Chapter Four: The XYZ Affair

Bribes and Prejudice

Three Big Things

1. France was mad because the U.S. was making nice with England. (Wasn't it only yesterday France had gone to so much trouble to help them get *out* of that relationship? Aren't we supposed to be hating England *together*?!)

2. U.S. efforts to make nice with France led to serious drama when French representatives (code names "X," "Y," and "Z") made demands (including bribes) which the U.S. contingent found offensive – hence the catchy nickname for the entire mess.

3. The resulting kerfuffle led to a "Quasi-War" abroad and more pronounced divisions between political parties at home before being resolved by a new round of diplomacy and yet another new treaty. The dispute also prompted the Federalists to push through the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts (which didn't turn out all that well).

Background

If you've seen *Hamilton* (or at least listened to the soundtrack), you might be surprised to learn that many of the characters and events portrayed were based on *real people and events* in American history. Seriously, there should have been a note on the program or something to that effect. It would have added a whole other dimension to the experience.

In any case, I refer you to one of the highlights of the second act, "Cabinet Battle #2":

> *The issue on the table: France is on the verge of war with England. Now do we provide aid and troops to our French allies, or do we stay out of it? … Secretary Jefferson, you have the floor, sir…*

Jefferson, as you may recall, thought it was a complete no-brainer that the U.S. should jump in and assist France. French aid had tipped the balance in the Revolutionary War and their rhetoric was rooted in the same Enlightenment ideals that inspired the colonies to rebel in the first place. Hamilton thought getting involved was a *horrible* idea, particularly since the folk with whom they'd actually signed a treaty (the King and Queen) were dead at that point, beheaded by French revolutionaries. President Washington agreed with Hamilton, and in the very next number ("it must be nice… it must be nice… to have Washington on your side…") the nation's first two political parties were formed – right there on stage.

It wasn't the *beginning* of tensions over how the new nation should be run, but it certainly helped clarify and solidify the sides.

The Federalists (think Alexander Hamilton) were pushing for a strong central government and a more unified nation. Despite the recent Revolutionary War, Federalists still tended to see the world through English eyes. It was the Federalists who'd pushed for the Constitution (which replaced the much looser Articles of Confederation) and who relied on the "three branches" system to keep the government checked and balanced. If taken to the extreme, their approach to the Constitution was that anything it didn't strictly *prohibit* was probably *OK*.

The Anti-Federalists, better known as the Democratic-Republicans (unlike in *Hamilton*, the real party didn't officially include "Southern M*****-F*******" as part of their title), were less enthused about strong central government. They worried that the young nation would fall back into the same patterns and problems they'd had under King George. Democratic-Republicans loved the revolutionary fervor of the French and believed that an agrarian economy and local control were the keys to extending and strengthening the enlightened, independent nature of their new country. The Constitution gave the central government specific functions and powers, and anything beyond that was a leap into corruption and self-destruction. Historians often refer to this group as the "Jeffersonian Republicans" because, you know… *Jefferson*.

How to handle France wasn't the ONLY issue dividing these emerging parties, but it was pretty high on the list.

Jay's Treaty (1794)

Right after giving France a promise ring during the Revolution, Uncle Sam** slid right back into making goo-goo eyes with his ex, England. Washington and other Federalists were more pragmatic than they were idealistic; they had little interest in endless conflict with the world's most powerful nation. They signed a treaty resolving several points of contention: the British agreed to pull out of the Northwest Territory and to leave American shipping alone (although that one didn't exactly last) while the U.S. paid off some outstanding debts to British merchants. Both sides compromised a bit on shared boundaries. Perhaps most importantly, the treaty laid the groundwork for a positive trading relationship with England.

It's amazing how many things can be worked out when there's money to be made.

France saw this as a betrayal of all they'd thought they meant to the U.S., particularly after they'd sacrificed so much to help the young nation win its independence… *from the very nation it was now making all cuddly with!* France and England had been in recurring conflict since roughly the Neolithic Era, so Uncle Sam's insistence that they were just friends (albeit with benefits) rang hollow. France began attacking American shipping, which hurt America's feelings and kinda ruined how nice it was that England had finally stopped doing it.

