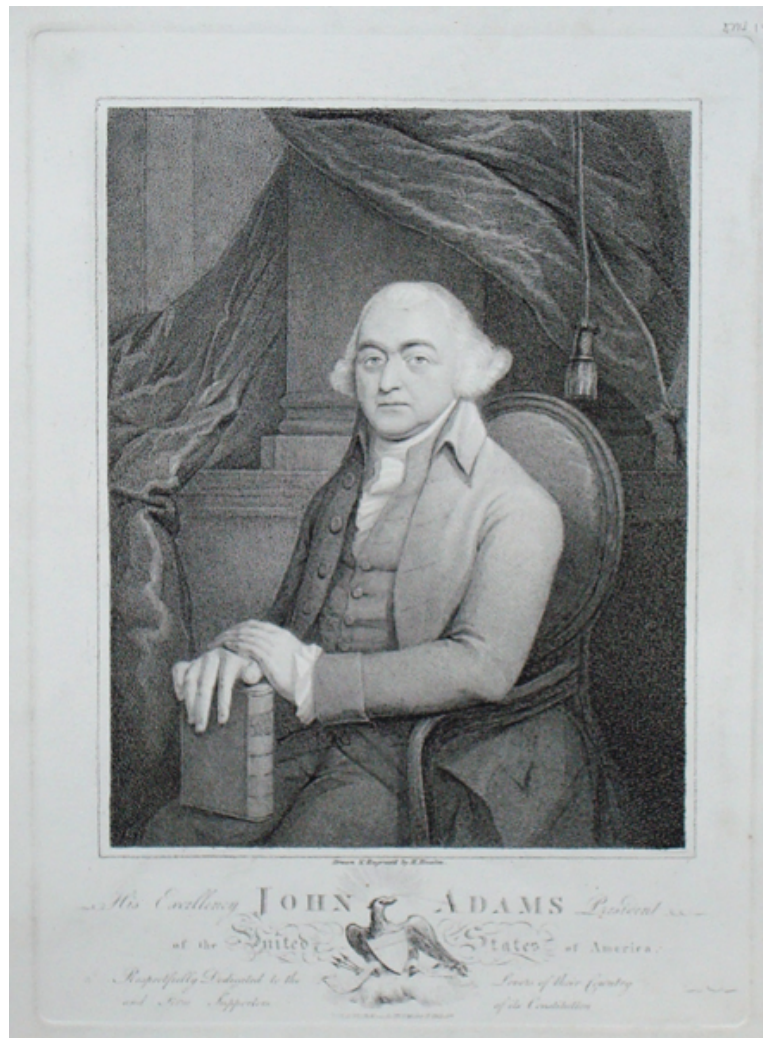


Part II



The Education of John Adams R. B. Bernstein

"Drawn & Engraved by H. Houston / His Excellency John Adams President of the United States / Respectfully Dedicated to the Lovers of their Country and Firm Supporters of its Constitution / Published by D. Kennedy 228 Market St. Philad". (ca. 1797)

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Chapter Six

“every phenomenon that occurs in the history of government”:

American Minister and Constitutional Commentator

(1784-1788)

John Adams was ambivalent about what to do after the peace treaty had established American independence. He wanted to return to America; he had even submitted his resignation as a diplomat to the Confederation Congress on 4 December 1782.¹ He could not leave Europe, however, without Congress’s authorization, and while he stayed, he let himself speculate about whether Congress would show that it valued his past services by entrusting him with another mission.

Against that background, he and Abigail engaged in a loving war of wills and desires, conducted across the Atlantic. She begged him to return home, and with equal ardor he pleaded with her to join him in London. Though she yielded at last to his entreaties, Abigail at first insisted that it was unwise for her to attempt the journey and far better for John to return to America.² Beyond her concerns about the voyage, she cited a new set of worries: What figure would she cut in London by John’s side?

Theory and practise are two very different things; and the object magnifies, as I approach nearer to it. I think if you were abroad in a private Character, and necessitated to continue there; I should not hesitate so much at comeing to you. But a mere American as I am, unacquainted with the Etiquette of courts, taught to say the thing I mean, and to wear my Heart in my countenance, I am sure I should make an awkward figure. And then it would mortify my pride if I should be thought to disgrace you. Yet strip Royalty of its pomp,

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and power, and what are its votaries more than their fellow worms? I have so little of the Ape about me; that I have refused every publick invitation to figure in the Gay World, and sequestered myself in this Humble cottage, content with rural Life and my domestick employments in the midst of which; I have sometimes Smiled, upon recollecting that I had the Honour of being allied to an Ambassador[.]³

While John and Abigail were arguing, another family matter intruded itself. Their daughter Abigail (known as Nabby) was being courted by a young man eight years her senior, Royall Tyler. A Harvard graduate and a friend of Francis Dana, Tyler had a reputation as a rake. He had charmed Abigail and persuaded her that he had reformed, but at first John was skeptical and angry that the dissolute Tyler should aspire to his daughter. He soon relented, and Nabby and Tyler became betrothed.

John informed Congress about European affairs, explaining why negotiation of commercial agreements should take place in London and hinting that he should be given that mission.⁴ On 29 October 1783, Congress voted to assign new responsibilities to the American peace commissioners. Adams, Franklin, and Jay were to open diplomatic relations and seek treaties with sixteen major European and North African powers.⁵ In 1784, Congress also elected Jay Secretary for Foreign Affairs to succeed Robert R. Livingston and chose Thomas Jefferson to take Jay's place on the negotiating team.

Jefferson arrived in Europe in August 1784. Almost immediately, he and Adams resumed their friendship and political partnership.⁶ They commiserated with each other about the difficulties of securing respect for the United States and contending with rapacious European bankers; they also shared European news and whatever American news came to hand. John had

one success – he finally persuaded Abigail to come to Europe. Though still hoping that he would come home, she admitted her sadness: “The airy delusive phantom Hope, how has she eluded my prospects. And my expectations of your return from month to month, have vanished.” But she also made clear that she wanted nothing more than to be with him, even if it was in Europe:

You invite me to you, you call me to follow you, the most earnest wish of my soul is to be with you -- but you can scarcely form an Idea of the conflict of my mind. It appears to me such an enterprize, the ocean so formidable, the quitting my habitation and my Country, leaving my Children, my Friends, with the Idea that prehaps I may never see them again, without my Husband to console and comfort me under these apprehensions -- indeed my dear Friend there are hours when I feel unequal to the trial. But on the other hand I console myself with the Idea of being joyfully and tenderly received by the best of Husbands and Friends, and of meeting a dear and long absent Son. But the difference is; my fears, and anxieties, are present; my hopes, and expectations, distant.⁷

Abigail and Nabby sailed from Boston on 20 June 1784. Writing to her sister, Elizabeth Smith Shaw, Abigail vividly described life at sea:

It is very difficult to write at sea, in the serenest Weather the vessel rolls; and exceeds the moderate rocking of a cradle, and a calm gives one more motion, than a side wind going at 7 and 8 knots an hour: I am now setting in my *State room*, which is about 8 foot square, with two Cabbins, and a chair, which compleatly fills it, and I write leaning one

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Arm upon my cabbin, with a peice of Board in my lap, whilst I steady myself by holding my other hand upon the opposite Cabbin; from this you will judge what accommodations we have for writing; the door of my room opens into the Great Cabbin where we set, dine, and the Gentlemen sleep: we cannot Breath with our door shut, so that except when we dress and undress, we live in common. A sweet Situation for a delicate Lady, but necessity has no law: and we are very fortunate, in our company.⁸

After a turbulent voyage, the Adamases arrived in London on 21 July. Two days later, Abigail expressed joy at her arrival and relief that her ordeal of ocean travel was ended:

At length Heaven be praised I am with our daughter safely landed upon the British Shore after a passage of 30 days from Boston to the Downs. We landed at Deal the 20 instant, rejoiced at any rate to set our feet again upon the land. What is past, and what we sufferd by sickness and fatigue, I will think no more of. It is all done away in the joyfull hope of soon holding to my Bosom the dearest best of Friends.....I think no inducement less than that of coming to the tenderest of Friends could ever prevail with me to cross the ocean, nor do I ever wish to try it but once more.⁹

John wrote back immediately: “Your Letter ,, has made me the happiest Man upon Earth. I am twenty Years younger than I was Yesterday.”¹⁰ Because he had to travel to Amsterdam to negotiate further loans, John did not reunite with Abigail until 7 August; then they traveled to Auteuil, outside Paris.¹¹

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Seeing his mission as only partial confirmation by Congress of his value as a diplomat, Adams hoped and moped – until he finally received the assignment that he had yearned to get. On 24 February 1785, the Confederation Congress named Adams American minister to Great Britain; the news reached him on 2 May 1785.¹² Adams would be the first American to represent his nation before his former monarch – a great honor and an unsettling challenge. At about the same time, Congress named Jefferson to succeed Franklin as American minister to France; Franklin was retiring and returning to Philadelphia.

Before any diplomacy could take place, Adams had first to meet King George III and present his credentials. John Singleton Copley’s full-length life portrait of Adams shows him as he looked when he went to court to meet the king.¹³ The audience took place on 1 June 1785. In a letter to John Jay that he wrote the day afterward, Adams reported every detail of the meeting and of his talk with the king, including his own speech to the monarch:

The Appointment of a Minister from the United States to your Majestys Court, will form an Epoque, in the History of England and of America. I think myself more fortunate, than all my fellow Citizens, in having the distinguish’d Honour, to be the first to Stand in your Majestys Royal Presence, in a diplomatic Character: and I Shall esteem myself the happiest of Men, if I can be instrumental in recommending my Country, more and more to your Majestys Royal Benevolence and of restoring an entire esteem, Confidence and Affection, or in better Words, “the old good Nature and the old good Humour” between People who, tho Separated by an Ocean and under different Governments have the Same Language, a Similar Religion and kindred Blood.— I beg your Majestys Permission

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to add, that although I have Sometimes before, been entrusted by my Country it was never in my whole Life in a manner So agreeable to myself.—¹⁴

King George's answer showed considerable emotion. After noting how "extraordinary" their meeting was, he thanked Adams for "the language you have now held[, which] is So extremely proper, and the Feelings you have discovered, So justly adapted to the Occasion." George "receive[d] with Pleasure, the Assurances of the friendly Dispositions of the United States," and expressed happiness that "the Choice has fallen upon you to be [American] Minister." The king added his view that he had "done nothing in the late Contest, but what I thought myself indispensably bound to do by the Duty which I owed to my People." Noting with frankness that he "was the last to consent to the Seperation", he admitted that American independence was now a fact, and expressed his willingness to "meet the Friendship of the United States as an independent Power." Adams's diplomatic words and behavior, the monarch added, persuaded him that he was right to do so.¹⁵

After that triumph, however, Adams found his mission frustrating and disappointing. Congress instructed him to induce Britain to redress a long list of American grievances – but Adams knew that Britain would not step back from its positions.

