

America from Washington to Madison

by James Folta



left to right: George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison

The story of the United States' development involves many people and shifting forces. After the American Revolution in the late eighteenth century, the young nation had to navigate turbulent international events and balance the wishes of American citizens who had varying opinions. The first four presidents of the United States—George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison—all contributed to the trajectory of the nation. Examining each president's term in office, we can look at the unique problems each faced, what each was able to change, and how America changed around each of them.

America's first president was George Washington who served in office from 1789 until 1797. A farmer-turned-general-turned-president, Washington was influential in most major events leading up to the formation of the United States.

After the Revolutionary War, the brand new United States encompassed the territory of the 13 former British colonies. These colonies became states, and the new nation followed much the same boundaries established by the original colonial charter—with the addition of land ceded by the British at the end of the Revolutionary War, which effectively doubled the size of the country—bordered on the north by land owned by the British, on the south by Spanish Florida, on the west by the Mississippi River, and on the east by the Atlantic Ocean.

Washington's first major presidential decision regarding foreign policy was to decide how America would respond to the war that broke out between France and England soon after the French Revolution. Members of Washington's cabinet were split with some supporting each of the European nations. Many felt obligated to help France as repayment for their aide to the young nation during the American Revolution. These same people also still held anger for Britain. Others were still loyal to Britain, though, and they thought it would be a sign of good faith to side with England. Washington chose to remain neutral, as he felt the U.S. was too vulnerable at the moment to engage in a war.

Nationally, Washington gave much thought to the emerging American political culture. He was wary of the emergence of the two party system that has dominated United States politics ever since. He feared that blind allegiance to one single party or geographic region would make political arguments too extreme and hyperbolic, stifling compromise and debate. Retiring after his second term, Washington warned against Americans becoming too entrenched in parties, and he stuck by his foreign policy of remaining as neutral as possible and avoiding long-term treaties and alliances.

John Adams was elected president after Washington, serving from 1797 until 1801. He had served with Washington in the Continental congresses, and he was a diplomat during the Revolutionary War to France and Holland. He returned to the United States to become Washington's vice president, a position he disliked.

When elected, Adams faced similar international issues as his predecessor, namely the war between England and France. The conflict was causing problems for U.S. naval and shipping interests at sea, as the French had begun seizing American merchant ships. It was also dividing the U.S. As when Washington was president, the nation couldn't agree upon which European nation would be the best choice for the U.S. to support.

Adams also became embroiled in the XYZ Affair. France, ruled by a revolutionary leadership group called the Directory, was refusing to recognize the U.S. as a nation, turning away American diplomats and cutting all trade ties. Adams decided to send three commissioners in 1797 to address the impasse, but France wouldn't talk with them until they paid a large bribe. Adams brought the news to Congress, who voted to publish the letters sent from American diplomats detailing the French bribery demand. In the letters, the names of three of the French diplomats who were involved were replaced with the letters X, Y, and Z to hide their identities-hence the name of the affair. It was a major news story in the U.S. and played a major role in the breakout of the Quasi-War with the French.

Adams tried to move America in the direction of a more aggressive isolationist foreign policy. He passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, which raised the number of years someone needed to live in the United States in order to be considered a citizen and allowed for the deportation of aliens deemed dangerous to the United States. These acts were aimed at his opposition party, the Republicans.

Meanwhile, Adams also engaged in the Franco-American Quasi-War. French privateers, essentially legal pirates acting in France's interests, were heavily raiding U.S. merchant ships. The U.S. Navy was mostly defenseless at first, but Adams had more Navy vessels built and dispatched to fight back. Despite a number of U.S. naval victories, the Quasi-War eventually ended diplomatically when Adams sent a peace mission to France. Adam's party, the Federalists, were divided for and against this decision, but the opposing Republican Party was overwhelmingly against the peace mission. This lack of agreement between the parties and within Adams' own party led to Adams being voted out of the presidency in the election of 1800.

Just before his defeat, Adams had the unique distinction of becoming the first U.S. president to live in the White House in the new capital city of Washington, D.C. He moved in on November 1, 1800.

Thomas Jefferson was next into the office, leading from 1801 to 1809. He was the head of the Republican Party, which favored more decisive foreign policy. As a former minister to France with strong sympathies for the French Revolution, Jefferson sought to move away from the antagonism with France in his first term.

In his second term, he struggled to maintain neutrality and abstain from the Napoleonic Wars between France and England. This became difficult as both nations were harassing U.S. shipping merchants. Jefferson took the middle path of a U.S. shipping embargo, but this was unpopular and unsuccessful.

Domestically, Jefferson was a proponent of states' rights, and he strongly opposed a large central government, tenets of the Republican Party both then and now. He cut back on the Navy and Army

budgets, cut down on the nation's expenditures overall, and reduced the national debt by a third. He also eliminated the tax on whiskey that had been very unpopular, even leading to localized rebellions.

