



# BUILDING A MORE PERFECT UNION

PART II



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FOR THE  
HUMANITIES

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**NHD**  
NATIONAL  
HISTORY DAY

# OPPOSITION TO THE ALIEN AND SEDITION ACTS

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## GUIDING QUESTION:

How did opposition to the Alien and Sedition Acts lead to the formation of a more perfect union?

## OVERVIEW

In 1798, the Federalist-dominated U.S. Congress passed a series of laws known collectively as the Alien and Sedition Acts. These laws put significant limitations on immigrants' rights and curtailed freedom of speech and the press. In this lesson, students will analyze sources and engage in a class discussion to develop an understanding of the varied perspectives taken by participants in the debate over the Acts.

## OBJECTIVES

At the conclusion of this activity, students will be able to:

- > Analyze primary source documents and discuss the major arguments in support of or opposition to the Alien and Sedition Acts;
- > Argue from the point of view of the authors of primary source documents;
- > Synthesize the ideas expressed for and against the Alien and Sedition Acts with their own views; and
- > Discuss how opposition to the Alien and Sedition Acts led to a more perfect union.

## STANDARDS CONNECTIONS

### CONNECTIONS TO COMMON CORE

- > CCSS.ELA-Reading.RH.11-12.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

- > CCSS.ELA-Writing.RH.11-12.9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- > CCSS.ELA-Speaking and Listening.RH.11-12.4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

## CONNECTIONS TO C3 FRAMEWORK

- > D1.5.9-12. Determine the kinds of sources that will be helpful in answering compelling and supporting questions, taking into consideration multiple points of view represented in the sources, the types of sources available, and the potential uses of the sources.

## DOCUMENTS USED

### PRIMARY SOURCES

The Alien and Sedition Acts, 1798  
National Archives and Records Administration  
<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/alien-and-sedition-acts>

James Madison, Virginia Resolutions, December 21, 1798  
National Archives and Records Administration  
<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-17-02-0128>

Letter, John Marshall to George Washington, January 8, 1799  
National Archives and Records Administration  
<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/06-03-02-0216>

Letter, Virginia Freeholders from Prince Edward County to John Adams, August 20, 1798  
National Archives and Records Administration  
<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-2859>

Thomas Jefferson, Resolutions Adopted by the Kentucky General Assembly (Kentucky Resolutions), November 10, 1798  
National Archives and Records Administration  
<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-30-02-0370-0004>

## TEACHER-CREATED MATERIAL

- > Debate Organizer

## ACTIVITY PREPARATION

- > Make one copy of the Debate Organizer for each group of students.
- > Organize students into five groups of four or five students each.
- > Arrange the classroom for group work.
- > Ensure all students have a device to access the primary sources (or print copies if needed).
- > Ensure students have basic knowledge of the Alien and Sedition Acts and the Quasi-War with France before beginning this lesson.

## CONNECTIONS

Political debate is crucial to democracy. This resource includes lessons that explore historical debates over school integration, civil rights, immigration, and voting rights. These themes demonstrate the evolution of American democracy.

## PROCEDURE

### ACTIVITY ONE: DEBATE PREPARATION (25 MINUTES)

- > Organize students into five groups and distribute the Debate Organizer.
- > Assign group leaders to facilitate each group's discussion and activities.
- > Assign each group of students one of the primary perspectives with the corresponding primary source document.
- > Review the instructions and give students time to prepare for the debate by discussing and taking notes on the questions on the organizer.
- > Circulate and monitor as needed.
- > Ask each group leader to ensure each member is prepared to discuss the group's perspective on the Acts during the debate.
- > Ask each group to prepare an opening statement that summarizes their group's position. The statement should be less than two minutes long when expressed verbally.