Adams was to demand that Britain cede to the United States the western forts and posts specified by the treaty. He was to demand that Britain compensate Americans for property (including slaves) seized during the war. He was to insist that Britain grant the United States "most favored nation" trading status. (The country having that status gets the best trading terms and conditions that the other nation offers – including the lowest tariffs, or exemption from

tariffs; the fewest trade barriers; and the highest import quotas – or none) Finally, he was to require the British to restrain British creditors' demands for payment of debts owed by Americans.¹⁶ The British position on these matters was that, as long as the United States was in violation of provisions of the treaty, Britain need not carry out its duties under the treaty; furthermore, Britain saw no reason to grant the United States "most favored nation" status.

The only diplomatic success that Adams could claim was his negotiation with Prussia in 1785 of a treaty of recognition and commerce. In partnership with Jefferson, he also laid the groundwork for a treaty with Portugal, which was not concluded until 1791. He and Jefferson tried to secure a treaty with Tripoli, but the sultan's envoy demanded tribute that the diplomats could not ensure that the United States would pay.

Meanwhile, private vexations warred with public business for John Adams's attention -- in particular, Royall Tyler's conduct as Nabby's fiance. Tyler sent no answers to Nabby's letters to him, leaving her disappointed and hurt. The reports of Tyler's bad character that Abigail was getting persuaded her to abandon her former high opinion of him, and John was content to go along with her. On her own, Nabby rejected Tyler and ended her engagement to him. She turned instead to the secretary of the American mission in London, Colonel William Stephens Smith, whom she eventually married.

Adams turned to the life of the mind to distract himself, but even there he found new reason for vexation when he contemplated European disdain for American experiments in government, as expressed by the theorists of reform known as *philosophes*.¹⁷ Adams found particularly irksome a 1778 letter that the French economist Anne Robert Jacques Turgot had written the English dissenting clergyman and political activist Richard Price. Adams first read Turgot's letter as an appendix to Price's 1784 pamphlet, *Observations on the American*

Revolution, and on the Means of Making It a Blessing to the World, which Price sent to Adams.¹⁸ Thanking Price for the pamphlet,¹⁹ Adams focused on Turgot's letter rather than on Price's text. He found irritating Turgot's insistence that checks and balances and separation of powers were unnecessary and pernicious mystifications, and that the people should concentrate all political authority in one center. Adams covered the pamphlet's margins with testy handwritten comments. Turgot's praise for Pennsylvania's 1776 constitution, which he extolled as Franklin's work, exasperated Adams, because he thought little of Pennsylvania's constitution and doubted Franklin's understanding of constitutional government. At one point, Adams exploded in wrath:

— Is it possible that the writer of this paragraph should have ever read Plato, Livy, Polybius, Machiavel, Sidney, Harrington, or that he should ever have thought of the nature of man or of a society? What does he mean [by] collecting all authority in one center? What does he mean by the center of a nation? Where would he have the legislation placed? Where the execution? Where the decision of controversies? Empty piece of declamation I never read: it is impossible to give a greater proof of ignorance.²⁰

By itself, Turgot's letter might have spurred Adams into writing a work on constitutionalism, but a more urgent stimulus to action was the news from America that arrived in late 1786: political upheavals at home threatened American constitutional stability. The Adamses learned of the outbreak in Massachusetts of Shays's Rebellion.²¹ This insurrection by Massachusetts farmers seeking freedom from the crushing burdens of debt and of debt-related litigation closed courts in western Massachusetts and provoked similar outbreaks from the Virginia backcountry to the "independent republic" of Vermont. Shays's Rebellion seemed to

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threaten the survival of Massachusetts's government – a danger that Adams took personally, both because it was his home state, and because he had done so much to frame its constitution.

Unlike the Adamses, Jefferson welcomed Shays's Rebellion as proving the people's commitment to their liberties: "The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions, that I wish it to be always kept alive. It will often be exercised when wrong, but better so than not to be exercised at all. I like a little rebellion now and then. It is like a storm in the Atmosphere."²²

Rejecting Jefferson's optimism as naïve, Adams saw Shays's Rebellion as a threat to all that he believed about politics, government, and law. If such a rebellion could erupt in a state with a good constitution, he fretted, what would happen in other states? Was this insurrection an American outbreak of internal upheavals that had toppled republican governments throughout history? Were his efforts at constitutional creation for nothing? What effect would such news have on the skeptical monarchs, diplomats, and *philosophes* of Europe? Would they not dismiss the American Revolution as doomed to failure, and republican constitutional government along with it?

Even after March 1787, when he learned of the defeat of the insurgents by the state's militia (backed up by several hundred Continental soldiers sent by Secretary of War Henry Knox) the previous January, Adams continued to find Shays's Rebellion alarming. He set to work, pen in hand, books piled around him in his study. His goals were to defend American experiments in government, to prove their value, and to refute arguments at home and abroad against the ideas and principles that justified a constitution's worth.

Adams analyzed a wide range of constitutions ancient, medieval, and modern, American and foreign; his goal was to distill the general principles animating them, his method and

research epitomizing the Age of Enlightenment. He titled his vast treatise *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States*.²³

At first, Adams quoted extracts from his sources as launchpads for his commentary. As he wrote, however, haste drove him to copy more material from others and to provide less of his own; the result was a sourcebook or casebook of comparative constitutional history. The problem was that the mass of detail in Adams's volumes threatened to obscure the points that he sought to make, in the process fatiguing or alienating potential readers. Adams saw that the way he was writing would damage the project, but his sense of urgency drove his pen, leaving him no time for revision: "The preceding Letters have been produced upon the spur of a particular occasion, which made it necessary to write and publish with precipitation, or it might have been useless to have published at all. The whole has been done in the midst of other occupations, in so much hurry, that scarce a moment could be spared to correct the style, adjust the method, pare off excrescences, or even obliterate repetitions; in all which respects it stands in the need of an apology."²⁴

The method that Adams used to compose the *Defence* paralleled that of his earlier large-scale works of constitutional argument. He was so intent on refuting his adversary (or agreeing with his source), sometimes line-by-line, that he forgot the need to make evident his major themes or to map out his argument.²⁵

Adams's goal was not originality or creativity. Rather, in writing or rather compiling his *Defence*, he was seeking to distill the amassed wisdom of the ages about human nature, society, politics, and government.²⁶ His argument was relatively simple and straightforward. He had two linked purposes, one theoretical and one political. His theoretical purpose was to show that the only republican constitutions having a chance of success were those with separated institutions

checking and balancing one another, corresponding to the different levels or orders of society – monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic, or rule by the one, the few, and the many. The institutions that Adams thought indispensable to a sound republican constitution were a two-house legislature, with an upper house representing aristocratic elements and a lower house representing democratic elements, and a powerful, independent chief executive embodying the monarchic principle. The governor would check and balance the legislature, as the two legislative houses would check and balance the executive, and if the governor allied himself with one house, the other would check and balance that alliance. The three institutions would share the power to make laws, preserving liberty by preventing any one institution or any one part of society from prevailing over the others.

Adams rejected “simple” models of government having only a one-house legislature, or lacking an independent chief executive, or embracing both bad ideas (as with Pennsylvania). The history of all societies, Adams insisted, taught the need to strike a balance in the structure of government among the three orders of society (one, few, and many):

All nations, from the beginning, have been agitated by the same passions. The principles developed here will go a great way in explaining every phenomenon that occurs in the history of government. The vegetable and animal kingdoms, and those heavenly bodies whose existence and movements we are as yet only permitted faintly to perceive, do not appear to be governed by laws more uniform or certain than those which regulate the moral and political world.²⁷

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Just as important as his theoretical purpose was his political purpose – his determination to refute criticisms by smug European *philosophes* of American constitutions conforming to what he saw as the lessons of history. European views of America, Adams thought, could threaten the success of American experiments in government. If they believed that those experiments were based on unsound principles, they would reject the United States as an unworthy ally, an unsound trading partner, and a bad place to settle. Adams also aimed his vast, disorderly treatise at his fellow Americans, to stiffen their resolve to stand by their own constitutional experiments. If the American people, lacking confidence in their constitutional handiwork, heeded the *philosophes'* mistaken counsel, the result would be disastrous for American liberty and for preserving the fruits of the Revolution.

Adams distilled wisdom from human history to justify his vision of sound constitutional government, but he also was doing something new. He was declaring American intellectual independence from Europe. He insisted not only that Americans should not listen to European thinkers, but that they had much to teach the Old World. Adams's *Defence* was an enormous sequel to his 1776 pamphlet on constitution-making, *Thoughts on Government*, but it also was a constitutional counterpart to Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In *Notes*, Jefferson refuted the arguments of European *philosophes* – led by the great naturalist the Comte de Buffon – that all life, including human life, degenerated in the New World.²⁸ Just as Jefferson sought to defend the new nation's legitimacy and soundness from the perspective of natural history, Adams sought to uphold the legitimacy and soundness of American experiments in government from the perspective of constitutional history. Both men wrote in the spirit of the Enlightenment.

