**John Adams: Second President of the United States**

Directions: As you read this summary on the presidency of John Adams, take notes in your binder/notebook. Do not copy word-for-word, instead you will need to summarize. Your notes should thoroughly cover the topics listed below. Once you are finished you will complete an assignment in Google Classroom about John Adam’s presidency.

Federalists vs. Democratic- Republican

Relations with France & Quasi-War Alien & Sedition Acts

Growth of Federal Government

French Revolution XYZ Affair

Relations with Great Britain Kentucky & Virginia Resolutions Jay’s Treaty

**OVERVIEW:** Before becoming President in 1797, John Adams built his reputation as a blunt-speaking man of independent mind. A fervent patriot and brilliant intellectual, Adams served as a delegate from Massachusetts to the Continental Congress between 1774 and 1777, as a diplomat in Europe from 1778 to 1788, and as vice president during the Washington administration.

**POLITICAL FACTIONS:** The Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton, supported a strong central government that favored industry, landowners, banking interests, merchants, and close ties with England. Opposed to them were the Democratic- Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson, who advocated limited powers for the federal government. Adams's Federalist leanings and high visibility as vice president positioned him as the leading contender for President in 1796. Today we call these groups “political parties” but in Adam’s time they were referred to as “factions”.

In the early days of the American electoral process, the candidate receiving the second-largest vote in the electoral-college became vice president. This is how Thomas

Jefferson, who opposed Adams in the election, came to serve as Adams's vice president in 1797. In 1800, Adams faced a much tougher battle for reelection, as the differences between the Federalists and the Republicans intensified—by that time, the terms "Democratic-Republican" and "Republican" were used interchangeably.

**ADAMS AS PRESIDENT:** The Adams presidency was characterized by continuing crises in foreign policy, which dramatically affected affairs at home. Suspicious of the French Revolution and its potential for terror and anarchy, Adams opposed close ties with France. Relations between America and France deteriorated to the brink of war, allowing Adams to justify his signing of the extremely controversial Alien and Sedition Acts. Drafted by Federalist lawmakers, these were a series of four laws were largely aimed at immigrants, who tended to become Republicans. Furious over Adams's foreign

policy and his signing of the Alien and Sedition Acts, Republicans responded with the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, which challenged the legitimacy of federal authority over the states.

Republicans were equally incensed by the heavy taxation necessary for Adams's military buildup; farmers in Pennsylvania staged Fries's Rebellion in protest. At the same time, Adams faced disunity in his own party due to conflict with Hamilton over the undeclared naval war with France. This rivalry with Hamilton and the Federalist Party cost Adams the 1800 election. He lost to Thomas Jefferson, who was backed by the united and far more organized Republicans.

**FOREIGN AFFAIRS:** Adams's presidency was consumed with problems that arose from the French Revolution, which had also been true for Washington. Initially popular with virtually all Americans, the French Revolution began to arouse concerns among the most conservative in the United States after the excesses that commenced in 1792. The King and Queen (Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette) were executed, attempts at de- Christianization occurred, numerous foes of the Revolution—especially aristocrats and monarchists—were executed in the September Massacre (1792) and the Reign of Terror (1793-1794), and the revolutionary leadership moved toward social leveling that would end historic class privileges and distinctions between the social classes. Adams had observed the coming of the French Revolution while living in France and Great Britain, and he immediately realized its potential for terror and anarchy.

Nevertheless, the problems that beset Presidents Washington and Adams arose more from the wars spawned by the French Revolution. War erupted in 1792 when France attempted to export its revolutionary ideas and when several European monarchical nations allied against the French, hoping to eradicate the threat posed by the republican revolutionaries. The great danger for the United States began in the spring of 1793 when Great Britain, the principal source of American trade, joined the coalition against France. Although the Washington administration proclaimed American neutrality, a crisis developed when London sought to prevent U.S. trade with France.

Numerous conflicts occurred on the high seas, as ships of the Royal Navy seized American ships and cargoes and sought to impress American sailors who had allegedly deserted the British navy. Cries for war with Britain were widespread by 1794.

