CHAPTER 10

Launching the New Ship of State, 1789–1800

# Focus Questions

1. What important protections were added to the Constitution in the Bill of Rights?

2. What were the components of Hamilton’s economic policy, and what did he hope to accomplish with that policy?

3. What two constitutional theories were presented by Jefferson and Hamilton when Washington asked about the constitutionality of creating a national bank?

4. Why did Washington opt for neutrality during the French Revolution?

5. What were the domestic and international consequences of Jay’s Treaty?

6. How did John Adams handle foreign affairs with France?

7. What laws were being responded to in the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions, and what was Jefferson’s proposed remedy?

8. Who would likely support Hamiltonian federalists, and who would likely support Jeffersonian Republicans? What were the philosophical differences between these two political parties?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** Led by Washington and Hamilton, the first administration under the Constitution overcame various difficulties and firmly established the political and economic foundations of the new federal government. The first Congress under the Constitution, led by James Madison, also contributed to the new republic by adding the Bill of Rights.

**Theme:** The cabinet debate over Hamilton’s financial measure expanded into a wider political conflict between Hamiltonian Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans—the first political parties in America. Federalists supported a strong central government, a loose interpretation of the Constitution, and commerce (business). (Democratic) Republicans supported states’ rights, a strict interpretation of the Constitution, and agriculture (farmers).

**Theme:** The French Revolution created a severe ideological and political division over foreign policy between Federalists and Republicans. The foreign-policy crisis coincided with domestic political divisions that culminated in the bitter election of 1800, but in the end, power passed peacefully from Federalists to Republicans. American isolationist tradition emerges as a result of Washington’s strong neutrality stance and his farewell warnings about foreign alliances.

chapter summary

The fledgling government faced considerable difficulties and skepticism about its durability, especially since traditional political theory held that large-scale republics were bound to fail. But President Washington brought credibility to the new government, while his cabinet, led by Alexander Hamilton, strengthened its political and economic foundations.

The government’s first achievements were the Bill of Rights and Hamilton’s financial system. Through effective leadership, Hamilton carried out his program of funding the national debt, assuming state debts, imposing customs and excise taxes, and establishing a Bank of the United States.

The bank was the most controversial part of Hamilton’s program because it raised basic constitutional issues. Opposition to the bank from Jefferson and his followers reflected more fundamental political disagreements about republicanism, economics, federal power, and foreign policy. As the French Revolution evolved from moderation to radicalism, it intensified the ideological divisions between the pro-French Jeffersonians and the pro-British Hamiltonians.

Washington’s Neutrality Proclamation angered Republicans, who wanted America to aid Revolutionary France. Washington’s policy was sorely tested by the British, who routinely violated American neutrality. In order to avoid war, Washington endorsed the conciliatory Jay’s Treaty, further outraging the Republicans and France.

After the humiliating XYZ affair, the United States came to the brink of war with France, but Adams sacrificed his political popularity and divided his party by negotiating peace.

These foreign-policy disagreements embittered domestic politics: Federalists passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, to which Jefferson and Madison responded with the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Elaborate on the reasons for skepticism about the new government, particularly the view that factionalism would eventually destroy a republican government that extended over such a large territory. Show how Washington deliberately acted to assert the durability of the new regime.

REFERENCE: Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788–1800* (1993).

* Explain why the French Revolution was such a dangerously divisive world event, even in America. Point out that part of the disagreement in America was over whether the French were only carrying out the principles of the American Revolution or whether they were advocating a more radical doctrine of class conflict.

REFERENCE: Daniel Lang, *Foreign Policy in the Early Republic* (1985).

* Show how the Federalist-Republican conflict over foreign policy embittered domestic politics, since it raised charges of disloyalty on both sides. The Genêt affair, Jay’s Treaty, the quasi-war with France, and the Alien and Sedition Acts might all be viewed in this light.

REFERENCE: Leonard Levy, *Legacy of Suppression* (1960).

* Consider the Adams-Jefferson contest of 1796 in relation to both foreign- and domestic-policy disagreements. The focus might be on how, despite the depth of the conflict over issues, the Federalists and Republicans finally kept their contest within the bounds of peaceful electoral politics and the shared value of republicanism.