The two men swapped books, and each sent the other letters filled with compliments. In 178x, the artist Mather Brown painted portraits of each man holding his new book, and both

authors secured copies of the portraits for their homes. On 22 May 1785, Adams wrote to Jefferson: “I thank you kindly for your Book. it is our Meditation all the Day long.— I cannot now Say much about it. but I think it will do its Author and his Country great Honour. The Passages upon Slavery, are worth Diamonds. They will have more effect than Volumes written by mere Philosophers.” This was the privately printed edition of *Notes*, which appeared two years before the public version. Jefferson addressed slavery in two different chapters – in chapter XVIII, he denounced the institution, but in chapter XIV, he proposed a scientific argument (“advanced as a suspicion only”) why people of African descent might be suited for slavery. We do not know whether Adams thought both chapters “worth Diamonds.”²⁹

In January 1787, the first volume of Adams’s *Defence* appeared in London; an enterprising printer reprinted it in Philadelphia that spring in time for the convening of the Federal Convention, the body that was to frame the Constitution of the United States. Adams finished two more volumes within the year. At first, readers welcomed Adams’s *Defence*, praising its author as a benevolent man seeking to put his profound knowledge at the service of his country. However, the praise faded, to be succeeded by puzzled, even bitter criticism. Adams’s critics charged him with adopting corrupt, decadent, European habits of thought. In particular, they attacked what they saw as his embrace of aristocratic government. These critics failed to grasp Adams’s point. Adams never advocated aristocracy. Rather, in the *Defence*, he penned a clear-eyed, realistic assessment of aristocracy as an enduring political problem.³⁰ Adams insisted that every society would develop an aristocracy; that that aristocracy would seek to control the government to protect itself and to extend its power; and that the best way to meet this challenge was to give aristocracy a place in government, benefiting from its wisdom, while limiting its power with constitutional safeguards so that it could do as little harm as possible.

One reader sharing Adams's concerns about the American situation but rejecting Adams's arguments on substantive grounds was James Madison. The Virginian, who rivaled Adams as a leading American constitutional thinker, read Adams's first volume during the opening weeks of the Federal Convention. Writing to Jefferson on 6 June 1787, Madison began by making the usual critical claim – that Adams was defending aristocratic forms of government, particularly the British constitution: “Mr. Adams’ Book which has been in your hands of course, has excited a good deal of attention. ... It will probably be much read, particularly in the Eastern States, and contribute with other circumstances to revive the predilections of this Country for the British Constitution.” But then he delivered one of the most devastating put-downs in the history of letters:

Men of learning find nothing new in it. Men of taste many things to criticize. And men without either not a few things, which they will not understand. It will nevertheless be read, and praised, and become a powerful engine in forming the public opinion. The name & character of the Author, with the critical situation of our affairs, naturally account for such an effect. The book also has merit, and I wish many of the remarks in it, which are unfriendly to republicanism, may not receive fresh weight from the operations of our Governments.³¹

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Madison's dismissal of Adams's book may have been in part the growl of a frustrated would-be author confronting a senior colleague's book on his chosen subject. Like Adams, Madison was a student of comparative constitutional government; in 1786, he had researched the

history of ancient and modern confederacies, preparing an elaborate memorandum to guide his thinking.³² By publishing first, Adams may have rubbed Madison's sensibilities raw.

More than authorial jealousy was at work in Madison, however. Exploring the contrast between their approaches to constitutional government illuminates the intellectual worlds of both men, and the ways that Adams was falling increasingly out of step with his countrymen as they pursued different lines of thought about what government should be and how it should work. It is no accident that Madison shared with Jefferson his disappointment with Adams's book on the same day that he delivered one of his most important speeches in the Federal Convention, setting forth his views on factionalism and the extended republic, issues on which Adams gave no guidance.³³

Adams and Madison were thinking politicians of very different kinds.³⁴ Though they shared such traits as deep learning, bookishness, love of study, and fascination with the history of republican government, they approached these subjects in radically different ways. Adams was a student of comparative constitutional government and history. He worked to master the wisdom of western civilization in general and that of comparative constitutional government in particular, seeking to teach the lessons that he derived from his study of that subject and seeking also to bring American constitution-making into line with those lessons. By contrast, Madison was a political technologist who sought not only to understand human experience with republican government and constitution-making, but also to go beyond the conventional wisdom when it threatened to doom American efforts to create a new constitution. Instead of conforming constitution-making to the lessons of human nature and of history, Madison sought to manipulate human nature and history by devising new constitutional forms. Not only did he reject history's conventional wisdom; sometimes he even stood it on its head.

Whereas problems flowing from aristocracy preoccupied Adams, Madison focused on problems flowing from federalism. In a sense, Adams was a vertical political thinker, starting from the conventional teaching that society was hierarchical, with top, middle, and bottom layers corresponding to the one, few, and many of humanity. For his part, Madison was a horizontal political thinker, stressing the effects of geography on constitution-making. For Madison, the problem was holding together an extensive republic under one constitutional system, including striking a proper balance between the general government and the states. Madison engaged with that problem throughout the 1780s, grappling with its theoretical and practical issues. Because Adams had never had to contend with issues of federalism, he never addressed those issues.³⁵

The outcome of the Convention's labors in Philadelphia was a new kind of government for the United States. This compound federal republic recognized the people as sovereign, making it possible for them to assign one share of that sovereignty to the general government and another share to the states. It then sought to regulate the balance of power between the federal government and state governments, and to regulate the balance of power among the federal government's branches.³⁶ Adams grasped only the Constitution's latter aspect; he never saw that the Constitution's federal framework was meant to solve problems different from those preoccupying him. Thus, Madison criticized Adams's book for failing to address the issues of constitutional design that he saw as truly central to the Constitution's creation.

Adams and Madison also diverged because they grounded their competing conceptions of constitutional government on differing visions of the United States. On the one hand, Adams crafted his vision of republican constitutional government for a nation that was like other nations in having to grapple with the perennial problem of aristocracy. On the other hand, Madison saw the United States as unique – a relatively equal people with a common national identity, yet with

competing loyalties to the several states, while also forming factional groups, defined by loyalty to or hostility to a specific leader, by differing religious commitments, and above by all clashing economic interests.

Madison spurned what he saw as an outmoded model of society divided into aristocratic and democratic layers. For him, as he wrote in *The Federalist No. 10*, interests and factions posed the key problem: “The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation....”³⁷ Because this calculus of interests and its interaction with federalism preoccupied Madison, he rejected Adams’s *Defence* as missing the point. Adams’s book focused on the wrong question, and its answer was irrelevant to what Madison saw as the real question. Further, though not all American politicians shared Madison’s sophisticated understanding of interests and factions,³⁸ their sense of the American people as a relatively equal political mass was far removed from Adams’s embrace of the old wisdom of the one, the few, and the many. Yet another difference between them was that Adams’s political thinking was largely static, giving little attention to the American future, whereas Madison, like Jefferson, sought to extrapolate and provide for the United States’ future political development.³⁹

These intellectual differences between Adams and Madison – and, more generally, between Adams and his countrymen – about the nature of American politics and the challenges of constitution-making loom increasingly large in our effort to understand Adams.⁴⁰ Adams did not grasp the changes in the American intellectual and political climate wrought by the years since 1779 (his last extended time in the United States). In the closing pages of the third volume of his *Defence*, Adams sought to shoehorn the proposed U.S. Constitution into his framework of political analysis, while missing its embrace of federalism and divided sovereignty. Adams saw the Constitution’s inclusion of a Senate as part of a bicameral national legislature as vindicating

his theories about aristocracy and the need for an upper house as its home in a balanced constitutional republic. By contrast, the Federal Convention created the Senate principally as a means of placating the small states, with its rule of equality of representation for all states and its assignment of the election of Senators to state legislatures. Its basis was not classical political thought but federalism.⁴¹

While writing volumes two and three of the *Defence*, Adams also began the slow process of concluding his diplomatic mission and preparing to return to the United States. The many letters between Adams and John Jay, the Confederation's Secretary for Foreign Affairs, suggest how slow the process was. On 24 January 1787, Adams sent Jay an official request for permission to resign his post and return home by the beginning of 1788; he then wrote a private letter to Jay, asking Jay as a friend to do all he could to expedite permission from Congress.⁴² On 31 July, Jay sent an embarrassed apology for Congress's delay.⁴³ Nearly two months later, on 16 October, Jay finally informed Adams that Congress had granted his request and had passed resolutions complimenting him on his service.⁴⁴ Still more logistical delays plagued the Adamses, so that they did not begin their voyage home until late April 1788.

On 21 February 1788, Adams reported to Jay on his last audience with George III. Peeping between the lines of his letter is Adams's satisfaction that, despite the frustration of dealing with the king's ministers, at least he was able to meet with the king on amiable terms:

Yesterday I had my Audience of Leave of His Majesty.... The Substance of my address to His Majesty was no more than, a Renewal of assurances in Behalf of the United States, of their friendly Dispositions, and of their continued desire to cultivate a liberal Intercourse of Commerce and good offices which his Majestys Subjects and States;

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Thanks for the Protection and Civilities of His Court; and good Wishes of Prosperity to His Majesty, His Royal Family, His Subjects and Dominions.

The Kings Answer to me, was in these Words "Mr Adams You may, with great Truth assure the United States that whenever they Shall fulfill the Treaty, on their Part, I, on my Part will fulfill it, in all its Particulars. As to yourself, I am sure I wish you a safe and pleasant Voyage, and much comfort with your Family and Friends."⁴⁵

While he prepared to go home, Adams was eager to learn about the American struggle to adopt a new constitution. One great irony of American constitutional history is that the man who had a plausible claim to be the prophet of American constitutionalism had to watch from three thousand miles away as his countrymen struggled over ratifying the proposed U.S. Constitution. When he received a copy of the Constitution, the only qualm that he expressed at first paralleled that of Jefferson and many other Americans on both sides of the ratification controversy: "What think you of a Declaration of Rights? Should not such a Thing have preceeded the Model?"⁴⁶ Even so, he generally approved of what he read, as he told Jefferson:

It seems to be admirably calculated to preserve the Union, to increase Affection, and to bring us all to the same mode of thinking. They have adopted the Idea of the Congress at Albany in 1754 of a President to nominate officers and a Council to Consent: but thank heaven they have adopted a third Branch, which that Congress did not. I think that Senates and Assemblies should have nothing to do with executive Power. But still I hope the Constitution will be adopted, and Amendments be made at a more convenient opportunity.⁴⁷

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Jefferson thought that the House of Representatives would be inadequate to the burdens of business placed on it, and he strongly criticized the eligibility of the president for as many terms of office as he pleased.⁴⁸ Despite his insistence to Madison that the Constitution ought to have included a bill of rights and ought to be amended to include one, Jefferson never addressed that point with Adams. In a later letter to Jefferson, Adams spelled out his own criticisms. He pointed out that Jefferson feared monarchy whereas Adams feared aristocracy. Jefferson's apprehensions about a too-strong president who could serve for too long did not move Adams, for he saw such a strong president as a counter to the Senate. Both men worried about foreign efforts to corrupt the process of electing a president, but Adams drew from that fear the conclusion that, "as often as Elections happen, the danger of foreign Influence recurs. The less frequently they happen the less danger."⁴⁹ After sharing these reflections, they turned back to issues regarding American loans from bankers in Amsterdam and the news of potential constitutional upheavals in France.