In the middle of this madness, George Washington decided not to run for a third term in 1796. ("One last time… we'll teach them how to say goodbye…"). The unenviable task of following the Father of the Nation into office fell to John Adams with Thomas Jefferson as VP, which was tricky since they were from different political parties – Adams was a Federalist, and Jefferson, well… was *not*.

The Adams Tightrope

President John Adams wanted to patch things up with France without alienating England. He wasn't the towering figure Washington had been and often made decisions based on how he thought things *should* work instead of how they *did*.

Then again, Washington had struggled on this front as well. Before leaving office, he'd appointed Charles Pinckney as the U.S. "Minister to France." It wasn't a great match. Pinckney was a staunch Federalist from an essentially aristocratic background – the exact sort of person the French were gleefully beheading on a regular basis at the time. Adams hoped to do better.

Adams conferred with his VP, Jefferson, who suggested sending Madison – a Democratic-Republican with revolutionary street cred and who knew how to speak *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*. Instead, Adams chose the safer political path and selected more Federalists, the party who hated France to begin with and couldn't relate to them *at all.* They arrived in Paris disgusted with the people, the politics, and the culture in general – not the ideal foundation for diplomacy.

The French Foreign Minister, Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, initially refused to see them. Eventually he sent word through intermediaries that a meeting might be arranged if the Americans agreed in advance to pay off all claims made by American merchants against France, loan France a ton of money at rock-bottom interest rates, and offer Talleyrand a substantial bribe just to get things going.

In better dynamics, these might have served as a starting point for under-the-table negotiations. As things were, it merely offended and annoyed the American coterie. They wrote back to President Adams, who in turn informed Congress that things weren't going well and that maybe they should start preparing for the itsy-bitsy possibility of war. Not wanting to stir things up more than they already were, or risk the safety of his representatives in France, Adams substituted letters – W, X, Y, and Z – for the names of the French go-betweens.

The subsequent kerfuffle, then, could just as easily have become known as the ABC Affair, the WXYZ Conflict, or the Beta Epsilon Gamma Kappa Shenanigans. Adams also withheld numerous details of exactly what was going badly, informing Congress merely that the French were being uncooperative and things could get ugly. It didn't give Congress much to go on. Mostly it simply confirmed their suspicion that Adams was *not* George Washington.

Let Me Be Frank(ophile) With You

France had by this time closed its ports to ships from any nation not totally "Team France" and granted permission to French vessels to capture and search any ship they suspected of carrying British goodies – which could be any of them. Congress nevertheless insisted on knowing what the ever-loving heckity-darn was actually going on before taking further action. It passed resolutions and called Adams all sorts of bad names (although that last part wasn't exactly new). Eventually, Adams released the letters from his representatives in France, including the demands made by X, Y, and Z. ("W" had largely dropped out of the picture by this point.)

The Democratic-Republicans simply couldn't believe anything negative about their revolutionary brethren across the ocean. Surely Adams was lying, or the emissaries had misunderstood, or – and this one was a crowd favorite – Talleyrand's demands were a natural result of Adam's push for a military buildup, despite those two things having occurred in the opposite order, many months apart. (No sense letting a little thing like objective reality interfere with a good political barrage, then or now.)

American outrage was about what one would expect for a generation still drunk on the patriotic fervor of its own revolution. "Millions for defense but not one cent for tribute!" cried the masses. War was never officially declared, but this "Quasi-War" was definitely a few shoves and swear words past being "at peace."

À La Réflexion…

Talleyrand had by this point realized he'd miscalculated and that things weren't going the way he'd hoped. He began scrambling to reopen negotiations with the U.S. while navigating a revolution at home which was becoming increasingly unpredictable and bloody. Napoleon was rapidly gaining power as well, and while he loved a good scrap as much as anyone, the General was more interested in using France's claim on Louisiana Territory (which was technically owned by Spain at the time) to help finance his war in Europe.

President Adams sent new representatives to France, thus averting a real live shooting-and-killing war. They eventually reached a new agreement – the Convention of 1800. (It's also called the Treaty of Mortefontaine, but seriously – who even wants to try *saying* that, let alone *remembering* it?)

