

Bird

Criminal Dissent

Prosecutions Under the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798

In the first complete account of prosecutions under the Alien and Sedition Acts, dozens of previously unknown cases come to light, revealing the lengths to which the John Adams administration went in order to criminalize dissent.

The campaign to prosecute dissenting Americans under the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 ignited the first battle over the Bill of Rights. Fearing destructive criticism and "domestic treachery" by Republicans, the administration of John Adams led a determined effort to safeguard the young republic by suppressing the opposition.

The acts gave the president unlimited discretion to deport noncitizens and made it a crime to criticize the president, Congress, or the federal government. In this definitive account, Wendell Bird goes back to the original federal court records and the papers of Secretary of State Timothy Pickering and finds that the administration's zeal was far greater than historians have recognized. Indeed, there were twice as many prosecutions and planned deportations as previously believed. The government went after local politicians, raisers of liberty poles, and even tavern drunks but most often targeted Republican newspaper editors, including Benjamin Franklin's grandson. Those found guilty were sent to prison or fined and sometimes forced to sell their property to survive. The Federalists' support of laws to prosecute political opponents and opposition newspapers ultimately contributed to the collapse of the party and left a large stain on their record.

The Alien and Sedition Acts launched a foundational debate on press freedom, freedom of speech, and the legitimacy of opposition politics. The result was widespread revulsion over the government's attempt to deprive Americans of their hard-won liberties. *Criminal Dissent* is a potent reminder of just how fundamental those rights are to a stable democracy.

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