The ratification controversy ground on from the fall of 1787 to midsummer 1788. On the other side of the Atlantic, Adams attempted only one indirect intervention.⁵⁰ On 26 March 1788, he wrote to Governor George Clinton of New York, introducing his daughter and son-in-law (who were traveling to New York) and offering his perspective from abroad on the desirability of adopting the Constitution. Adams apparently did not know that Clinton had emerged as a leading spirit among the Constitution's opponents, and was the leader of the Constitution's adversaries in New York. Clinton seems not to have answered Adams's letter:

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It is expected in Europe that the new Constitution for the United States will be soon adopted by all. It is a general opinion that the old one, stood in great need of a Reform, and that the projected Change, will be much for our Prosperity. A federal Republic of independent Sovereign States was never known to exist, over a large Territory. innumerable Difficulties have been found in these which have been tried in small Countries. The question really seems to be, whether the Union shall be broken; or whether all shall come under one Sovereignty. The Union is one object of such Magnitude: that every Thing but constitutional Liberty Should be Sacrificed to it.⁵¹

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Adams did not know that his *Defence* was being quoted and attacked in the ratification debates. His critics cited his analysis of aristocracy, which they misread as a defense of aristocracy, to smear the Constitution as an aristocratic document. A notable pamphlet by John Stevens of New Jersey targeted the *Defence* as Adams's means of signaling his intentions to bring aristocracy to the new nation; we do not know if Adams ever saw Stevens's pamphlet.⁵²

Adams's marginal role during the ratification controversy, and the rumblings at home of popular dissatisfaction with the *Defence*, indicated that an intellectual and political gap was opening between him and his countrymen. That gap raised ominous questions about Adams's political future – questions that he did not and perhaps could not see, let alone answer. As he and Abigail prepared to return to Massachusetts in the spring of 1788, Adams was teetering between his inclination to retire and his desire to take part in the Constitution's new political experiment, and to learn what the new American political world had in store for him.

NOTES

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- ¹ “From John Adams to Robert R. Livingston, 4 December 1782,” *FO/NA*.
- ² Abigail Adams to John Adams, 15 December 1783. *AFPEA/MHS*.
- ³ *Id.*
- ⁴ “From John Adams to the President of Congress, 13 November 1783,” *FO/NA*.
- ⁵ “Instructions to the American Peace Commissioners, 29 October 1783,” *FO/NA*. The supplementary instructions are: “Instructions to the American Commissioners, May–June 1784,” *FO/NA*.
- ⁶ Cappon 1:12-238.
- ⁷ Abigail Adams to John Adams, 11 February 1784. *AFPEA/MHS*.
- ⁸ “Abigail Adams to Elizabeth Smith Shaw, 11 July 1784,” *FO/NA*.
- ⁹ Abigail Adams to John Adams, 23 July 1784, *AFPEA/MHS*.
- ¹⁰ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 26 July 1784. *AFPEA/MHS*.
- ¹¹ Gelles, *Abigail & John*, 150-156.
- ¹² “John Adams’ Commission as Minister to Great Britain, 24 February 1785,” *FO/NA*. For John Jay’s cover letter, see “John Jay to John Adams, 15 March 1785,” *FO/NA*.
- ¹³ Andrew Oliver, *Portraits of John and Abigail Adams* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), 23-38.
- ¹⁴ “From John Adams to John Jay, 2 June 1785,” *FO/NA*.
- ¹⁵ *Id.*
- ¹⁶ “John Adams’ Instructions as Minister to Great Britain, 7 March 1785,” *FO/NA*.
- ¹⁷ Henry Steele Commager, *Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books/Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1977), 236-245 (on the meaning of the term *philosophe*) and *passim* (on the contrast between the European and American Enlightenments).
- ¹⁸ Bernard Peach with Jon Erik Larson, ed., *Richard Price and the Ethical Foundations of the American Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979). The pamphlet appears at 177-214; Turgot’s letter appears at 215-224.
- ¹⁹ “From John Adams to Richard Price, 8 April 1785,” *FO/NA*.
- ²⁰ Zoldan Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 149.
- ²¹ David Szatmary, *Shays’ Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Robert A. Gross, ed., *In Debt to Shays: The Bicentennial of an Agrarian Rebellion (Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Vol. 65)* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia for Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1993).
- ²² “From Thomas Jefferson to Abigail Adams, 22 February 1787,” *FO/NA*.
- ²³ John Adams, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government*, 3 vols. (London, 1787-1788). The work is reprinted in *WJA* vols. 4-6. Charles Francis Adams edited and revised that version without indicating his revisions. I have used the third edition, published in 1797: *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America, Against the Attack of M. Turgot in his Letter to Dr. Price Dated the Twenty-Second Day of March, 1778*, third ed. in 3 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Printed by Budd and Bartram for William Cobbett, 1797). (The 1797 third edition exists in two modern reprint editions – Aalen, Germany: Scientia Verlag, 1979, and Union, NJ: The Lawbook Exchange, 2001.) The third edition of 1797 is closest to the author’s intentions. On the composition of the *Defence*, see Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*, 139-164. Luke Mayville, *John Adams and the Fear of American Oligarchy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), makes the *Defence* the focus of his illuminating, invaluable study of Adams’s political thought. Ryerson, *Republic*, focuses on the *Defence* at 280-309. The analysis here is deeply indebted to Mayville and Ryerson, and to Howe, chapters 5 and 6.
- ²⁴ Adams, *Defence*, third edition 1797, 3:503
- ²⁵ For an analysis of the rhetorical design of the *Defence*, see John E. Paynter, “The Rhetorical Design of John Adams’s Defence of the Constitutions of . . . America,” *Review of Politics* 16:3 (Summer 1996): 531-560.
- ²⁶ Stephen G. Kurtz, “The Political Science of John Adams: A Guide to His Statecraft,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 25:4 (October 1968): 605-613.
- ²⁷ Adams, *Defence*, third edition 1797, 3:503.
- ²⁸ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787). There are two scholarly editions – one edited by William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1955; Norton pbk reprint) and one edited by Frank Shuffelton (New York: Penguin Classics, 1998). See also David Tucker, *Enlightened Republicanism: A Study of Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).
- ²⁹ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 22 May 1785, *FO/NA*.

- ³⁰ Mayville, *John Adams and the Fear of American Oligarchy*, is excellent on this point.
- ³¹ "From James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, 6 June 1787," *FO/NA*.
- ³² "Notes on Ancient and Modern Confederacies, [April–June?] 1786," *FO/NA*.
- ³³ Max Farrand, *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1911, 1937, 1966, 1987), 1:134-136 (Madison's notes for 6 June 1787, specifically his speech on factionalism).
- ³⁴ Jack N. Rakove, *A Politician Thinking: The Creative Mind of James Madison* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), presents an excellent discussion of what it means to view Madison as a thinking politician.
- ³⁵ Rakove, *A Politician Thinking, passim*; Trevor Colbourn, ed., *Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays of Douglass Adair* (New York: W. W. Norton for Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1974; reprint ed., Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1998); Lance Banning, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty: James Madison and the Founding of the Federal Republic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Drew R. McCoy, *The Last of the Fathers: James Madison and the Republican Legacy* (Cambridge, Eng., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- ³⁶ Richard B. Bernstein with Kym S. Rice, *Are We to Be a Nation? The Making of the Constitution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), esp. chapter 6; Richard B. Morris, *The Forging of the Union, 1781-1789* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987); Richard R. Beeman, *Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution* (New York: Random House, 2009); Clinton L. Rossiter III, *1787: The Grand Convention* (New York: Macmillan, 1966); Carol Berkin, *A Brilliant Solution: Inventing the American Constitution* (New York: Harcourt, 2002).
- ³⁷ [James Madison], *The Federalist No. 10*, in Jacob E. Cooke, ed., *The Federalist* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 56-65 (quotation at 59).
- ³⁸ Larry D. Kramer, "Madison's Audience," *Harvard Law Review* 112:3 (January 1999): 611-679.
- ³⁹ McCoy, *The Last of the Fathers*, is particularly good on Madison's thinking on this point.
- ⁴⁰ This point is the focus of Gordon S. Wood's discussion of Adams's relevance and irrelevance. See Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1969; with new preface, 1998), 567-592 (Chapter XIV: "The Relevance and Irrelevance of John Adams"). See the epilogue, *infra*.
- ⁴¹ Adams, *Defence* third edition 1797, 3:505-506, with the Constitution reprinted as an appendix in *id.*, 507-528. On the creation of the Senate by the Federal Convention, see R. B. Bernstein, "Parliamentary Principles, American Realities: The Continental and Confederation Congresses, 1774-1789," in Kenneth R. Bowling and Donald R. Kennon, eds., *Inventing Congress: Origins and Establishment of the First Federal Congress* (Athens: Published for the United States Capitol Historical Society by Ohio University Press, 1999), 76-105.
- ⁴² "From John Adams to John Jay, 24 January 1787," *FO/NA* [Early Access document]. "From John Adams to John Jay, 25 January 1787," *FO/NA*. [Early Access document].
- ⁴³ "To John Adams from John Jay, 31 July 1787," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ⁴⁴ "To John Adams from John Jay, 16 October 1787," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ⁴⁵ "From John Adams to John Jay, 21 February 1788," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ⁴⁶ "To Thomas Jefferson from John Adams, 10 November 1787," *FO/NA*.
- ⁴⁷ *Id.*
- ⁴⁸ "From Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 13 November 1787," *FO/NA*.
- ⁴⁹ "To Thomas Jefferson from John Adams, 6 December 1787," *FO/NA*.
- ⁵⁰ I base the statement in text on a search of the online version of the *Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, 1787-1791*. <https://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/history/constitution/>
- ⁵¹ "From John Adams to George Clinton, 26 March 1788," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ⁵² [John Stevens], *Observations on government: including some animadversions on Mr. Adams's Defence of the constitutions of government of the United States of America: and on Mr. De Lolme's Constitution of England. By a farmer, of New-Jersey* (New York: Printed by W. Ross, in Broad-Street, M.DCC.LXXXVII. [1787]); R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959, 1964; one-volume ed., 2014), 210-11.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“The most insignificant office”:

