

Volume 9

Number 065

The Alien and Sedition Acts – III

Lead: Attempting to damage their political enemies, Thomas Jefferson's Republicans, in 1798 the Federalist majority in Congress put the final nail in their own political coffin.

Intro: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts

Content: Anger against France was in the air. War seemed imminent. The people were aroused and the Federalists in Congress, alarmed at the growing power of republican followers of Thomas Jefferson, decided to settle some political scores.

They passed and pressed an allegedly reluctant President John Adams to sign, the Alien Acts and the Sedition Act, three of the most reprehensible pieces of legislation in U.S. history. The Alien Acts more than doubled the time immigrants had to live in the U.S. before achieving citizenship and, in addition, allowed the President to unilaterally deport foreigners he considered dangerous. The Sedition Act provided penalties for those convicted of criticizing the U.S., the Congress or the President.

The targets were obvious. French and Irish immigrants almost all tended to support the Republicans and nearly all of the more than two dozen prosecuted under the Sedition

Act were Republican newspaper editors or activists. It was a transparent exercise in political repression and in clear violation of the First Amendment's protection of free speech. Reaction was swift and vigorous. The Virginia and Kentucky legislatures passed resolves authored by James Madison and Jefferson respectively, which denounced the Acts as unconstitutional. In 1799 disputes with France were resolved and when war fever subsided and rationality returned, the public began to turn against this perceived constitutional coup. Voters swept aside the Federalists in the Republican electoral tidal wave in the elections of 1800, thus helping push the Federalists onto their long slide to

political oblivion.

**At the University of Richmond,
this is Dan Roberts.**

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