REFERENCE: Lance Banning, ed., *After the Constitution: Party Conflict in the New Republic* (1989).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Focus on the components of Washington’s image as the central symbol of republican government and virtue: heroism, integrity, nonpartisanship, and reluctance to hold power.
* Compare the American political dilemmas presented by the French Revolution with those in the twentieth century caused by the Russian, Chinese, and Iranian revolutions.
* Was George Washington uniquely suited to be a successful first president under the Constitution? How might the United States be different if Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, or Benjamin Franklin were the first president? Consider political ideas, economic issues, and foreign policy.
* What other times in American history has liberty been attacked? What situation or conditions would merit restrictions on liberty? Would they be constitutional?
* Discuss the Alien and Sedition Acts as threats to liberty. Consider, especially, their relation to the new, fragile Bill of Rights.
* Consider whether the Hamilton-Jefferson conflict was just a normal political disagreement like those between later American political parties or whether it was a more profound ideological disagreement that really threatened to destroy the new government.

# character sketches

## George Washington (1732–1799)

As both military leader of the Revolution and first president under the Constitution, Washington symbolized the republican ideal of Cincinnatus, the Roman citizen-soldier who only reluctantly abandoned private life to serve his country.

The only serious challenge to Washington’s leadership during the Revolution came in 1777 from the “Conway cabal,” a group of disgruntled officers, encouraged by some members of Congress, who plotted futilely to oust Washington from command.

In 1782, some Continental army officers proposed making Washington king of America; he was outraged when he heard of it and refused to allow anyone to mention the idea in his presence.

During his retirement from 1783 to 1787, his greatest interest was in linking the Potomac and Ohio rivers by road, and he traveled on horseback 650 miles to examine possible routes.

**Quote:** “My movements to the chair of government will be accompanied by feelings not unlike those of a culprit who is going to his place of execution.” (1788)

REFERENCE: Garry Wills, *Cincinnatus* (1984).

## Alexander Hamilton (1757–1804)

Hamilton was the political and financial genius of the early Republic whose heroic postures, personal ambition, and taste for aristocratic government made many of his contemporaries fear him, even though everyone recognized his great talents.

Born on the British West Indian island of Nevis, Hamilton came to New York at age fourteen to begin his education. The unfair attacks on him as a “bastard” arose because his mother had not obtained a legal divorce from her previous husband before establishing her union with Hamilton’s father.

He became Washington’s aide-de-camp in the Revolution and rose to lieutenant colonel. Extremely hot-tempered and sometimes vindictive, Hamilton denounced Washington behind his back and resigned from his staff after Washington once rebuked him for lateness.

He feuded with Aaron Burr for years in New York and helped block him from the governorship and, possibly, the presidency. He tried to avoid Burr’s demand for a duel, but when Burr made Hamilton’s refusal a matter of public honor, Hamilton reluctantly accepted.

**Quote:** “The love of fame, the ruling passion of the noblest minds, prompts a man to plan and undertake extensive and arduous enterprises for the public benefit, requiring considerable time to mature and perfect them.” (*Federalist* No. 72, 1788)

REFERENCE: Gerald Stourzh, *Alexander Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government* (1970).

## John Jay (1754–1829)

Jay was one of the authors (with Madison and Hamilton) of the *Federalist Papers*. His negotiation of Jay’s Treaty with Great Britain in 1795 made him a hero to Federalists and a hated symbol of American humiliation to Jeffersonian Republicans.

Although somewhat humorless and vain, Jay had a very high sense of honor. At King’s College (Columbia), he was once temporarily suspended for refusing to reveal the name of a fellow student who had committed vandalism.

Washington offered him his choice of any position in the new government, and Jay chose chief justice of the United States. He carefully cultivated influential British citizens during the negotiation of the commercial treaty with Britain in order to obtain the most favorable terms, but to the Republicans, who burned him in effigy, these contacts were proof that he had sold out American interests.