The Vice Presidency (1788-1797)

In late April 1788, the ship *Lucretia* left Britain for Boston, carrying John and Abigail Adams. As the voyage's eight weeks dragged by, Adams pondered his future. Retirement attracted him, but his yearning for retirement clashed with his concern about his country. He pondered the new U.S. Constitution, which he read as vindicating his arguments about a proper balanced government in his *Defence of the Constitutions*. He speculated whether enough states would ratify the U.S. Constitution to define the nation's new form of government. He also reflected on hints from friends and allies that he would be a leading candidate for office in that government, should it come into being. He little knew that the office he would be chosen to fill would be one of the most trying of his life, bringing him to some of the lowest points in his public career.

One powerful inducement for Adams to remain active in politics was his recognition that holding office under the Constitution might win him fame. He and his contemporaries understood fame as a reward for great achievements inspired by devotion to the public good; thus, winning fame was neither only nor mainly about personal gratification. For years, he had fretted that his service abroad might go unappreciated at home. He always was vigilant to assert his claims to what he thought due to him in terms

of recognition (sometimes to his own cost). Thus, he welcomed the prospect that he might be chosen for high office in the new federal government.¹

On 17 June 1788, the *Lucretia* reached Boston. Sailing into port, the ship was greeted by fusillades of cannon echoing across Boston Harbor. On landing, the Adamses received a hero's welcome far beyond what they had expected, featuring artillery salutes, cheering onlookers, and pealing church bells. Greeting the couple at the dock was an emissary from Governor John Hancock, Adams's ally from the Second Continental Congress, who threw open the governor's mansion to them.²

Though honored by Hancock's hospitality, John and Abigail were eager to settle into their new house. They would not return to the salt-box house in Braintree where they had spent the first twenty years of their married life and where their children had been born. The idea of buying a new house had taken form in 1787, when Abigail wrote from London to her older sister, Mary Cranch, asking her to measure the house in Braintree to guide purchases of new furnishings to be shipped home; Mary warned Abigail that the old house was too small for their family, which now included three grown sons.³ She suggested that Abigail and John buy a larger house that had just come on the market, the Vassall-Borland House. After consulting with Mary, John and Abigail asked her uncle Cotton Tufts to negotiate the purchase.

The Vassall-Borland House sat on eighty-three acres a mile north of their old home. Built in 1731 by the West Indies sugar planter Major Leonard Vassall, it had passed through various hands; at one point, the Massachusetts government had confiscated it as a Loyalist property. Its last owner was Royall Tyler, the writer, lawyer, and rejected suitor of their daughter Abigail. After Tyler had defaulted on his attempt to

buy the house, the house returned to Vassall's grandson, Leonard Vassall Borland, who sold it to the Adamses.

After leaving Boston, John and Abigail traveled inland to stay with relatives while awaiting the arrival of their furniture in Braintree. They found a scene of confusion. The renovations that Abigail had entrusted to Cotton Tufts's supervision were far from being finished. To her dismay, Abigail also saw that the house was less grand and elegant than she had remembered. It was smaller than the townhouse they had occupied in London; she plaintively called it a "wren's nest." Determined to set things right despite suffering from an arthritic hand, she set to work, intent on moving the renovations forward and on planning an expansion of the house. John, captivated by the surrounding land and eager to return to farming, felt comfortable, even happy, in his new home. He named the house Peacefield – commemorating his role in negotiating the Treaty of Paris of 1783.⁴

Adams had to face another practical question – his finances. Not only would he and Abigail have to maintain themselves – they also would have to support three sons. John Quincy, a fledgling lawyer, would have lean years as he launched his law practice. Charles and Thomas Boylston were undergraduates at Harvard who also were aiming at legal careers; they would need support while finishing their college studies and legal apprenticeships and then joining the bar. The costs of renovation were mounting, and Adams had to include in his financial calculations the mortgage that he had taken as part of the house's purchase. Sadly, he concluded that his expenses were nearly three times his income, ruling out retirement. New expenses would require a new salary. Not even the profits that Abigail had made from her financial enterprises, such as her skilled investments in government securities and her sales of goods that Adams had sent her

from Europe – which persuaded him that she had greater fiscal sagacity than he did – could make up the shortfall.⁵ Further, he realized that he had to collect moneys due him, specifically his back salary and funds owed to him by the federal government for expenses that he had amassed during his diplomatic missions. During his first years as vice president, he kept up an insistent campaign to secure reimbursement for those expenses.⁶

Beyond financial worries and fame, other considerations brought Adams back into politics. His return to Massachusetts meant that others would seek to draw him into the political world unless he took active steps to prevent them – and he was not inclined to prevent them. Before he and Abigail had returned home, the Massachusetts legislature had chosen him as a delegate to the Confederation Congress – and Virginia delegate Tench Coxe saw Adams as a fine choice for president of Congress.⁷

Events moved more quickly than institutions did. In July 1788 Adams learned that the Constitution had been ratified, replacing the Articles of Confederation. He realized that that change would supersede his election to the Confederation Congress. Organizing government under the Constitution meant new offices and new possibilities. Which post should he seek? He knew that standing for the presidency was out of the question, because of the man whose name was on every tongue in discussions of that office – George Washington. Adams deferred to the national favorite.⁸

Adams decided that only one office under the Constitution would suit him – vice president of the United States. The second-highest office under the Constitution, the vice presidency seemed to Adams appropriate for a man with his extensive record of public service, suiting his status as a leading figure in the Revolution. Further, he knew that he

could expect the backing of New England and perhaps most of the Northern states. Most of his rivals withdrew from consideration as soon as they learned that he was interested – but one potential competitor remained. Governor George Clinton of New York expected support from the movement that had opposed the Constitution in 1787-88. Though the Constitution’s foes had conceded defeat, they still wanted to battle over how to put the Constitution into effect. As part of that battle, they wanted to install an ally in a high office in the new government. They were committed to vigilance lest the Constitution’s supporters expand the federal government’s powers beyond the people’s expectations. Some opponents of the Constitution were organizing to demand a second convention to revise or replace the Constitution; Clinton’s election would aid that movement.⁹ Clinton also made a generous estimate of his own fitness for the nation’s second highest office.¹⁰

The possibility of Clinton’s candidacy, the aftershocks of ratification, the agitation for a second convention, and the challenge of launching the new government alarmed such supporters of the Constitution as Alexander Hamilton. What worried him and his allies most was the campaign by the Constitution’s opponents to use the first federal elections to influence how the new Constitution would be put into effect. Interpreting its provisions could expand or contract the new government’s powers. Hamilton and his allies knew that the electors actually had freedom to cast their votes for those vying to be the first president and vice president. They therefore sought to guide presidential electors to cast their votes for the right man and against the wrong men. Two goals drove their efforts. First, they wanted to ensure Washington’s unanimous election; second, they wanted to deny whoever came in second any chance to threaten Washington’s pre-eminence.¹¹

Throughout the summer and fall of 1788, having allowed word to circulate that he was available and interested, Adams fretted over political gossip that one or another candidate was outpacing him for Vice President. The electoral process came to an end in January, when electors in each state cast their votes and the nation's newspaper published the results. Washington had won all 69 first-place electoral votes, which confirmed his election as the nation's first president. To his dismay, however, Adams had eked out only 34 of the 69 second-place votes; it was enough to elect him vice president with no other candidate coming close, but still one vote less than a majority. He read into those numbers stinging implications about what the people thought of him. Though he suspected that some politicians had worked to reduce his electoral-vote count, we do not know whether he learned of Hamilton's role.¹²

At first, Adams felt humiliation rather than joy at his election. Certain that his countrymen did not value his merits, he grumbled that perhaps he should turn down the vice presidency. This dour line of thought lasted for only a short time, however, and he accepted election.¹³ He received formal notification on April 12, in a letter from Senator John Langdon, president *pro tempore* of the Senate, setting forth the official vote tally established on 6 April.¹⁴ Adams set out for New York City; Abigail was visiting their daughter and her husband in Jamaica, New York, waiting for the right time to join John in the new capital.

People in towns along Adams's route cheered him as he rode by, sometimes bestowing symbolic gifts. Militia units escorted him into and out of such towns as Hartford and New Haven. When he reached New York City, another militia unit

conducted him to the home of his friend John Jay, who hosted him for his first days in the nation's temporary capital.

On April 21, 1789, Adams became the nation's first Vice President in the renovated Federal Hall – formerly New York's City Hall, now the first capitol building of the United States.¹⁵ As there was no set oath for federal officials to take, there was no ceremony. Langdon yielded his place to Adams at the front of the Senate chamber, a room forty by thirty feet and two stories high; a canopy of red damask shaded the president's chair. Adams then read the Senate a short speech, closing with a promise:

It should be my constant endeavour to behave towards every member of this most honorable body with all that consideration, delicacy, and decorum, which becomes the dignity of his station and character. But if, from inexperience or inadvertency, any thing should ever escape me, inconsistent with propriety, I must entreat you, by imputing it to its true cause, and not by any want of respect, to pardon and excuse it.¹⁶

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On April 23, President-elect Washington arrived in New York City after his own tumultuous journey from Mount Vernon. Washington dreaded assuming the Presidency; he wrote that his journey to New York was like that "of a culprit who is going to the place of his execution."¹⁷ Could he live up to his countrymen's hopes? He did not know what to think.

