized these possibilities and behaved accordingly.

Despite his saber rattling, the historical record suggests that President Adams actually sought peace. In his special message to Congress on May 16, 1797, the president spoke with indignation about French behavior and called for defensive measures. However, he also extended an olive branch by expressing his intention to send a new peace mission. President Adams made a strong effort to staff the new mission with representatives friendly to the French. However, he was unsuccessful because of resistance from both political parties.

Then, in March 1798 when it became clear that the new peace mission had failed, the president addressed Congress to report the failure. Despite his personal outrage at the French, he downplayed their malevolence by giving a speech that was more moderate than he initially planned. Upon being required to release the XYZ dispatches to Congress, the president asked that they be considered in private until their implications could be fully considered. It was only after the XYZ dispatches became public that he began to speak more openly of war.

Finally, once the president received word in November 1799 that an accommodation might finally be possible, he pursued this option vigorously. This was despite vitriolic opposition from his own political party and the obvious consequences for his personal prestige and political fortunes.

Viewed in this light, President Adams behaved as a statesman in his dealings with France. He put the interests of the nation at large ahead of passion, personal glory, partisanship, reelection, and the need for domestic support.

Was John Adams a Support-Seeking Partisan?

An argument can also be made that President Adams's behavior was driven by self-interest and partisanship. Consider some factual evidence in this regard. French treatment of neutral American shipping was barely different from that of the British. Even before the Jay Treaty, "The French had been ignoring the [1778] treaty's 'free ships, free goods' stipulations off and on ever since the outbreak of hostilities in 1793" (Elkins and McKitrick 1993, 538). Furthermore, near the end of the crisis, a story was published showing that, on the basis of insurance claims, "American merchants had actually suffered greater shipping losses at the hands of the British Royal Navy than to the Directory's prowling frigates" (Ferling 1992, 375–76). Yet the president did not talk of war with the British. If both the British and French were attacking American ships, then why were only the French singled out by the president as the enemy?

Consistent with these facts, Democratic-Republicans believed from the start that President Adams was driven by partisanship and an abiding hatred of the French and their revolution. The president was, after all, a Federalist, and