American History Play

How far should a President go to preserve “an honorable peace”?

Unnecessary War

Adapted from John Adams, the HBO Films and Playtone miniseries, written by Kirk Ellis, based on the book written by David McCullough.

PROLOGUE

Prologue narrator: John Adams is largely remembered as a hero of the American Revolution [1775-1783]. He was one of the first Americans to call for independence from Britain. He nominated George Washington to command the Continental Army, and encouraged Thomas Jefferson to write the Declaration of Independence. Adams was widely known as a passionate supporter of liberty—for slaves as well as for the Colonies.

But Adams's accomplishments as the second President of the United States are mostly forgotten. If not for his determination and strength, the nation might have been ruined by war before it ever got a chance to grow strong.

Characters*

John Adams, second President of the United States

Thomas Jefferson, his Vice President (later, third President of the United States)

James McHenry, Secretary of War

Timothy Pickering, Secretary of State

Oliver Wolcott Jr., Secretary of the Treasury

Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams

John Marshall, Adams's envoy to France

Gilbert Fox, an actor

Crowd, audience at a play

Prologue narrator

Narrators A-E

Epilogue narrator

*All characters were real people.
**SCENE 1**

**Narrator A:** John Adams is sworn in as President on March 4, 1797, in the nation's capital, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His first big challenge is already brewing. On March 5, while walking with Thomas Jefferson—his friend, political rival, and Vice President...  

**John Adams:** We must find a solution to this misunderstanding with France, yet keep our nation’s honor.  

**Thomas Jefferson:** France helped us win the Revolution, Mr. President. We owe them much for that.  

**Adams:** But now the French have captured more than 300 of our trading ships. They tortured one captain with thumbscrews! Barbaric! I want to send an envoy to help work things out. You served us well in France during the Revolution. Will you go? I can think of no one better.  

**Jefferson:** But we are of different parties, John. We’re rivals! I’m your Vice President only because I came in second in the voting. Would you be sending me overseas to keep me from challenging your authority?  

**Adams:** Of course not! I ask because this country needs help with France, and the French consider you a friend.  

**Jefferson:** I cannot accept that job.  

**Adams:** Are you saying this as my Vice President? Or as the head of your party?  

**Jefferson:** We’ve always had different ideas about the best form of government, John.  

**Adams:** But we’ve always differed as friends, respecting each other’s beliefs. Must we play politics? You told me once that I would always have your friendship.  

**Jefferson:** You have it.  

**Adams:** But not your support! Good day, Thomas.  

**Jefferson:** Good day, John.  

**Narrator B:** They walk off—in opposite directions.

**SCENE 2**

**Narrator C:** In May 1797, Adams meets with his Cabinet. Adams had kept George Washington’s advisers instead of choosing his own.  

**James McHenry:** It is quite clear. War with France is unavoidable.  

**Adams:** War is never unavoidable, Mr. McHenry. Beware the guilt of an unnecessary war.  

**Timothy Pickering:** But Mr. President! We must—  

**Adams:** I hope, sirs, that you will respect my wishes as you did our previous President’s.  

**Oliver Wolcott Jr.:** But France must respect this country!  

**McHenry:** We should build a strong national army. That would command more respect than the states’ scattered militias.  

**Adams:** It is too early to speak of armies and war, gentlemen. I kept you all in your posts for the sake of national unity. Do not make me regret that decision!  

*Continued on next page →*

**Words to Know**

- **Cabinet:** a group of top-level advisers to a head of state.  
- **envoy:** a government representative sent on a special mission of diplomacy.  
- **Samson:** an Old Testament hero known for his immense strength.  
- **tribute:** payment made by one nation to another to show gratitude, respect, or submission.
SCENE 3
Narrator D: That night, at home...
Abigail Adams: You look troubled.
John Adams: It was so frustrating. Abigail! My thoughts are so clear in my mind. But when I speak, they seem to lose their power.
Abigail: There’s nothing wrong with your words, John. The problem is the prejudices of the people you’re talking to. They cling to their old ideas, and don’t want to hear new ones.
John: This country cannot survive a war! It is too young, not yet established. To build an army and attack another country—what can they be thinking? They seem more concerned with their own ambitions than with what’s best for the nation.
Abigail: Be true to your ideals, John. But if war comes, we must be ready. You must be ready.