As New Yorkers welcomed Washington, the Senate met in its chamber on Federal Hall's second floor; the House of Representatives met in a similar chamber one floor

below. As he gazed at the twenty senators who were present, Vice President Adams faced a body that was both a new institution and a recognizable descendant of the Confederation Congress.¹⁸ The Senate was a council of representatives of the states, refashioned as the upper house of a bicameral Congress of the United States. Each state had two senators, who voted individually rather than by state delegation. Most states gave their legislature the task of choosing senators, though Connecticut guided its legislature's choices by popular vote. Only ten states were represented in the Senate. North Carolina and Rhode Island had not yet ratified the Constitution, and well into the summer the two houses of New York's legislature were deadlocked over choosing the state's senators; for that reason, New York never chose presidential electors.¹⁹

The Senate had features drawn from institutions that Adams knew. As the upper house of Congress, it paralleled the British House of Lords, Parliament's upper house. It also resembled the executive council found in American colonial charters and state constitutions. The President could make treaties and appoint executive officials only with the Senate's advice and consent – features of the Senate that Adams found problematic, because they varied from his strict version of separation of powers. As he had written to Jefferson in 1787, he would have given the President sole power to make treaties and to name and fire executive officials.²⁰ Such opinions risked making him look like an advocate of monarchy.

Adams noted a few former colleagues among the senators. Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, Robert Morris of Pennsylvania, George Read of Delaware, John Langdon of New Hampshire, and Ralph Izard of South Carolina all were veterans of the Second Continental Congress. A classmate from Harvard's class of 1755, Tristram Dalton of

New Hampshire, also was there.²¹ If the presence of these men gave Adams the sense that he was among friends, events proved him mistaken.

Adams's troubles as Vice President began almost at once. In his first days in office, he voiced confusion about his role. He asked the senators for advice as to how he should act – expressing doubt, for example, on April 25, 1789, as to his role when the President entered the Senate chamber. Senator William Maclay of Pennsylvania recorded Adams's words in his diary:

Gentlemen I feel great difficulty how to act. I am possessed of two separate powers, the one in esse, and the other in posse. I am Vice President. in this I am nothing, but I may be everything, But I am President also of the Senate. When the President comes into the Senate, what shall I be. I cannot be then, no Gentlemen, I cannot, I cannot – I wish Gentlemen to think what I shall be....²²

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Some Senators, notably Connecticut's Oliver Ellsworth, shared Adams's discomfort with the question; Maclay recorded Ellsworth's response:

Ellsworth thumbed over the Sheet constitution, and turned it for some time: at length he rose, and addressed the Chair with profound Gravity. Mr. President I have looked over the Constitution (paused) and I find Sir, it is evident & Clear Sir, that wherever the Senate is to be, then Sir you must be at the head of them, but further Sir (here he looked agast, as if some tremendous Gulph had Ya[w]ned before him) I. shall. not. pretend. to. say.²³

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Maclay reacted with sardonic amusement to the dithering before him: “God forgive me, but it was involuntary, for the profane Muscles of my face, were in Tune for Laughter, in spite of my indisposition.”²⁴ A newcomer to national politics, Maclay was a leading figure in Pennsylvania. His acidulous diary of his Senate service is a classic of American politics – resembling, in its self-revealing style, John Adams’s diary. In some ways, the two men would have been very similar in outlook had Adams not gone to Europe. Not only did his time in the Old World shape Adams’s conduct as Vice President; Maclay decided that Adams had been corrupted away from American republican values by his time in Europe, and therefore that he was not to be trusted.

Adams’s self-consciousness during the inauguration was problematic enough, but he soon made matters worse. Alarmed by his belief that the Union risked losing the respect of European powers, he drew on his diplomatic experience and his study of European nations to educate the senators. Only one solution would work, he argued at great length – bestowing an august title on the president.²⁵ Only such a title, he insisted, would enable the new government to establish its dignity in the world’s eyes. Reminding the senators that he was familiar with the Confederation Congress’s failure to win respect, he identified the reason for that failure as Congress’s inability to establish its dignity. Titles, he finished, would be a sure means to that end.²⁶

The senatorial debate on titles took place behind closed doors. The Senate’s creators at the Federal Convention of 1787 gave it legislative and quasi-executive functions. Making laws in partnership with the House of Representatives was its legislative function; advising and consenting on executive and judicial appointments and

making treaties were its quasi-executive functions. Recognizing this mix of functions and powers and giving priority to their quasi-executive functions, the Senators voted to meet in private. Choosing to follow a different path, the House of Representatives voted to meet in public, even admitting journalists. (Not until 1795 did the Senate open its sessions to the public and to journalists, belatedly joining the House in affirming the public's right to know the doings of their representatives.)²⁷

Despite the Senate's decision to meet in private, word of its debates on titles, including Vice President Adams's strong advocacy of that proposal, soon became public knowledge. The leaks were inevitable, for a bill establishing titles would require action by both houses of Congress to become law, and the House of Representatives not only was meeting in public but also was holding its own debate on titles. Adams's suggestion of titles became known and soon became the target of satire focusing not on the proposal but on its sponsor. It did not help that Adams's suggested title was an indigestible mouthful: "His High Mightiness the President of the United States, and Protector of Their Liberties." A mocking title forever attached itself to Adams: "Mr. [Ralph] Izard after describing [Adams's] air Manner deportment and personal Figure in the chair, concluded with applying the Title of *Rotundity* to him."²⁸ Others dubbed Maclay and Pennsylvania Representative Henry Wynkoop, the tallest members of Congress, His Highness of the Upper House and His Highness of the Lower House.²⁹

Adams soon ran into other difficulties. One resulted from his attempts to draw on his greatest strengths – his vast learning and his willingness to share that learning – in contributing to Senate debates. Not only was he determined to expound the lessons that he had distilled from his study of governments; he also believed that his diplomatic

experience had taught him an immense amount about government and politics directly relevant to the American situation. He was determined to lay out that knowledge for the benefit of the senators in particular and Americans in general.

Adams did not realize how far he had fallen out of touch with his countrymen's political ideas, in the Senate or among the people. For one thing, Americans had come to think of themselves as different not just in geographic location but in kind from the peoples of Europe. Most Americans did not have Adams's experience of Europe, nor did he have direct experience, as they did, of the different course that American political thought had taken beginning in the 1780s. Most senators dismissed Adams's invocations of history and his discussions of European diplomatic customs; they found his disquisitions laughable at best and annoyingly irrelevant at worst. They, and many among the people, deduced from Adams's apparent obsession with the Old World that, having spent too much time in Europe, he had been corrupted away from his former attachment to American ideals and republican virtue. Every time he advocated titles, he seemed to speak for an obsolete and decadent political past.

Adams had another mistaken idea about his office that crippled his effectiveness as Vice President; he thought that he would be the administration's prime minister in the Senate. He soon learned otherwise. The senators made clear that they did not want him to take part in debates, let alone guide them. They expected him to preside, not to speak, and certainly not to speak for them. After a few ill-considered attempts to lead the Senate, he acknowledged that the senators had no desire to be led. Thereafter, he restrained himself.³⁰

President Washington further rebuffed Adams's attempts to become the Washington administration's leader in the Senate. Not only was the vice president to preside over the Senate rather than lead the senators; he also was to be barred from the executive branch's deliberations. Washington met with his cabinet – a group including only heads of executive departments – to secure their advice and to discuss public policy. Because Adams was president of the Senate, Washington saw him as part of the legislative branch, not as part of the executive branch and thus not as part of his cabinet.

Fallout from the controversy over titles also played a part in giving Washington a dim view of Adams, as did growing controversy over ceremony and pomp in the new government. Rumors spread through the country about the pomp with which the Washington administration was conducting itself – carriages drawn by too many horses, too-elegant dress for the leading members of the government, and so forth. Many Americans disapproved of how grandly the government seemed to be behaving. Word of the controversy reached John and Abigail Adams; they read into these rumors the clear implication that they were to blame. Yielding to the natural temptation to defend themselves, they complained in response that Washington was really at fault because of his love of pomp and ceremony. In turn, news of that criticism reached Washington via reports from as far away as Virginia. Thereafter, he showed a decided coolness toward Adams. Other contributing factors included occasional clashes between them dating back to the Revolution, Adams's alignment with a Lee-Adams faction in the old Confederation Congress that criticized and denigrated Washington, and Washington's dislike of Vice President Adams's joking tendency to call himself "the heir apparent." Washington rarely consulted Adams, preferring to confer with his advisors in the executive branch.³¹ Thus,

Adams was sidelined during discussions of such pivotal issues as the location of the permanent federal capital, the federal government's assumption of state debts, and Congress's power to create the First Bank of the United States, pitting Hamilton against Jefferson.

Even Adams's attire attracted criticism. By dressing in finery suited to a European court, his detractors charged, Adams was giving himself airs as an aristocrat. Veering between sarcasm and anguish, he explained to his former law student, William Tudor, that, having returned from Europe with only his diplomatic wardrobe, he could not afford a new, simple republican wardrobe.³² In Adams's thinking, the attire question linked with his frustrating battle to get Congress to arrange for his compensation for debts owed to him, and his equally vexing battle to win a salary suitable to his needs in office. Aghast that he was to be paid only \$5,000 per year as vice president when President Washington would get \$25,000 per year, he complained that both men had nearly equal burdens of providing for guests and entertainment. Thus, Adams maintained, his salary should be closer to that paid to the President – but he never got satisfaction on that point.

