



Jefferson on the Alien and Sedition Acts

Source: “[Jefferson on the Alien and Sedition Acts, page 30 of the Jefferson Cyclopedia](#)” [<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/foley-browse?id=JC0056>] on the Electronic Text Center of the University of Virginia, a link from the EDSITEMent resource **Internet Public Library** [<http://www.ipl.org/>].

To James Madison, June 1798

They have brought into the lower House a sedition bill, which, among other enormities, undertakes to make printing certain matters criminal, though one of the amendments to the Constitution has so expressly taken religion, printing presses, &c. out of their *coercion* (ability to limit them). Indeed this bill, and the alien bill are both so *palpably* [obviously] in the teeth of the Constitution as to show they mean to pay no respect to *it* [the Constitution]. --

Kentucky Resolutions, 1798

If the Alien and Sedition Acts should stand, these conclusions would flow from them: that the *General Government* (federal government) may place any act they think proper on the list of crimes, and punish it themselves whether *enumerated* [specified] or not enumerated by the Constitution as *cognizable by them* [falling under the jurisdiction of Congress]: that they may transfer its cognizance to the President, or any other person, who may himself be the accuser, counsel, judge and jury, whose suspicion may be the evidence, his order the sentence, his officer the executioner, and his breast the sole record of the transaction: that a very numerous and valuable description of the inhabitants of these states being, by this precedent, reduced, as outlaws, to the absolute dominion of one man, and the barrier of the Constitution thus swept away from us all, no *rampart* [protection] now remains against the passions and the powers of a majority in Congress to protect ...the minority of the same body, the legislatures, judges, governors, and counselors of the States, nor their other peaceable inhabitants, who may venture to reclaim the constitutional rights and liberties of the States and people, or who for other causes, good or bad, may be obnoxious to the views, or marked by the suspicions of the President, or be thought dangerous to his or their election, or other interests, public or personal: that the friendless alien has indeed been selected as the safest subject of a first experiment; but the citizen will soon follow, or rather, has already followed, for already has a Sedition Act marked him as its prey: that these and successive acts of the same character, unless arrested at the threshold, necessarily drive these States into revolution and blood, and will furnish new *calumnies* [false accusations] against republican government, and new pretexts for those who wish it to be believed that man cannot be governed but by a rod of iron.

To James Madison, January 1799

Petitions and *remonstrances* [protests] against the Alien and Sedition laws are coming from various parts of New York, Jersey and Pennsylvania. I am in hopes Virginia will stand so countenanced by those States as to repress the wishes of the Government to coerce her, which they might venture on if they supposed she would be left alone. Firmness on our part, but a passive firmness, is the true course. Anything rash or threatening might check the favorable dispositions of these middle States, and rally them again around *the measures which are ruining us* (the Alien and Sedition Acts). --

To Edward Pendleton, February 1799

In Pennsylvania, we fear that the ill-designing may produce *insurrection* (revolt against the Alien and Sedition laws). Nothing could be so fatal. Anything like force would check the progress of the public opinion, and rally them around the government. This is not the kind of opposition the American people will permit. But keep away all show of force, and they will *bear down the evil propensities of the government* (work against abuses of power by the government), by the constitutional means of election and petition. --

To James Madison, February 1799

Yesterday witnessed a scandalous scene in the House of Representatives. It was the day for taking up the report of their committee against the Alien and Sedition laws, &c. They [the Federalists] held a caucus and determined that not a word should be spoken on their side, in answer to anything which should be said on the other. Gallatin *took up* [began a discussion of objections to] the Alien, and Nicholas the Sedition law; but after a little while of common silence, they began to enter into loud conversations, laugh, cough, &c., so that for the last hour of these gentlemen's speaking, they must have had the lungs of a *vendue master* [an auctioneer] to have been heard. Livingston, however, attempted to speak. But after a few sentences, the Speaker called him to order, and told him what he was saying was not to the question. It was impossible to proceed. The question was carried in favor of the report, 52 to 48; the real strength of the two parties is 56 to 50. --