The big event of Jefferson's presidency was the Louisiana Purchase. The president purchased a vast plot of land from Napoleon in 1803, doubling the size of the U.S. The land is now much of the central part of the US. It reaches all the way to the Rocky Mountains, including the present-day states of Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, North and South Dakotas, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Arkansas, Louisiana, Minnesota, and Colorado. Jefferson was unsure about the purchase as the Constitution did not lay out any rules or protocol about how to legally acquire new land, but he went forward anyway, recognizing the need to expand.

America's fourth president was James Madison, who held office from 1809 to 1817. Madison was a major Constitutional thinker and a central author of the Federalist papers. He came to be referred to as the "Father of the Constitution," a title he felt was inaccurate. He would later help to articulate the Bill of Rights, and he was a major leader in the formation of the Republican Party.

As Jefferson's Secretary of State, Madison had maintained that the French and British seizure of U.S. shipping was against international law.

Madison was drawn into the same issues between England and France as his predecessors. The Embargo Act of 1807 that Jefferson passed was repealed in 1809, but the U.S. prohibited trade with both nations until 1810, when Congress voted to allow trade with either France or England if they recognized American neutrality. If one nation complied, the U.S. would not trade with the other.

France, under Napoleon, appeared to follow these rules. The trade prohibition was unpopular in America. Led by a group called the "War Hawks," many in Congress pressured the president to take a more aggressive approach and enter the war. Their wishes were granted in 1812 when America went to war with England. The British had been capturing U.S. sailors and forcing them to join the British Navy, a practice called impressment. The British said this was legal, as the American sailors were English before the Revolutionary War. As a result, on June 1, 1812, the U.S. declared war.

A couple of months after the U.S. declared war, U.S. forces invaded the British owned land to the north, which is present-day Canada. The U.S. forces failed and retreated. They even lost Detroit to the British. The United States lost many other battles against the British. One significant loss was when British forces captured the U.S. capital. Much of the city was burned, including the White House and the Capitol.

United States forces did have a few significant victories on land and sea, especially later in the war. The last string of U.S. victories was capped by future president Andrew Jackson's victory at New Orleans. As a result of these victories, the U.S. public saw the War of 1812 as a success, and national spirits and patriotism soared. The public sentiment was so heavily in favor of the war that it crippled Madison's party, the Federalists, who had opposed the war. They disappeared as a national political party as a result.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Who were the first four presidents of the United States?

- A. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and Alexander Hamilton
- B. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and James Monroe
- C. George Washington, James Madison, James Monroe, and John Quincy Adams
- D. George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison

2. In this text, the author describes important elements of the first four presidents' time in office. What important element does the author describe for all four of the presidents?

- A. their opinions of states' rights
- B. their plans to expand the U.S.
- C. their opinions about political culture
- D. their foreign policy decisions

3. The wars between England and France in the late 1700s and early 1800s caused problems for America. What evidence from the text best supports this conclusion?

- A. During wartime, both England and France seized and harassed U.S. shipping merchants.
- B. Washington chose to remain neutral in the war that broke out between France and England.
- C. Both Jefferson and Madison put limits on trading with France and England during wartime.
- D. Adams engaged in the Franco-American Quasi War because of the actions of French privateers.

4. During the early years of the United States, what difficult decision did Americans and American presidents often face?

- A. how best to continue expanding the size of the U.S.
- B. how best to support France in its continuous wars against England
- C. whether to remain neutral, support England, or support France in international conflicts
- D. whether to pursue a two-party system in U.S. politics, against George Washington's wishes

5. What is the main idea of this text?

- A. The first four presidents of the U.S.A. struggled to keep the nation's trade and shipping economy healthy.
- B. While the first four presidents of the U.S.A. were all important, George Washington had the largest impact on the nation.
- C. The first four presidents of the U.S.A. demonstrated their ability to lead by uniting Americans' opinions on important matters.
- D. The first four presidents of the U.S.A. all faced unique challenges and took actions that impacted the trajectory of the nation.

6. Read these sentences from the text.

Washington's first major presidential decision regarding foreign policy was to decide how America would respond to the war that broke out between France and England soon after the French Revolution. Members of Washington's cabinet were split with some supporting each of the European nations. [. . .] Washington chose to remain neutral, as he felt the U.S. was too vulnerable at the moment to engage in a war.

Based on these sentences, what does it mean to "remain neutral"?

- A. to not choose sides in a conflict
- B. to fully support one side in a conflict
- C. to fight against both sides in a conflict
- D. to get involved in a conflict

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

During Madison's presidency, the British had been capturing U.S. sailors and forcing them to join the British Navy. _____, on June 1, 1812, the U.S. declared war.

- A. However
- B. Moreover
- C. Consequently
- D. Specifically

8. Describe Washington's and his cabinet members' responses to the war that broke out between France and England soon after the French Revolution.

9. Overall, American opinions about foreign policy were often divided in the years following the American Revolution. Give three examples from the text to illustrate this conclusion.

10. It can be difficult for a president to balance the varied opinions of other Americans when making major decisions. Argue for or against this statement, using evidence from the text to support your argument.