Hostilities ceased. France gave back America's boats and the U.S. agreed to reimburse owners for any losses incurred as a result. Perhaps most importantly, France and the U.S became trading besties again, although the U.S. was not required to quit seeing England in order to do so. This was to be something of an "open partnership." As long as the brides didn't have to share a bed or anything, they'd ignore one another and make it work.

Why It Matters

The XYZ Affair was the first major foreign policy dilemma faced by the young United States. It presented questions they'd face in various forms many times over the coming centuries: When is it better to compromise out of pragmatism than to dig in over ideals? What does the U.S. owe to nations who've supported it in the past compared to those it might be nice to have around in the future? How much power should the president have over foreign affairs before Congress steps in and demands to know what's going on?

In terms of more tangible results, the U.S. slung enough testosterone during the conflict to bump up its status on the world stage. They weren't yet a "superpower," but they were becoming someone you didn't want to annoy if you could avoid it. The resulting treaties with England and France helped the young nation continue building its economy, which over time became an additional source of strength and influence – and remains so today.

Domestic disagreement over the event helped highlight key differences between the two parties beyond simply being pro-central government or pro-state autonomy. Each party came to represent a range of views about many different issues rather than simply arguing with one another over the same one repeatedly. Federalist frustration with growing Democratic-Republican moxie, as well as concerns over foreign influence, led to the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts, which of course sparked all sorts of other shenanigans.

Not everyone loved the way the Federalists had handled the XYZ Affair, and even most of those who did had trouble embracing the Alien and Sedition Acts once their initial patriotic fervor began settling. This frustration probably contributed to the election of Thomas Jefferson in 1800 – the first peaceful transfer of power from one political party to another. We could argue that the whole XYZ kerfuffle was therefore responsible for the Louisiana Purchase and the founding of the University of Virginia, but that seems a bit of a stretch.

Making The Grade: What You're Most Likely To Be Asked

This one lends itself readily to multiple choice questions with "The XYZ Affair" as the correct answer (or one of the correct answers). They're often phrased in terms of "new challenges facing the young republic" or "issues which highlighted growing divisions between political parties." Other times they'll just keep it simple and see if you remember the colorful parts:

1. The slogan "Millions for defense; not one cent for tribute!" is most closely associated with…? (A) the XYZ Affair, (B) Jay's Treaty, (C) the Wilmot Proviso, or (D) Bacon's Rebellion.

2. What event sparked the XYZ Affair? (A) The new Congress raised taxes on whiskey. (B) The British navy boarded American ships and forced their crews into service. (C) The French foreign minister demanded a bribe before he would meet with American representatives. (D) Andrew Jackson chased runaway slaves into Spanish-controlled Florida.

It's possible you'll be asked about the XYZ Affair in the context of cause and effect – what prompted it to begin with (your response should include "Jay's Treaty"), or its connection to the Alien and Sedition Acts or Jefferson's election (and John Adams' loss). You should also remember the term "Quasi-War." While technically this *could* refer to any number of things, it almost always means *this* conflict.

It's unlikely you'll get an entire essay prompt over the XYZ Affair by itself, but it should certainly be part of your responses to all sorts of things from that time period.

3. What were some of the challenges confronting the new government under the Constitution?

4. Summarize the policy differences between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

5. How did the Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans differ in their approach to foreign policy?

6. Identify the foreign policies of presidents Washington through Monroe.

APUSH or other advanced courses are likely to ask very similar questions in fancier ways. It may not always be immediately obvious that you know enough relevant material for a decent response… but you probably do:

7. Analyze the ways in which the United States sought to advance its interests in world affairs between 1789 and 1823.

8. How did the conflicts between France and Britain resulting from the French Revolution end up impacting the United States?

If you can keep track of 80% of the details and interwoven issues involved in the XYZ Affair, you're doing better than most. It's a legitimately messy topic to keep straight and knowing your basics is as impressive as you need to get.

**The term "Uncle Sam" didn't come along for a few more years, but you know exactly who I mean. Don't be difficult.