**Quote:** “Further concessions on the part of Great Britain cannot, in my opinion, be attained. If this treaty fails, I despair of another.… If I entirely escape censure, I shall be agreeably disappointed.” (Letter, 1795)

REFERENCE: Richard B. Morris, *John Jay* (1975).

## John Adams (1735–1826)

Adams was the Massachusetts Revolutionary and Federalist president whose public appeal never matched his political and intellectual talents.

He originally considered becoming a minister, but “frigid John Calvin” repelled him, and he turned to law. During his frequent missions abroad, he lived very frugally and constantly complained of the extravagance of his fellow diplomats such as Franklin and Jay.

He thought that Hamilton maneuvered to get him elected to the vice presidency, which he called “the most insignificant office that ever the invention of man contrived or the mind of man conceived.” Although he was prickly and cold in most situations, his diaries and letters to his wife Abigail show his warm, anxious, and generous side.

He renewed his friendship with Jefferson after both left office, and they exchanged numerous letters until they died within a few hours of each other on July 4, 1826. Adams’s last words were “Thomas Jefferson still lives.”

**Quote:** “My reputation has been so much the sport of the public, for fifty years, and will be with posterity, that I hold it a bubble, a gossamer, that idles in the wanton summer air.” (Letter to Jefferson, 1813)

REFERENCE: Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (1976).

## Aaron Burr (1756–1836)

Burr was the vice president of the United States who killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel and then organized a mysterious conspiracy to separate parts of the West from the United States.

A grandson of Jonathan Edwards, the Great Awakening preacher, Burr was charming and eloquent but always loved adventure and intrigue. He nearly joined the Conway cabal against Washington and helped organize the Tammany Hall political club in New York.

After killing Hamilton in the duel on July 11, 1804, he first fled but then returned to preside as vice president over the impeachment trial of Samuel Chase before embarking on his western conspiracy.

Burr’s plotting was so complicated and confusing that it is still uncertain whether he wanted to set up a new western nation under himself or to form a private army to invade Mexico. Although technically acquitted in his treason trial, he was completely disgraced. He fled to France, where he lived in poverty and tried to get Napoleon to endorse his schemes for an invasion of America.

**Quote:** “Political opposition can never absolve gentlemen from a rigid adherence to the laws of honor.…You have indulged in the use of language derogatory to my honor as a gentleman.…To this I expect a definite reply which must lead to an accommodation, or the only alternative which the circumstances of the case will justify.” (Dueling challenge to Alexander Hamilton, 1804)

REFERENCE: Herbert S. Parmet and Marie B. Hecht, *Aaron Burr: Portrait of an Ambitious Man* (1967).

# great debates in american history

## Great Debate (1791–1801):

Whose political theories and programs are more conducive to creating a strong, free Republic: Hamilton’s or Jefferson’s?

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| ***For Hamilton:*** The Federalists—led by Hamilton, Adams, Jay, Marshall, and Pickering; including merchants, urban upper classes, and conservative clergy. |  | ***For Jefferson:*** The Republicans—led by Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and Burr; including farmers, westerners, and urban craft workers and tradespeople. |

ISSUE #1: Loose or strict construction. Should the Constitution be interpreted loosely to grant implied powers to the federal government?

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| ***Yes:*** Federalist Hamilton: “The means by which national exigencies are to be provided for, national inconveniences obviated, national prosperity promoted are of such infinite variety, extent, and complexity, that there must of necessity be great latitude of discretion in the selection and application of these means. If the *end* be clearly comprehended within any of the specified powers, and if the measure have an obvious relation to the *end,* and it is not forbidden by any particular provision of the constitution, it may safely be deemed to come within the compass of the national authority.” |  | ***No:*** Republican Jefferson: “I consider the foundation of the Constitution as laid on this ground—that all powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states, or to the people. To take a single step beyond the boundaries thus specifically drawn around the powers of congress is to take possession of a boundless field of power, no longer susceptible of any definition.” |

ISSUE #2: Manufacturing versus agriculture. Should urban commerce and manufacturing be promoted as much as agriculture?

