

Lesson Five

Partisan politics destroys the friendship of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

Objectives

Students will be able to explain how:

- 1) John Adams's and Thomas Jefferson's different political beliefs caused them to join separate parties.
- 2) Adams and Jefferson began to distrust each other.

Materials

- 1) **5.1:** Letters of John Adams and Abigail Adams that demonstrate distrust of Jefferson.
- 2) **5.2:** Letters of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson that show the disintegration of their friendship.

Lesson Outline

- Cover John Adams's vice presidency, his victory over Jefferson in the election of 1796 and his defeat by Jefferson in 1800.
- Divide the class into four groups. Give each group two letters. Have groups read letters, discuss what the letters are saying and record this information in their notebooks. When groups have completed this task have them report their findings to the class.
- Use group findings to piece together the falling out of the Adamses and Jefferson and the birth of party politics in America.

5.1

John and Abigail Adams's letters during the elections of 1796 and 1800.

Introduction

Jefferson and Adams became political rivals in 1796 when the two ran for president on their respective party tickets. Adams beat Jefferson in 1796 and Jefferson became his vice president. In 1800, Jefferson ran again and defeated Adams. What was a very close political bond and friendship slowly fell apart.

Abigail Adams to John Adams, 27 November 1796

Excerpted from Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 27 November 1796 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

Quincy Novbr. 27 1796 Sunday Eve

My Dearest Friend

Winter has caught you on the Road I presume for a colder day than this we seldom have in Janry. You will want to hear how the Farming goes on. The Letters inclosed which I received last evening have put it all out of my Head, and almost put out my Eyes to read. No other than the printed duplicate has come to Hand. I send you both Yours and mine, both of which are important at this time when the plots are unfolding. They are a clue to all the whole System of Electionering under foreign influence which in a greater or less degree pervades every State in the union. They will afford but Sorry comfort to You whether destined to publick or private Life. If to private, "O! Save my Country Heaven" if we are to receive a President¹ from the French Nation. What is to be our Fate? [...]

[...] We are told here that under the Jefferson ticket the voters distinguished themselves by wearing the National [illegible] cockade². Can they have become so openly and bold? [...]

My best my sincerely affectionate Regards to the President and Mrs. Washington. If any people on earth are to be envyd they are the ones. Not for what they have been in power and Authority but for their transit.

Once more adieu ever ever Yours,
A ADAMS

¹ Jefferson.

²Symbol of the French Revolutionaries.

John Adams to Abigail Adams, December 14, 1798
Excerpted from Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 14 December 1798 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.
<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

Dec. 14. [17]98

My Dearest Friend

Rejoice with me, that I have this Day finished my Ceremonies with the two Houses. Their Answers to the Speech have been civil and I have given them civil Replies.

[...]

The dangerous Vice is not arrived. If I was ever absent so long when I was the dangerous Vice they did not spare to confuse me. But nothing is now Said.

Gen. Washington is gone to Mount Vernon to day. Gen. Pinckney goes to Charleston next Week. We are not afraid of an Invasion from France this Winter. Adieu.

J.A.

Abigail Adams to John Adams, December 31, 1798
Excerpted from Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 December 1798 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.
<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

Quincy Decbr. 31 17[9]8

My dearest Friend

[...] It is thought the VP. stays away from very bad motives. I am told he is considered here as the Head of the opposition, to Government both in the old dominion and Kentucky. He ~~has~~ is certainly acting a part, that he will find hard to justify.

[...]

The weather is fine to day. Can you get time to walk, or to Ride?

I am with the tenderest affection.

ever yours
A ADAMS

John Adams to Abigail Adams, November 15, 1800
Excerpted from Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 15 November 1800 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.
<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

Washington Nov. 15. 1800

My dearest Friend

[...] I am of opinion however that he³ would prefer Mr. J. [Jefferson] to me. And so would Some others. Some of these are desirous of Confusion, and a dissolution of the Confederacy. Some in hopes of getting a new Constitution more to their minds, Some I fear in hopes of dividing the Continent, and Sitting up two or three Confederacies, and Some perhaps in hopes of making an Army necessary.

The opposite Party too are divided into many Sects, as the World will see, if they succeed in their Choice. Their Man⁴ will not be found to be the Man of all their People: No nor a Majority of them. He is not thorough going enough. He is not daring and desperate enough. In short one half the Nation has analyzed itself, within 18 months, past and the other will analyze itself in 18 months more. By that time this Nation if it has any Eyes, will see itself in a Glass. I hope it will not have reason to be too much disgusted with its own Countenance.

