Chapter 9 Lesson 3

Opposing Parties

The American people generally admired Washington and his service to the nation, still, harsh attacks appeared from time to time in newspapers. One paper even called Washington “the scourge and the misfortune of his country.”

Most of these attacks were from Thomas Jefferson supporters. They wanted to weaken the policies of Alexander Hamilton. In 1796, the supporters of Jefferson and Hamilton were forming the nation’s first political parties.

At the time, many Americans thought political parties were harmful to the government. The Constitution made no mention of political parties because the framers saw no good use for them. Washington disapproved of political parties, known as “factions”. He warned they would divide the nation.

To others it seemed normal that people would disagree about issues. They also knew that people who held similar views would bond together. Washington’s cabinet was clearly divided on key issues. Hamilton and Jefferson had very different views. They disagreed on economic policy and foreign relations. They had different views on the role of the federal government and the meaning of the Constitution. Even Washington was partisan, favoring one faction over another. He believed he stood above politics but usually supported Hamilton.

Political Parties Emerge

The differences found in Washington’s cabinet also existed in Congress and the public. They formed the basis for two distinct political parties. One party was the Federalists, led by Hamilton, favored a strong central government. They believed the Constitution gave government “implied” powers. These powers are not enumerated, or listed clearly in the Constitution. Instead Federalists believed the enumerated powers imply the power to do other things. Federalists believe Congress could make all laws “necessary and proper” to carry out enumerated powers.

The Democratic-Republicans, or Republicans, stood against the Federalists. This faction was led by Jefferson and Madison. They believed in a strict reading of the Constitution and rejected the Federalist idea of implied powers. They believed congressional powers were limited to what is absolutely necessary to carry out the enumerated powers.

Debate over the national bank highlighted these differences, the Constitution gave Congress very specific power to do things like issue and borrow money. To Hamilton, this implied that the federal government could create a bank to help with these tasks, Jefferson disagreed.

The Role of the People

The two parties also disagreed about the role of ordinary citizens in government. Federalists supported representative government, in which elected officials ruled in the people’s name, they didn’t believe it was wise to let the public become too involved in politics. Federalists thought that educated, wealthier men should hold public office. In Hamilton’s words, “The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right.”

The Republicans feared a strong central government controlled by only a few people. They believed that democracy and liberty would be safe only if ordinary people took part fully in government. As Jefferson wrote in a letter, “I am not among those that fear the people. They, and not the rich, are our dependence [what we depend on] for continued freedom.”

Washington’s Reaction

The growing differences between the parties and Hamilton and Jefferson troubled Washington. He wrote to Jefferson, trying to persuade him: “I …ardently wish that some line could be marked out by which both of you could walk.”

Washington’s attempt to get Jefferson and Hamilton to work together failed. The split was so strong that Jefferson left the cabinet and his job as secretary of state. Soon afterward, Hamilton resigned as secretary of the treasury. The rival groups and their points of view moved further apart. As the election of 1796 approached, the two parties each prepared to seek control of the presidency.

The Presidential Election of 1796

To prepare for the election, both parties held caucuses, a meeting of members of a political party to choose candidates for upcoming elections. Each party chose two candidates, and the electors voted for any two. The Federalists chose John Adams and Charles Pinckney and the Democratic-Republicans chose Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr. There was no candidate identified as a vice-presidential candidate on the ballot.

The Federalists carried the New England region. Democratic-Republican strength lay in the Southern states. Adams received 71 electoral votes, winning the election. Jefferson finished second with 68 votes. Under the rules of the Constitution at that time, the person with the second highest electoral vote total – which was Jefferson – would become the vice president. The administration that took office March 4, 1797 had a Federalist president and a Republican vice president.

John Adams as President

John Adams spent most of his life in public service. He was well-known as one of Massachusetts’s most active patriots before and during the Revolutionary War. He served two terms as vice president under Washington before becoming president. His time in office, however, was troubled.

The XYZ Affair

The nation was in the middle of a dispute with France when Adams took office. The 1794 Jay’s Treaty was seen as an American attempt to help the British in their war with France. To punish the US, the French seized American ships that carried cargo to Britain.

President Adams sent a team to Paris to try to resolve the dispute in the fall of 1797. French officials chose not to meet with the Americans, instead the French sent 3 agents, who demanded a bribe and a loan for France from the Americans. The Americans refused.

When Adams learned what happened, he was furious. The president urged Congress to prepare for war. In his report to Congress, Adams used the letters X, Y, and Z in place of the three French agent names. As a result, the event became known as the XYZ affair.

Alien and Sedition Acts

As the public found out about the XYZ affair, many people became upset at foreign attempts to influence their government. They became more suspicious of aliens – residents who are not citizens. Many Europeans who had come to the US in the 1790’s supported the ideals of the French Revolution. Some Americans worried whether these aliens would remain loyal if the US went to war with France.

In response, the Federalists, in 1798, passed the Alien and Sedition Acts. Sedition means activities aimed at weakening the government. The Alien and Sedition Acts allowed the president to imprison aliens. The president could also deport those thought to be dangerous. President Adams was a strong supporter of these laws.

Domestic and Foreign Affairs

Democratic-Republicans saw the Alien and Sedition Acts as Federalist tyranny. They looked to the states to respond and protect people’s liberties. Madison and Jefferson wrote statements of protest that the Virginia and Kentucky legislatures passed as resolutions.

The Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions of 1798 and 1799 claimed that the Alien and Sedition Acts violated the Constitution. They declared that the states should not put them into action. The Kentucky Resolution further said that states could nullify – legally overturn – federal laws they thought were unconstitutional.

The resolutions supported the principle of states’ rights. This principle held that the powers of the federal government were limited to those clearly granted by the Constitution. To prevent the federal government from becoming too powerful, the states should have all the other powers not expressly forbidden them. This issue of states’ rights would remain an important issue in American politics for years to come.

The Federalists wanted Adams to declare war on France, however, Adams resisted the pressure and sent a representative to seek peace with France.

In 1800, the French agreed to a treaty and stopped their attacks on American ships. Even though it had benefits for the US, the treaty with France was unpopular and hurt Adams’s chance for reelection. Hamilton and his supporters opposed their own president. This split the Federalist Party and improved the Democratic-Republican hopes for winning the presidency in the 1800 election.