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| ***Yes:*** Federalist Hamilton: “The spirit of enterprise, useful and prolific as it is, must necessarily be contracted or expanded, in proportion to the simplicity or variety of the occupations and productions which are to be found in a society. It must be less in a nation of mere cultivators, than in a nation of cultivators and merchants; less in a nation of cultivators and merchants, than in a nation of cultivators, artificers, and merchants.” |  | ***No:*** Republican Jefferson: “Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.… Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.… Generally speaking the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any state to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts.… The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body.” |

ISSUE #3: Should the common people be trusted with government?

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| ***No:*** Federalist Hamilton: “All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well born; the other, the mass of the people. The voice of the people has been said to be the voice of God; and however generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true in fact. The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. Give therefore to the first class a distinct, permanent share in the government. They will check the unsteadiness of the second; and as they cannot receive any advantage by a change, they therefore will ever maintain good government.” |  | ***Yes:*** Republican Jefferson: “Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government; wherever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them right.  “I am not among those who fear the people. They, and not the rich, are our dependence for continued freedom.  “The mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.” |

ISSUE #4: The French Revolution. Should the United States view the French Revolution with sympathy and approval?

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| ***No:*** Federalist Hamilton: “The cause of France is compared with that of America during its late revolution. Would to heaven that the comparison were just. Would to heaven that we could discern in the mirror of French affairs the same humanity, the same decorum, the same gravity, the same order, the same dignity, the same solemnity, which distinguished the cause of the American Revolution. Clouds and darkness would not then rest upon the issue as they now do. I own I do not like the comparison.” |  | ***Yes:*** Republican Jefferson: “I still hope the French Revolution will end happily. I feel that the permanence of our own leans in some degree on that; and that a failure there would be a powerful argument to prove there must be a failure here.  “My own affections have been deeply wounded by some of the martyrs to this cause, but rather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated; were there but an Adam and Eve left in every country, and left free, it would be better than it now is.” |

REFERENCES: Richard Buel Jr., *Securing the Revolution: Ideology in American Politics*, 1789–1815 (1972); Daniel Lang, *Foreign Policy in the New Republic* (1985).

# Questions for Class Discussion

1. Did the Bill of Rights satisfy the Anti-Federalists concerns? Was individual liberty and state sovereignty protected by the new amendments? What about assaults on the new Bill of Rights such as the national bank and the Alien and Sedition Acts?

2. Why did Hamilton move so rapidly to create large financial commitments by the federal government? Since we normally think of the federal debt as something bad, why did Hamilton think of it as something good and necessary for the national welfare?

3. How sympathetic should Revolutionary Americans have been to the king-killing French Revolution?

4. Why were political parties viewed as so dangerous by the Founding Fathers? Why did parties come into being at all, and why did they come to be accepted as legitimate ways to express political disagreement?

5. How wise was Washington’s insistence on neutrality? What about the fact that, while this foreign policy stance may not have violated the letter of the alliance with France, it did violate the spirit of the alliance? Do you agree that, as the authors contend, “self-interest is the basic cement of alliances”? Does a nation have an obligation to maintain alliances previously established, even when it is no longer in that nation’s self-interest?

6. What role did domestic politics and economic realities play in establishing an American foreign policy? How should American diplomats interact with European governments? Consider the fact that some Americans do not want diplomats to follow standard European protocol (like kissing the Queen’s hand or paying bribes to speak to public officials).

7. Contrast the Hamiltonian Federalist belief that the wealthy and well educated ought to run the government with the Jeffersonian Republican belief that the common person, if educated, could be trusted to manage public affairs.

**CONTENDING VOICES: ALEXANDER HAMILTON VS. THOMAS JEFFERSON**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. Contrast Hamilton’s view of human nature with the view expressed by Jefferson.
2. How did these differing conceptions of human nature shape the policies advocated by each man?

**THINKING GLOBALLY: TWO REVOLUTIONS**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. How did intertwined disputes over taxation spark both the American Revolution and the French Revolution?
2. What intellectual commonality was shared by both conflicts?
3. What contrasts can be drawn between the two uprisings?
4. How have historians found the roots for these contrasts in the different pre-Revolutionary histories of France and of what became the United States?
5. How was the American Revolution exceptional when compared with other major revolutions?