



# TALES OF BEING A LARGE 'D' DEMOCRAT

## *Beware a Trump Federal Sedition Act*

By Bruce D. Beasley

## se·di·tion

[sə'diSHən]

noun

1. conduct or speech inciting people to rebel against the authority of a state or monarch.



**PICTURES: (Left) Federalist 2nd President John Adams who signed the Alien & Sedition Act of 1798, (Center) World War One President Woodrow Wilson who signed the Sedition Act of 1918 and (Right) President Donald J. Trump.**

As the dictatorial policies and Executive Orders continue from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, the Republican majority Congress abdicates their Constitutional responsibilities while citizen protests increase around the nation, it may be time to remember when earlier Presidents had thin skins when it came to criticism from the American people.

George Washington was not immune from criticism. After the help of France during the Revolutionary War, there were several United States citizens who protested for our new nation to intervene during the French Revolution on the side of liberty against the French monarchy. Washington wisely stayed out of an internal conflict, but did not leave office in 1797 the popular man he was eight years earlier.

Though the mouth of the American Revolution, Federalist John Adams term as President was rocky as his own Vice President Thomas Jefferson, along with James Madison, formed the new Democratic-Republican Party. The separation of powers between the states and Federal governments created a divide between the political parties and former comrades.

In 1798, a number of Alien laws were enacted by the Federalist majority Congress. I will save discussion of those for another time, but the Sedition Act of 1798 or "**An Act for the Punishment of Certain Crimes Against the United States**" was passed with President Adams blessing by the Fifth Congress of the United States on November 13, 1798.

### **Section Two of the Sedition Act of 1798:**

*SEC. 2. And be it farther enacted, That if any person shall write, print, utter or publish, or shall cause or procure to be written, printed, uttered or published, or shall knowingly and willingly assist or aid in writing, printing, uttering or publishing any false, scandalous and malicious writing or writings against the government of the United States, or either house of the Congress of the United States, or the President of the United States, with intent to defame the said government, or either house of the said Congress, or the said President, or to bring them, or either of them, into contempt or disrepute; or to excite against them, or either or any of them, the hatred of the good people of the United States, or to stir up sedition within the United States, or to excite any unlawful combinations therein, for opposing or resisting any law of the United States, or any act of the President of the United States, done in pursuance of any such law, or of the powers in him vested by the constitution of the United States, or to resist, oppose, or defeat any such law or act, or to aid, encourage or abet any hostile designs of any foreign nation against United States, their people or government, then such person, being thereof convicted before any court of the United States having jurisdiction thereof, shall be punished by a fine not exceeding two thousand dollars, and by imprisonment not exceeding two years.*

The effect of the Sedition Act was to stifle criticism of the Federalist Congress and Adams Administration by the press and other forms of political dissent. With George Washington no longer President, the political divisions grew and got nastier in the nation.

### **From Teaching American History, Sedition Act of 1798, by Ray Tyler:**

“Newspapers in the 1790s were openly partisan. Republican editors published only 16% of the nation’s newspapers in 1795. However, their market share grew to 28% in 1798 and 40% following the enactment of the Sedition Act in 1798. According to historian John Ferling, this “new breed of printers ... were driven by ideology and partisanship.” Like partisan cable commentators “owning” the opposition on their nightly broadcasts, these editors “assailed their adversaries” in every type of print available – newspapers, pamphlets, and broadsides. Newspapers did not fire the opening salvo in the partisan struggles of the 1790s. Instead, partisan newspapers arose after competing political parties emerged in the United States, shortly after George Washington took office as the new government’s first executive. One party, coalescing around Alexander Hamilton, became known as the Federalists, and supported President Washington. Thomas Jefferson and his confidant James Madison organized an opposition party, known as the Republicans. As the one man seen as

indispensable to the new government's success, President George Washington was able to moderate partisan conflict while in office. With Washington's retirement to Mt. Vernon following two terms in office, these groups broke into open political warfare over how best to interpret the Constitution, the federal government's role, and foreign policy.

Especially thorny were the issues of the potential support for the French Revolution and France's subsequent war with Great Britain. Republicans backed the French. They reminded the public of France's military alliance with the U.S. when its Revolution hung in the balance. Federalists argued that Great Britain had a governmental structure the U.S. should emulate and that our shared political, cultural, and commercial ties with England necessitated a strong alliance with her.

In the election of 1800, John Adams was attacked as a closet monarchist who admired the British constitutional monarchy. Adams was accused of wanting a hereditary presidency and a war with revolutionary France. "Readers were reminded that Adams shared responsibility for the ... Sedition act," writes Ferling, and despite the legislation's expiration date of March 3, 1801, Republicans argued that Adams's reelection might mean the oppression of the press would continue.

Federalist newspapers were not silent. They accused Jefferson of being an atheist with plans to confiscate Bibles. Although the accusation did not make it into print until three years later, rumors circulated that Jefferson had engaged in a sexual relationship with an enslaved woman on his Monticello plantation named Sally Hemmings.

