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Alien and Sedition Acts - I

Lead: During the 1790s, partly in response to war fever, but also as an assault on their political enemies the Republicans, the Federalist majority in Congress passed three of the most reprehensible laws in U.S. History, the Alien Acts and Sedition Act.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: In the history of the United States there are probably only two periods during which the Republic's survival was seriously threatened. The most obvious time of

peril was in the 1860s. There were armies, Southern armies, in the field engaged in open and mutinous rebellion. With Abraham Lincoln determined to prevent a dissolution of the Union and willing to commit arms to that enterprise, the nation decided on the battlefield and with the blood of its children the two great issues of state sovereignty and slavery.

The first great period of peril and one that has not often received much historical scrutiny, is the full first decade of our national life following the ratification of the Constitution, the 1790s. First of all, the United States was engaged a broad and unprecedented experiment in republican government. With the

possible exception of the short-lived Roman Republic, a few Swiss cantons and Greek city-states, America was sailing in uncharted waters. Secondly, those waters were infested with large sharks, so to speak. In the 1790s the U.S. came perilously close to war with both Great Britain and France, wars, which we did not need and might have lost.

By 1798 war with France seemed imminent and war fever began to grip the public. There were fights in the streets between admirers of France and ready to do battle with the French. Such public anger can be very useful to clever politicians who try to use the whipped-up anger to settle political scores. The majority Federalists

attempted to divert the political energy born of war fever into a campaign against their enemies, Thomas Jefferson's Republicans. In the hot, sticky, fly-infested Philadelphia summer of 1798, Congress passed and President Adams signed three of the most insidious pieces of legislation to become law. Next time: the Alien Act, the Naturalization Act, and the Sedition Act.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

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