Adams's sole duties as Vice President were to preside over the Senate's debates; to break tie votes in the Senate; and to hold himself in readiness should the President be unable to exercise his powers and fulfill his duties, whether by death or illness. During President Washington's first term, two health crises beset him.³³ In June 1789, a large tumor on his left thigh required removal by a risky operation.³⁴ In May 1790, Washington again fell ill, of influenza accompanied by complications in his lungs. His illness left him near death for three days, affecting his sight, hearing, and strength. On both occasions, Martha Washington kept Abigail Adams informed of the president's health.³⁵ Aware that

the men of his family tended to die before their fortieth year, Washington had assumed that he would not have a normal lifespan. After his bout with influenza, he resigned himself to the idea that another such illness “would put me to sleep with my fathers.”³⁶ We have no record of Adams’s feelings on these occasions, for by 1790 Adams was no longer keeping his diary regularly; thus, he never wrote about Washington’s illnesses. Further, as he and Abigail were together, they did not exchange letters. Adams left no record, then or later, of his reactions to these potential crises over presidential succession and disability.

When he had to break tie votes as the Senate’s presiding officer, Adams wielded power. He broke twenty-nine ties (thirty-one, according to some counts) in his eight years as vice president – a record still unmatched. Fifteen of these votes came during the First Federal Congress alone, five during the argument over the location of the nation’s permanent capital.³⁷ He cast tie-breaking votes mostly to vindicate the federal government’s authority. Sometimes, as in late summer 1789, when the Senate could not decide whether to rewrite one of the constitutional amendments proposed by the House, Adams broke a tie to preserve good relations between Congress’s two chambers; the Senate gave up its attempt to rewrite the provision.

Adams had no other important official role in American public life. Unable to influence or intervene in Senate debates, barred from executive-branch deliberations, he was officially silenced. It is no wonder that, on December 19, 1793, during the crisis provoked by the French envoy “Citizen” Edmond Genêt, Adams mocked himself and his office in a letter to Abigail: “...my Country has in its Wisdom contrived for me, the most insignificant Office that ever the Invention of Man contrived or his Imagination

conceived: and as I can do neither good nor Evil, I must be born away by Others and meet the common Fate.”³⁸

In 1790 he decided to enter the political lists as an essayist – a role familiar to him from his days as a polemicist from the 1760s through the 1780s. He also hoped to salvage his most extensive work of constitutional argument, the *Defence of the Constitutions*, by extending that project in a new series of essays to be recast in book form.³⁹ Irritated that his countrymen had misread his *Defence* not as an anatomization and critique of aristocracy but as a vindication of it, he hoped to clarify matters with what would be a fourth volume of the *Defence*.⁴⁰

Adams took up his pen in response to the French Revolution. Viewing the upheavals in France with suspicion, Adams thought that nothing good would come of them. He suspected that France would plunge into chaos, from which a tyrant would emerge, instead of becoming the constitutional republic that such pro-French Americans as Jefferson desired. Because Americans seemed to Adams to be too naïve and enthusiastic about France, he was determined to set them straight.

As was his practice in planning his extended writings, he chose a text on which he could write commentary – the massive seventeenth-century *Historie of the Civil Warres of France* (1630) by the Italian historian and diplomat Enrico Caterino Davila.⁴¹ Adams focused on Davila’s reflections on how factional strife endangered liberty in France, drawing parallels with similar dangers facing the American republic.⁴² He hoped that his *Discourses on Davila* would be a counterpart to Niccolò Machiavelli’s greatest work, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*. As Machiavelli had used the Roman historian Livy’s account of the Roman Republic’s origins to discuss problems affecting

the republics of Renaissance Italy, Adams tried to use Davila's analysis of the sixteenth-century French civil wars to inspire his commentary on problems facing the United States. Adams also used another source for fourteen of the essays, which addressed moral and ethical themes – a passage in Adam Smith's influential *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published in 1759 and reissued in a revised edition in 1790, just as Smith died. Adams did not just track Smith's reasoning but borrowed his words without labeling his quotations, though he sometimes recast them in more vivid metaphors.⁴³

Again, how Adams wrote his *Discourses* helped to undermine their effectiveness. Like the *Defence*, his new essays showed a lack of sustained argument and method; he later wrote mournfully that his essays made a “dull, heavy volume” that had “powerfully operated to destroy [his] popularity.” He added, “It was urged as full proof that [Adams] was an advocate for monarchy, and laboring to introduce an hereditary President and Senate in America.”⁴⁴ The *Discourses* also miscarried, because Adams grounded his analysis on his faith in the continuing relevance of classical political thought to the modern world, despite its skepticism about democracy and about republican government.

Most Americans rejected his perspective, as he saw too late. The *Discourses* became a target for pamphleteers and controversialists. Not only did they dispute his arguments – they used those arguments as the basis for attacks on his character. They pulled from the essays passages that, taken out of context, would caricature Adams as an aristocrat and a would-be monarch. A man of such views, they argued, must be hostile to American political principles. Adams never found the respectful and attentive readership that he had hoped to have. Saddened, he broke off his *Discourses on Davila* after the

thirty-first essay (though scholars have found a thirty-second installment published in a Federalist newspaper).⁴⁵

Adams's decision to end his *Discourses on Davila* also meant that he had given up his last sustained work of political thought and argument, ending his formal work as a thinking politician. That ending confirmed his failure to find his intellectual bearings in the American political world. The stormy reception provoked by his arguments forced him to recognize that his ideas of politics differed dramatically from those held by most Americans, citizens and politicians alike. Thereafter, although he expounded his understandings of politics and government brilliantly in private letters, he never again sought to undertake a formal work of constitutional and political analysis.⁴⁶

Adams's immersion in the ideas and practices guiding Old World politics and diplomacy had wrenched his views out of alignment with conventional American wisdom. He had represented a fragile confederation in a world of great powers. Not only had he studied how they interacted; he tried to master the assumptions shaping their interactions, viewed through the intellectual lenses formed by his observations of monarchy and aristocracy in action. As he insisted, he was neither a monarchist nor an aristocrat nor an advocate of monarchy or aristocracy. Rather, seeking to grasp the hows and whys of European politics, he had become so used to them that he could not perceive that in America he was now operating in a different political context from the one reigning in Europe. Nor did he see, for example, that Franklin, whose ideas about politics were more democratic than his, had not allowed his time in Europe to pull him out of alignment with the ideas of his countrymen.

Adams was shocked that others saw differently the problems and challenges of politics, and the challenges of devising constitutional systems to solve those problems and meet those challenges. Other thinking politicians of his time experienced similar shocks. Rifts between such leading American politicians as Hamilton and Madison, Hamilton and Jefferson, and Washington and Madison all had in common each man's puzzled and horrified realization that someone else thought differently, with an accompanying sense of personal hurt and betrayal, as well as alarm because the stakes were so high.

American thinking politicians assumed, with the Scottish philosopher David Hume, that politics was an organized body of knowledge akin to "natural philosophy" – the era's term for science.⁴⁷ To them, politics was like physics or chemistry – it had clear postulates and assumptions, and equally clear principles and theories derived from them.⁴⁸ They assumed further that these assumptions, postulates, principles, and theories fit together naturally and neatly, with one right way to assemble and apply them. To someone who had arrived at a well-defined conception of the science of politics, anyone urging a different method of fitting these things together or a different way of applying them was wrong, evil, or both. Still, these differences not only emerged but multiplied, disrupting relations among American thinking politicians and the people in general. Dissension among thinking politicians was a drawback of American attempts to articulate the "divine science of politicks" – the failure to realize that different thinkers could assemble contrasting, even antithetical visions of politics, government, and constitutionalism, with no generally accepted standard for deciding which was right and which was wrong.⁴⁹ All these competing visions of politics and methods of political

reasoning ultimately fed the evolution of American constitutionalism and politics – but Adams and his contemporaries never grasped that development.

Adams and Jefferson both struggled to understand the political world that they found on their return home, but for different reasons. The experience of Europe affected the two friends in starkly different ways. Adams had accepted European ways as the ways of the world and saw the need to bring American politics into alignment with his perceptions of European politics and its lessons; he sought to use European politics to cast light on the likely evolution of American politics. Jefferson differed significantly from Adams. He had found European social and political corruption deeply traumatic; that traumatization sharpened Jefferson's understanding that American politics and governance stood in glaring opposition to those of Europe. Whenever Jefferson saw American public life seeming to echo European public life, he interpreted those echoes as symptoms of corruption and decadence.⁵⁰ Jefferson used European politics as a great array of warnings to Americans not to ape the ways of the Old World. Not only did Jefferson refuse to see European politics as forecasting the development of American politics; he committed himself to preventing American political imitations of Europe.

When in 1778 Adams went to Europe, he left behind him an American political system starting to emerge from the British colonial mindset. On his return in 1788, he found a new American political world starkly different from its colonial past, insecure about but proud of its intellectual independence from the Old World in general and from Britain in particular. The Americans whom he found on his return would have liked a comment penned decades later by the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, one that Adams would have rejected: "A new science of politics is needed for a world itself quite new."⁵¹

Adams was dubious of that American world's new science of politics. Rejecting that world's political givens, he hoped to draw on his strengths – his knowledge of systems of government and politics and the evolution of Western political thought, past and present – to establish his place in that world. In the process, he hoped to educate his countrymen as he had educated himself, but it was not to be. Adams gave up the work of a thinking politician because he and his countrymen were talking past each other.

In the 1790s, personal and intellectual differences shaped differences over public policy at home and diplomacy abroad, helping to mold the evolution of politics under the Constitution. Such leading American thinking politicians as Madison and Hamilton were at odds, with ominous consequences. They agreed in seeing American politics as dynamic, evolving in line with currents of social and economic change and development. What they disagreed about was those currents' specific nature and their consequences for America's evolving constitutional and political systems. Leading spirits in Washington's administration, such as Hamilton and Jefferson, were at loggerheads over the proper ways to interpret the Constitution and to apply its commands and limitations to solving national problems.⁵² In another kind of rupture, Vice President Adams, seeking to educate and guide his countrymen about the nature of politics, unintentionally created a widening rift between him and them, in the process dooming himself to political irrelevance.