The Sedition Act of 1798 was not the only factor contributing to Adams's defeat. Americans were angry about high taxes, Jay's Treaty which seemed too favorable to Great Britain and a Quasi-War with France they feared would erupt into full conflict at a time the new republic could ill afford a war. Still, the Sedition Act had a significant impact. Over two dozen editors, (most of them Republican-leaning) were arrested and charged with publishing seditious content. Perhaps the most prominent of those arrested was James Callender, whose anti-Federalist tract, *The Prospect Before Us*, Jefferson backed financially. Convicted under the Sedition Act, Callender was ordered to pay a \$200 fine and sentenced to nine months in prison.

Another victim of the Adams Administration's attempt to silence its opponents was Congressman Matthew Lyon of Vermont. Lyon attacked President Adams in print and in speeches, accusing him of having "an unbounded thirst for ridiculous pomp, foolish adulation and selfish avarice." Lyon was arrested, convicted, and sent to prison under the Sedition Act, but the Vermonter enjoyed the last laugh. He secured his reelection to the House of Representatives while serving his prison sentence."

President Adams only took third in the Electoral College in 1800. A tie for first between Jefferson and Aaron Burr was decided after Federalist leader Alexander Hamilton threw his support behind old nemesis Jefferson. With the election of Jefferson in 1800, the Alien and Sedition Act of 1798 ended in 1801. The Federalist Party was no longer a viable political party by 1802 after Adams defeat and the death of Hamilton at the hands of Burr in a duel.

It was over one hundred years until the United States had another sedition law. In 1918 a Sedition Act was passed with the support of the Woodrow Wilson Administration during the later stages of World War One. Though called the Sedition Act of 1918, it was a series of amendments to the Espionage Act of 1917. The Espionage Act of 1917 made it a crime to interfere with the war effort, disrupt military recruitment, or to attempt to aid a nation at war with the U.S.

From Wikipedia, the Sedition Act of 1918 forbade the use of "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language" about the United States government, its flag, its Armed Forces, or that caused others to view the American government or its institutions with contempt. Those convicted under the Act usually received sentences of imprisonment for five to 20 years.

Over 1,000 convictions were made under the Espionage Act of 1917, but few under the provisions of the Sedition Amendments. There was notable opposition of the Sedition Act by former President Theodore Roosevelt and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge among others. After the war ended, the law was repealed on December 13, 1920. Outgoing President Wilson offered clemency for most of the people convicted through the Sedition Act in early 1921.

***"Trump's second term as president has brought a troubling deterioration in press freedom,"***

**- Reporters Without Borders, May 2025**

***“... attacks on the media are not random actions; they are part of the autocratic playbook.”***

**- Joel Simon, head of the Journalism Protection Initiative**

The Trump Administration has claimed to be for free speech while doing the opposite. A number of attacks have been made on the media in the first few months of the Trump Administration, including:

1. The Associated Press (AP) not being allowed at Press Briefings until they refer to The Gulf of Mexico as The Gulf of America.
2. Trump called CNN and MSNBC as political arms of the Democratic Party that need to be “turned off”.
3. Trump has called for Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chair Brendan Carr to “impose maximum fines and punishment” for 60 Minutes stories on Kamala Harris, Greenland, and Ukraine.
4. FCC Chairperson Carr has launched investigations into Comcast, NBC Universal, ABC and Disney. No investigations of right-wing media sites at this time are known.
5. The Trump Administration is trying to defund the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR).
6. Efforts are in place to replace the Voice of America which has aired pro-USA, pro freedom radio for three-quarters of a century with right-wing broadcasting.
7. Attacks on the curriculum, teachers, college administration and student body selection at a number of schools is under pressure from Trump and Project 2025.

***“I’ve stopped all government censorship & brought back free speech in America, it’s back.”***

**- President Donald J. Trump, Address to Congress, March 4, 2025**

Despite Trump’s claims, free speech is under bombardment. Trump, MAGA, and billionaires’ free speech is safe under Trump, but is ours? There is no doubt that threats to freedom of assembly, freedom of thought and freedom of religion are quickly down the road.



**ABOVE: No Kings Day Protesters of the Trump Administration at the Clinton County Courthouse on April 19, 2025**

Both Adams and Wilson saw their political parties lose in elections when free speech was considered an act of rebellion under the Sedition Acts of 1798 and 1918, respectively. Giants like Jefferson, Madison and Teddy Roosevelt are not here to argue for freedom of speech this time. It has been over one hundred years since the last Sedition Act was passed. Many people don't know history or understand the consequences when loyalty is questioned. Beware a Trump Sedition or Insurrection Act with martial law declared when the only national emergency is one Trump creates himself. It will only mean a loss of freedom for us and more power for Trump and his aggrandizing friends. Keep your eyes and ears open and be vigilant. Our future demands it!