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HIST 1700-F10
E-Portfolio Document

As we draw to a close of the Fall 2010 Semester, I am faced with answering the question, “What is the single most important historical theme, issue or event you learned about in this class and how has it affected the way you look at the country you live in today?” I’ve sat with this question for several weeks now, wondering how I want to answer it and looking at which subjects from this course have had the greatest impact on my life. As it drew near to time to submit my paper, I was juggling between the studying of the Alien and Sedition Acts in the second section of this course and the most recent section wherein we studied the Clinton administration. The Alien and Sedition Acts won out because of the emotional impact it had on me at the time regarding what had happened then and how it relates to my world today.

In answer to that above question, I will post my paper based on my research on the Alien and Sedition Acts. I spent many hours researching *only* this topic because I was so intrigued with what was going on in the minds of the government officials of that day. I was trying to understand *what* exactly they had done. And, then, when I discovered that, I simply *had* to understand *why* they would choose to do what they did – mostly because what I was reading about the times “back then” was startlingly familiar to what I am seeing in the world today.

I feel such compassion for the leaders of the United States of America – the people who decide the fate of the *entire* nation. They have to make their decisions based on what they *can* see, what they have been told and what they can only assume is to come. I believe they have our

best interests and safety at the root of all decisions and I have to believe that their decisions over the Alien and Sedition Acts were because of that. And if I follow that logic through, that is their intention today, as well.

Perhaps I may strongly disagree with their decisions. Perhaps I may not understand at all. Perhaps their decisions may be completely contrary to how I think, or maybe completely in line with my thinking. At any rate, after studying the Alien and Sedition Acts, I feel a sense of understanding that they have a difficult job and, at the core of it, is their responsibility to protect the nation.

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Section #2 Discussion

I've spent several days researching the Alien and Sedition Acts to garner an understanding of what, exactly, they were, why they were enacted and the results thereof. I am a visual, auditory and kinesthetic learner so I sought out any video or audio recording that could help me grasp the impact of these laws. Reading through the text of both acts, I was aghast with the pure discrimination made legal by our government in direct contradiction of the Constitution.

In 1798, the United States was facing war with France and it had most of the nation paranoid and waiting to strike. They wrote up four separate laws that came to be known as the Alien and Sedition Acts. The Naturalization Act, which changed the required years for naturalization from five to fourteen and was signed into law on June 18 and the Alien Act, which gave the President the right to deport anyone he suspected of being dangerous to the United States was passed on June 25. (The Alien & Sedition Act of 1798, 1996-2010)

In addition, the Alien Enemies Act which passed on July 6, states that any male 14 and older within the United States who is not naturalized and is a citizen of the country that is declaring war against us is to be "apprehended, restrained, secured and removed, as alien enemies." (An Act Respecting Alien Enemies, 2008) (That last particular act sounds familiar... think Japanese Internment Camps in WWII.) The final bill, the Sedition Act passed into law on July 18 and made it unlawful to gather together in uprising against the government or to write or publish anything against the government. (Sedition Acts, 2008)

According to several of the videos I watched and documents I read, President John Adams was at war with himself about signing these documents into law. He relied heavily on the men around him to relay what the people of the nation were saying. He has been quoted as saying to Thomas Jefferson, “I am entrusted with the nation’s safety,” and he eventually sided with Congress, signing these bills into law, believing there was, basically, no choice in the matter.

At that time, Congress firmly believed that these four laws, which were in complete contradiction to our Constitution, were the only way to keep our people safe. However, I believe they went far beyond what I consider to be appropriate limits on free expression. While I understand that freedom is not free, I find it to be flat-out wrong to arrest and remove someone simply because they come from a country that may be of threat to our nation. It’s a rampant practice today and people who have never given anyone reason to question them are being interrogated and treated poorly.

In one of the videos I watched, John Adams said to Thomas Jefferson, “I am determined to control events, not to be controlled by them,” (Ellis & McCullough, 2008) and I believe that was what they were truly trying to do then – control something that “may” happen. That is madness and it is the same madness we see going on every day in our government now. I understand that on September 11, 2001, our national security was shattered seemingly beyond repair, but simply because a person’s last name is Amirpour does not mean they are a terrorist.

In this same movie, a line by Thomas Jefferson stands out to me and resonates with my sentiment exactly regarding these Acts and the current condition of our nation, “Do you intend to ship out the entire French population of the United States? Along with any luckless soul who

happens to voice a contrary opinion? ... You cannot protect the nation by attacking the right of every man to speak freely without fear. You're trampling on the Constitution."

While I understand that this movie from which I am quoting is someone's version of what happened during this time, it has helped me to understand what very well could have been going on. All documentation I've poured over states that Thomas Jefferson was vehemently opposed to these bills becoming laws and he fought against them. The words the character spoke in this film are the very words I would use to answer the questions asked for this paper, "When the freedom to speak freely is at stake and fear rises because the people are afraid to speak out against their government, then there can be no peace, no matter what national security issues we face." And given that the war was not even yet officially declared, I believe that the Sedition Act was uncalled for and inappropriate beyond measure.

References:

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