Believing that war would be disastrous, President Washington sent John Jay to London to seek a diplomatic solution. The result was Jay's Treaty, signed in 1794. The treaty improved U.S.-British relations. France, interpreting the treaty as a newly formed alliance between the United States and an old enemy, retaliated by ordering the seizure of American ships carrying British goods. This plunged Adams into a foreign crisis that lasted for the duration of his administration. At first, Adams tried diplomacy by sending three commissioners to Paris to negotiate a settlement. However, Prime Minister Charles Maurice de Talleyrand of France insulted the American diplomats by

first refusing to officially receive them. He then demanded a $250,000 personal bribe and a $10 million loan for his financially strapped country before he would begin peace negotiations. This episode, known as the XYZ affair, sparked a white-hot reaction within the United States.

**STRENGTHENING THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT**: Adams responded to the XYZ Affair by asking Congress to appropriate funds for defensive measures. These included the expansion of the Navy, improvement of coastal defensives, the creation of a provisional army, and authority for the President to summon up to 80,000 militiamen to active duty. Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts to curb dissent, created the Navy Department, organized the Marine Corps, and cancelled the treaties of alliance and commerce with France that had been negotiated during the War of Independence. Incidents, some bloody, soon took place on the high seas. Historians call this undeclared war the Quasi-War crisis. Some Americans hoped for war with France to save Great Britain and destroy the revolutionaries in France. From the outset, however, President Adams sought a peaceful solution (remember Washington’s advice?) if it could be had on honorable terms for the United States. He talked pugnaciously and urged a military buildup, but his goal was to demonstrate American resolve and, he hoped, bring France to the bargaining table. During the fall of 1798 and the winter of 1799, he received intelligence indicating a French willingness to talk. When Talleyrand sent unofficial word that American diplomats would be received by the French government, Adams announced his intention to send another diplomatic commission to France. By the time the commissioners reached Paris late in 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte had become the head of the French government. After several weeks of negotiation, the American envoys and Napoleon signed the Treaty of Mortefontaine, which released the United States from its Revolutionary War alliance with France and brought an end to the Quasi-War. Adams subsequently said that the honorable peace he had arranged was the great jewel in his crown after nearly twenty-five years of public service.

**DOMESTIC AFFAIRS:** President Adams's style was largely to leave domestic matters to Congress and to control foreign policy himself. Not only did the Constitution give the President the responsibility for foreign policy but perhaps no other American had as much diplomatic experience as Adams. As a result of his outlook, much of his domestic policy was combined with his foreign policy, for diplomatic issues often sparked a domestic reaction that consumed the President and the nation.

On the heels of the XYZ Affair, there were many negative feelings toward the French. Sensing this mood in the citizenry and identifying an opportunity to crush the pro- French Democratic-Republican Party of Thomas Jefferson, the Federalist-dominated Congress drafted and passed the Alien and Sedition Acts during the spring and summer of 1798. Adams signed the legislation into law. These acts were made up of four pieces

of legislation that became the most bitterly contested domestic issue during the Adams presidency.

Supposedly created as a means of preventing the aiding and abetting of France within the United States and of obstructing American foreign policy, the laws in actuality had domestic political overtones. Three of the laws were aimed at immigrants, most of whom tended to vote for Democratic-Republican candidates. The Naturalization Act lengthened the residency period required for citizenship from five to fourteen years.

The Alien Act, the only one of the four acts to pass with bipartisan support, allowed for the detention of enemy aliens in time of war without trial or counsel. The Alien Enemies Act empowered the President to deport aliens whom he deemed dangerous to the nation's security. The fourth law, the Sedition Act, outlawed conspiracy to prevent the enforcement of federal laws and punished subversive speech—with fines and imprisonment. Subversive speech was speech that could be interpreted at simply criticizing the government. There were fifteen indictments and ten convictions under the Sedition Act during the final year and a half of Adams's administration. No aliens were deported or arrested although hundreds of alien immigrants fled the country in 1798 and 1799.

In response to the Federalists' use of federal power, Democratic-Republicans Thomas Jefferson and James Madison secretly drafted a set of resolutions. These resolutions were introduced into the Kentucky and Virginia legislatures in the fall of 1798.

Jefferson and Madison argued that since the Constitution was created by a compact among the states, the people, speaking through their state legislatures, had the authority to judge the legitimacy of federal actions. Hence, they pronounced the Alien and Sedition Acts null and void. Although no other states formally supported the resolutions, they rallied Democratic-Republican opinion in the nation. Most importantly,

they placed the Jeffersonian Republicans within the revolutionary tradition of resistance to tyranny. The resolutions also raised the issue of states' rights and the constitutional question of how conflict between the two authorities would be resolved short of secession or war. This would not be the last time the issue of “nullification” would cause a crisis for the nation.