### ACTIVITY TWO: DEBATE (25 MINUTES)

- > Facilitate a debate between the various factions. Remind students that in the debate, they are speaking from the point of view of the primary sources and not from their own perspectives.
- > Prompt group leaders to express their groups' respective positions by reading or reciting their opening statements one after the other.
- > Open the debate by allowing one of the factions that opposed the Acts (at any level) to respond to the faction that strongly supports them.
- > Prompt the latter faction to respond to the opposing faction.
- > Choose a different opposing faction to respond to any of the points previously stated.
- > Repeat these steps for the remaining opposition faction.
- > Ask the faction that moderately supports the Acts to respond to both the opposition and the faction that strongly favors the Acts.
- > Allow members of other factions to "chime in" as time permits. Rotate between factions as much as possible to avoid one faction from dominating the discussion.

### ACTIVITY THREE: REFLECTION DISCUSSION (25 MINUTES)

- > Ask students to respond to the following questions based on prior knowledge and information discussed in the debate. Ensure that the discussion is not dominated by a few students. Encourage students to express their own thoughts regardless of what faction they were assigned to in the debate. Questions can include:
  - » *What motivated the Fifth Congress and President John Adams to implement the Acts?*
  - » *What implications did the Acts have for immigration policy and the government's role in protecting civil liberties?*
  - » *What were the major objections that those opposed to the Acts expressed?*
  - » *Why do you think there was a diversity of opinion among those who supported the Acts?*
  - » *Why do you think there was a diversity of opinion among those who opposed the Acts?*

### ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

- > Ask students to respond to the following prompt in written or spoken format: *To what extent did opposition to the Alien and Sedition Acts contribute to a more perfect union?*
- > Ask students to volunteer to share their responses with a partner or with the class.

### STUDENTS INTERESTED IN THIS TOPIC MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN RESEARCHING THE FOLLOWING FOR AN NHD PROJECT

- > The Formation of the First Party System in the U.S. (c. 1789–1801)
- > The French Revolution (1789–1799)
- > The Election of 1800
- > The Napoleonic Wars (1799–1815)
- > The War of 1812 (1812–1815)

To access a PDF containing all of the sources and materials to complete this lesson plan, go to:

**[NHD.ORG/250](https://nhd.org/250)**

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### RELATED RESOURCES

Curriculum: The First American Party System: Events, Issues, and Positions

<https://edsitement.neh.gov/curricula/first-american-party-system-events-issues-and-positions>

Lesson Plan: Lesson 1: From the President's Lips: The Concerns that Led to the Sedition (and Alien) Act

<https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plans/lesson-1-presidents-lips-concerns-led-sedition-and-alien-act>

Lesson Plan: Lesson 2: The United States, France, and the Problem of Neutrality, 1796–1801

<https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plans/lesson-2-united-states-france-and-problem-neutrality-1796-1801>

# DEBATE ORGANIZER

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To prepare for our debate, read and carefully analyze your group’s assigned document. Discuss and take notes on the following questions:

- > *What are the major points raised by the author?*
- > *What groups/factions does the author most likely represent?*
- > *What political motivations might the author hold?*
- > *What are the likely objections raised to the author’s position?*

If you have extra time, research the other sides of the debate.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Group One:</b> <i>Strong Supporters</i> of the Alien and Sedition Acts</p> <p>The Alien and Sedition Acts, 1798 <a href="https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/alien-and-sedition-acts">https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/alien-and-sedition-acts</a></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Group Two:</b> <i>Moderate Supporters</i> of the Alien and Sedition Acts</p> <p>Letter, John Marshall to George Washington, January 8, 1799 <a href="https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/06-03-02-0216">https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/06-03-02-0216</a></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Group Three:</b> <i>Moderate Opposition</i> to the Alien and Sedition Acts</p> <p>Letter, Virginia Freeholders from Prince Edward County to John Adams, August 20, 1798 <a href="https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-2859">https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-2859</a></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Group Four:</b> <i>Strong Opposition</i> to the Alien and Sedition Acts</p> <p>James Madison, Virginia Resolutions, December 21, 1798 <a href="https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-17-02-0128">https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-17-02-0128</a></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Group Five:</b> <i>Very Strong Opposition</i> to the Alien and Sedition Acts</p> <p>Thomas Jefferson, Resolutions Adopted by the Kentucky General Assembly (Kentucky Resolutions), November 10, 1798 <a href="https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-30-02-0370-0004">https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-30-02-0370-0004</a></p>	