SCENE 4
Narrator E: It is March 1798. Adams is reading a letter, outraged by what it says. With him is John Marshall, his envoy to France.
Adams: I send you to seek peace, and this is how France’s Foreign Minister responds? Doesn’t he realize what such disrespect can lead to?
John Marshall: He thinks you will avoid war at all costs. So instead of talking, he asks for money!
Adams: If word of this insult gets out, the people will demand war. But if I don’t release the facts, Mr. Jefferson and his party will claim that I’m playing politics with them.
Marshall: Perhaps you should seek his support, Mr. President.
Narrator A: Marshall leaves, and Jefferson arrives. He reads the letter from France in shocked surprise.
Jefferson: Mr. Talleyrand refuses to meet until we pay him $250,000!
Adams: And another $10 million to the French government and its officials! Talks are important, but I will do nothing to harm the safety, honor, or interests of this nation.
Jefferson: We shouldn’t blame the entire French government for what Mr. Talleyrand has asked.
Adams: Mr. Talleyrand is the French government!
Jefferson: You’ve always insisted that you wanted peace.
Adams: I still do. If there is to be war, Mr. Jefferson, it will be France’s doing, not mine!

SCENE 5
Narrator B: As word gets out about France’s demands, Americans start to rally around their President. One evening in April 1798, Adams and his wife attend a play...
John: I don’t much feel like going out in public. The people have always seen me as a poor replacement for George Washington.
Abigail: They understand little about politics. If you had declared war immediately, they would have loved you all along. They don’t realize how disastrous it would have been.
John: Better to be unpopular than go to war for the wrong reasons.
Narrator C: An actor on stage sees John and Abigail in the balcony. He stops the show and points to them.
Gilbert Fox: Three cheers for our President! May he slay thousands of Frenchmen like a mighty Samson!
Crowd: Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!
Narrator D: The crowd shouts out a popular new slogan.
Crowd: “Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute!”
Abigail (smiling): It seems they have come to love you, John.
John: They aren’t cheering for me, just expressing their anger at France. They will turn again at a moment’s notice. A mob is no less a mob because you have its support.

SCENE 6
Narrator E: In May 1800, Adams fires his Cabinet for continuing to insist on war. Marshall, the new Secretary of State, has been in Paris, negotiating a peace agreement. That November, the President and Mrs. Adams move into the unfinished
President’s Mansion (later called the White House) in Washington, D.C. The new capital barely exists—it is being built on swampland. Later that month, Marshall returns from France.

**Adams:** I pray you bring good news!

**Marshall:** On October 3, Mr. President, we signed a treaty with France. A copy for the Senate to ratify [approve] is on its way.

**Adams:** Well done. We have peace, Mr. Marshall—an honorable peace!

**Marshall:** Has it come too late to help your re-election campaign?

**Adams:** Yes, but so be it. Returning to office with blood on my hands would not be a victory.

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**SCENE 7**

**Narrator A:** In the election of November 1800, Adams comes in second. Tied for first are Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr. The House of Representatives isn’t able to agree on a winner until February 1801. Marshall, whom Adams appointed Chief Justice the month before, visits the President’s Mansion.

**Marshall:** It has been settled at last. Mr. Jefferson will be President.

**Adams:** He is fortunate that I’ve left him with a country to preside over. My presidency has faced many complaints. But leading this nation into a ruinous war is not among them.

**Marshall:** You’re all right, then?

**Adams:** A weight has been lifted from my shoulders. I shall be content as Farmer John instead of President Adams. It is a good exchange.

**Narrator B:** When Jefferson is inaugurated on March 4, 1801, Adams is already on his way home to Massachusetts. Instead of traveling in a fine carriage, he takes a crowded, public coach. Passengers who recognize him stare in amazement.

**Adams:** Stop gawking! I am plain John Adams. Just an ordinary citizen—the same as yourselves!

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**EPILOGUE**

**Epilogue narrator:** Adams lived to see his son, John Quincy Adams, sworn in as the sixth President.

In 1812, Adams wrote to Jefferson: “You and I ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other.” The old friends went on to exchange many letters and ideas. They died on the same day—July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

—Scholastic adaptation by Kathy Wilmore

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**WHO’S NEXT?**

How did John Adams, candidate of the Federalist Party, end up with a Vice President from the Democratic-Republican Party? When writing the Constitution, the Founding Fathers didn’t allow for political parties. There weren’t any. Article II of the Constitution simply states that “after the choice of President, the person having the greatest number of votes of the electors shall be Vice President.”

But candidates of opposing parties campaigning with different goals didn’t change their ideals on Inauguration Day. Instead of working together, Presidents and Vice Presidents tended to butt heads.

Clearly, that was an inefficient way to run a government. Congress fixed the problem by writing the 12th Amendment. Approved by the states in 1804, it allows each party to nominate its own vice-presidential as well as presidential candidate.