



George Washington on the Sedition Act

[George Washington to Alexander Spotswood, November 22, 1798](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw370024)))

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And Consider to what lengths a Certain description of men in our Country have already driven and even resolved to further drive matters and then ask themselves if it is not time and expedient to resort to protecting Laws against aliens for Citizens you certainly know are not affected by that law) who acknowledge no allegiance to this Country, and in many instances are sent among us [as there is the best Circumstantial evidence to prove] for the express purpose of poisoning the minds of our people and to sow dissentions among them, in order to alienate their affections from the Government of their Choice, thereby endeavoring to dissolve the Union, and of Course the fair and happy prospects which were unfolding to our view from the Revolution.

[George Washington to William V. Murray, December 26, 1798](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw370041)))

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Mr. Envoy Logan, who arrived at Philadelphia about the time I did, brings very *flattering* accounts of the Disposition of the French Directory *towards this Country* . He has dined with one, supped with another, and in short has been as familiar with them all, (that were in place) as the hand is with its glove: and is not a little employed in propagating this Doctrine in all parts of the U: States by means of the Presses which are at the command of that Party. He says the inclination of France to be upon good terms with the United States is *now* so strong, that it *must* be our own mismanagement, and disinclination to Peace, if matters with that Country are not accommodated upon terms honorable and advantageous to this. 35

[Note 35: On Jan. 30, 1799, the President approved “An Act for the punishment of certain crimes therein specified,” which described precisely activities like those of Dr. Logan, and affixed a punishment of a fine not exceeding \$5,000, and imprisonment of not less than 6 months, not more than 3 years. A similar law is now in force.]

The Alien and Sedition Laws, 37 are now the desiderata in the Opposi[t]ion. But any thing else would have done; and something there will always be, for them to torture, and to disturb the public mind with their unfounded and ill favored forebodings.

[George Washington to John Marshall, December 30, 1798](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw370046)))

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The Alien and Sedition Laws having employed many Pens, and we hear a number of tongues, in the Assembly of this State; the latter, I understand, to a very pernicious purpose; I send you the production of Judge Addison on these subjects. Whether any new lights are cast upon them by his charge, you will be better able to decide when you have read it. My opinion is, that if this, or

other writings flashed conviction as clear as the Sun in its Meredian brightness, k would produce no effect in the conduct of the leaders of opposition; who, have points to carry, from which nothing will divert them in the prosecution. When you have read the charge give it to Bushrod Washington, or place it to any other uses you may think proper. I wish success to your Election, most sincerely, and if it should fail [of which I hope there is not the least danger] I shall not easily forgive myself for being urgent with you to take a Poll. I offer you the compliments of the Season, and with much truth remain etc.

[George Washington to Bushrod Washington, December 31, 1798](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw370049)))

[[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(gw370049\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw370049)))]

By this conveyance, I have sent to Genl Marshall, Judge Addison's charge to the Grand Juries of the County Courts of the fifth Circuit, of the State of Pennsylvania, and requested, after he had read it, to give it to you, or dispose of it in any other manner he might think proper. This charge is on the Liberty of Speech and of the Press, and is a justification of the Sedition and Alien Laws.

But I do not believe that any thing contained in it; in Evans's 41 Pamphlet; 42 or in any other writing, will produce the least change in the conduct of the leaders of opposition, to the measures of the General Government. They have points to carry, from which no reasoning, no inconsistency of conduct, no absurdity, can divert them. If, however, such writings should produce conviction in the minds of those who have, hitherto, placed faith in their assertions, it will be a fortunate event for this Country.

[George Washington to Patrick Henry, January 15, 1799](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw370056)))

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It would be a waste of time, to attempt to bring to the view of a person of your observation and discernment, the endeavors of a certain party among us, to disquiet the Public mind among us with unfounded alarms; to arraign every act of the Administration; to set the People at variance with their Government; and to embarrass all its measures. Equally useless would it be to predict what must be the inevitable consequences, of such policy, if it cannot be arrested.

Unfortunately, and extremely do I regret it, the State of Virginia has taken the lead in this opposition. I have said the *State*, Because the conduct of its Legislature in the Eyes of the world, will authorise the expression; because it is an incontrovertable fact, that the principle leaders of the opposition dwell in it; and because no doubt is entertained, I believe, that with the help of the Chiefs in other States, all the plans are arranged; and systematically pursued by their followers in other parts of the Union; though in no State except Kentucky (that I have heard of) has Legislative countenance been obtained, beyond Virginia. 47

[Note 47: The "Kentucky Resolutions," so called, were adopted by that legislature Nov. 16, 1798; Virginia adopted similar resolves December 24. The gist of both sets of resolutions was that a State had the right to nullify an act of Congress, to which it did not accede. Thomas Jefferson drafted the Kentucky resolutions, and James Madison those passed by the Virginia legislature. The cause of the adoption of these resolutions was the Alien and Sedition laws.]