But I wander. Yours with an Affection that will never end or be diminished but with the Life of

JA

³ Alexander Hamilton

⁴ Jefferson

5.2

The disintegration of a friendship

In 1791, Jefferson sent some notes of encouragement to a printer who planned to publish Thomas Paine's essay the Rights of Man. In these notes he commented on the fact that he felt Paine's work to be a good defense against an article Adams had written defending the British form of government. Jefferson had no idea his comments would be published with Paine's essay and made public, but they were, and were viewed by many to be a direct attack against John Adams.

Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, July 17, 1791
Excerpted from *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, pages 245–247

P[h]iladelphia July 17. 1791

DEAR SIR

I have a dozen times taken up my pen to write to you and as often laid it down again, suspended between opposing considerations. I determine however to write from a conviction that truth, between candid minds, can never do harm.

[...] That you and I differ in our ideas of the best form of government is well known to us both: but we have differed as friends should do, respecting the purity of each other's motives, and confining our difference of opinion to private conversation. And I can declare with truth in the presence of the almighty that nothing was further from my intention or expectation than to have had either my own or your name brought before the public on this occasion.

[...] Be so good as to present my respectful compliments to Mrs. Adams and to accept assurances of the sentiments of sincere esteem and respect with which I am Dear Sir Your friend and servant.

TH: JEFFERSON

Braintree July 29. 1791

DEAR SIR

Yesterday, at Boston, I received your friendly Letter of July 17th. with great pleasure. I give full credit to your relation of the manner in which your note was written and prefixed to the Philadelphia edition of Mr. Paines pamphlet on the rights of Man: but the misconduct of the person, who committed this breach of your confidence, by making it publik, whatever were his intentions, has sown the Seeds of more evils, than he can ever atone for. The Pamphlet, with your name, to so striking a recommendation to it, was not only industriously propogated in New York and Boston; but, that the recommendation might be known to every one, was reprinted with great care in the Newspapers, and was generally considered as a direct and open personal attack upon me, by countenancing the false interpretation of my Writings as favouring the Introduction of hereditary Monarchy and Aristocracy into this Country. The Question every where was, What Heresies are intended by the Secretary of State⁵? [...]

You observe “That You and I differ in our Ideas of the best form of Government is well known to us both.” But, my dear Sir, you will give me leave to say, that I do not know this. I know not what your Idea is of the best form of Government. You and I have never had a serious conversation together that I can recollect concerning the nature of Government. The very transient hints that have ever passed between Us have been jocular and superficial, without ever coming to any explanation. If You suppose that I have or ever had a design or desire, of attempting to introduce a Government of King, Lords and Commons [...] you are wholly mistaken. [...]

I must own to you that the daring Traits of Ambition and Intrigue, and those unbridled Rivalries which have already appeared, are the most melancholly and alarming Symptoms that I have ever seen in this Country: and if they are to be encouraged to proceed in their Course, the sooner I am relieved from Competition the happier I shall be.

[...] Dear Sir Your most obedient and most humble Servant

JOHN ADAMS

⁵ Jefferson

Monticello Dec. 28. 1796

DEAR SIR

The public and the public papers have been much occupied lately in placing us in a point of opposition to each other. I trust with confidence that less of it has been felt by ourselves personally. [...] Since the day too on which you signed the treaty of Paris our horizon was never so overcast. I devoutly wish you may be able to shun for us this war by which our agriculture, commerce and credit will be destroyed. If you are, the glory will be all your own; and that your administration may be filled with glory and happiness to yourself and advantage to us in the sincere wish of one who tho', in the course of our voyage thro' life, various little incidents have happened or been contrived to separate us, retains still for you the solid esteem of the moments when we were working for our independence, and sentiments of respect and affectionate attachment.

TH: JEFFERSON

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, February 20, 1801
The Adams-Jefferson Letters, page 263

Washington Feb. 20. 1801

SIR

In order to save you the trouble and Expence of purchasing Horses and Carriages, which will not be necessary, I have to inform you that I shall leave in the stables of the United States seven Horses and two Carriages with Harness and Property of the United States. These may not be suitable for you: but they will certainly save you a considerable Expence as they belong to the studd of the President's Household. I have the honor to be with great respect Sir your most obedient and humble servant,

JOHN ADAMS