Another factor helping to sideline Adams was the controversy in the United States over the French Revolution. In 1791, as he was about to discontinue his *Discourses on Davila*, a new controversy occasioned by the Revolution put him and his friend Jefferson at odds. The American printer J. B. Smith undertook the first American edition of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, a powerful defense of the French Revolution against the

strictures of such writers as the British Member of Parliament Edmund Burke. Smith went to Jefferson for support, and the Secretary of State penned what he thought was a private letter praising Paine's book. To Jefferson's horror, Smith used that letter as the introduction to his edition of *Rights of Man*; Jefferson had to write apologetic letters to Washington and to Adams, because his letter-preface attacked "the political heresies that have sprung up amongst us," and many readers understood that reference to point to Adams or Washington.⁵³ Jefferson's discomfort about explaining himself to Adams may explain the six-week delay between his letters to Washington and to Adams. In his gentle, friendly response, Adams reassured Jefferson that their friendship was not damaged by the printer's publishing of a private letter.⁵⁴

What Adams himself could not do, John Quincy Adams, a young lawyer in his mid-twenties, could do. Soon after the appearance in the United States of *Rights of Man*, John Quincy Adams began publishing a series of essays under the pen-name "Publicola," which attacked Paine's support of the French Revolution, defended constitutionalism as understood in Britain and in America, and indirectly defended his father. So powerful were the "Publicola" essays that many Americans mistakenly identified them as John Adams's work. The essays – and two later series of essays defending the foreign policy of Washington's administration – brought John Quincy Adams to President Washington's attention. Washington helped to launch the younger Adams's diplomatic career by naming him American minister to the Netherlands (the same post his father had held in the early 1780s). Still, the elder Adams's opposition to the French Revolution remained a vulnerability for him.⁵⁵

Adams's marginal status as Vice President continued to vex him. His extensive learning and his questing mind seemed of no use to anyone. Only three avenues of expression remained open to him. He could vent his thoughts and feelings to his family. He could argue with European controversialists in the margins of their books, a pursuit that he continued during his presidency and into his retirement.⁵⁶ And he could immerse himself in private correspondence. Here, he found much to occupy him. Friends and allies, past and present, pelted him with letters asking him about his views. Had he abandoned republicanism? Was he a monarchist, an apologist for aristocracy, or both?

Adams answered that he had not changed, insisting that he was as much a republican as he had been during the Revolution. Still, in ways that he did not recognize, he had changed. As a man steeped in political history and political learning, he did not have the aversion to monarchy that so many Americans had. Rather, he thought that monarchy and aristocracy were natural political institutions, consequences of human nature, nor did he believe that Americans had banished such things from their future. Consider a letter that he wrote on June 9, 1789, to his friend and fellow signer of the Declaration, Dr. Benjamin Rush:

I do not consider "hereditary Monarchy or Aristocracy as Rebellion against Nature." On the contrary I esteem them both Institutions of admirable wisdom and exemplary Virtue in a certain Stage of Society in a great Nation. The only Institutions that can possibly preserve the Laws and Liberties of the People, and I am clear that America must resort to them as an Asylum against Discord, Seditions and Civil War, and that at no very distant Period of Time.... I think it therefore impolitick to cherish prejudices against Institutions which must be kept in view as the hope of our Posterity. I am by no means for attempting

any such thing at present. Our Country is not ripe for it in many respects, and it is not yet necessary, but our ship must ultimately land on that shore or be cast away.⁵⁷

It was hard for Rush, Jefferson, or any other American getting such letters to discern the difference between Adams and an advocate of aristocracy or monarchy. But the difference is clear, though sometimes difficult to trace. It is the difference between a political advocate and a political diagnostician – between one who insisted that monarchy and aristocracy were desirable and one who, like Adams, recognized that these institutions were central to the evolution of government, politics, and society throughout history, and no more unnatural to humanity than was an oak tree. And yet the difficulty of understanding the difference between Adams’s mindset and that of an advocate for these despised institutions – for most Americans did despise them – cost Adams dearly. Try as he would, he could not make himself understood; the result was that others abandoned him or wrote him off, and he seethed in frustration at his inability to acquit himself of charges that he felt he did not deserve to face and should not have to disprove.

Vexed at his enforced official silence, Adams found various ways to remedy his exasperation. One was regularly returning to Braintree (absorbed in 1792 into the village of Quincy), sometimes for months at a time. His habit of leaving the scene of government paralleled that of President Washington. Both men, tired of their exalted offices, yearned for their homes, timing trips homeward to coincide with congressional recesses. In truth, their absences mattered little; the general government was part-time, and congressional recesses (with the executive branch in suspended animation) were the rule. After the Compromise of 1790, when Congress moved the nation’s capital to Philadelphia, matters

of public health combined with the lack of need for fulltime government to give the nation an intermittent government.⁵⁸ Philadelphia was tormented by outbreaks of yellow fever; escaping the disease by fleeing the capital was common.⁵⁹ Adams growled to Abigail that he needed to go home regularly and would sooner resign than be forbidden to return to his home in Massachusetts:

I will not sit here in Summer, in all Events. I would sooner resign my office. ... Other Gentlemen of the Senate and House are frequently asking leave of absence: but my Attendance is perpetual and will if continued much longer disorder my Health, which hitherto has been very good. But I want my Horse, my farm, my long Walks, and, more than all, the Bosom of my friend.⁶⁰

Retreating to his favorite part of the world, Adams devoted himself to his wife and his children. Four children born to Abigail and John had survived into adulthood. His daughter Abigail's marriage to Major William Stephens Smith proved troubled, a source of pain not only to her but to her parents. John Quincy was more a source of pride than of worry. By late 1794 he was at his new post in Amsterdam, an office that his father had held fourteen years before. In abandoning the law for diplomacy, John Quincy drew on his mastery of languages, his experience, and his pronounced gift for diplomacy. Thomas Boylston Adams served as his older brother's secretary, putting his own legal career on hold. Charles had launched his own law practice in New York City. John and Abigail, proud yet anxious parents, indulged themselves in pride, worry, and advice.

Adams was happy to turn to private concerns, for, though he was re-elected as vice president in 1792 with a majority of electoral votes, his second term in that office may have been the low-point of his political career.⁶¹ Political unhappiness; worsening

health problems for him and his wife; and his vexation with his “insignificant Office” continued to annoy him. He seemed irrelevant to the great controversies roiling American politics and dividing the nation; his attempts to guide Americans to form a proper approach to the French Revolution had failed, and he saw little purpose in plunging into the controversy over President Washington’s Neutrality Proclamation of 1793 or the tumult over the contentious French envoy Edmond Charles Genet or 1794’s crisis over the Whiskey Rebellion. On March 12, 1794, for example, he wrote to Abigail, “It is to be sure a Punishment to hear other Men talk five hours every day, and not be at Liberty to talk at all myself: especially as more than half I hear appears to me very young inconsiderate and inexperienced.”⁶²

Yet in the last year of his service as vice president, a new possibility opened. On 5 January 1796 he informed Abigail of the almost certain news -- though then private -- that President Washington had decided to retire at the end of his second term: “You know the Consequence of this, to me and to yourself. Either We must enter upon Ardours more trying than any ever yet experienced; or retire to Quincy Farmers for Life.”⁶³ Conflicting feelings overwhelmed Adams. He desired peace and quiet and an escape from the public arena, but once again he felt the claims of ambition, relishing the idea that others saw him as a credible successor to Washington. For months, John and Abigail wrestled with the choice before them; political gossip named him and Jefferson (now in his third year of retirement from public life) as the leading contenders for the presidency.

On September 19, 1796, Washington announced his decision to retire, publishing a message (written with Hamilton’s aid) in David Claypoole’s *Pennsylvania Packet, and Daily Advertiser*. Adams first read Washington’s Farewell Address in a Boston

newspaper; Washington had neither consulted him nor informed him of his decision to publish his announcement. Washington's Farewell Address won fame as perhaps his most important statement on American politics. He warned the American people against "self-created societies" (his term for Democratic-Republican societies proliferating across the nation) and other forms of partisan strife, as well as against embrace of foreign adventures by the government or the people.⁶⁴ Washington's blend of sage counsel and embittered partisan rhetoric showed how the fevered political world of the 1790s had dragged even the central figure of American politics from his determination to stand above partisanship. Washington was no longer "the man who unites all hearts" but a staunch Federalist. The increasing polarization of the nation's public life intensified the challenge facing any man picked to succeed him.

Rumors of Washington's impending retirement prompted politicians throughout the nation to devise ways to name candidates to stand for the Presidency in the nation's first contested presidential election. For example, in 1796 Massachusetts politicians used Washington's Birthday celebrations to highlight their backing of Adams; in late 1795, supporters of Jefferson let one another know by letter that they would rally behind him. Within the Federalist partisan alliance, some, such as Hamilton, sought a palatable Southern candidate to counter Jefferson and perhaps to supplant Adams.⁶⁵

The four candidates emerging that fall were a heterogeneous group. Federalists rallied behind John Adams and Thomas Pinckney of South Carolina, a diplomat whose negotiation of a 1795 Treaty with Spain made him an admired national figure (and an appealing alternative to Adams for Hamiltonian Federalists).⁶⁶ Republicans backed Thomas Jefferson, with New Yorker Aaron Burr emerging as the likely second candidate

of that partisan alliance. Under the Constitution as it was in 1796, all four men stood for the presidency, making possible covert machinations by those looking to replace an “obvious” candidate with a more tractable alternative.

As was customary in that era, Adams, Jefferson, and Pinckney did not put themselves forth as candidates; only Burr campaigned for himself. By the time of Washington’s announcement that he would not seek a third term, Federalists agreed on Adams and Pinckney, and Republicans backed Jefferson. In that fall’s brief, hard-fought contest, the campaigning was in the hands of networks of Federalist and Republican politicians vying for states and votes, leading up to the choice by each state of presidential electors and their casting of votes in each state’s capital on the same day throughout the United States.

Reports by newspapers around the nation made clear that Adams had narrowly defeated Jefferson to become President – but that, as the first runner-up in the electoral tally, Jefferson would become Adams’s Vice President. The inventors of the Electoral College had not reckoned on partisan forces reaching across state lines to dominate presidential elections; thus, they had not foreseen the problems that could result from an election dominated by national partisan alliances. Again Hamilton had sought to manipulate the Electoral College, this time to edge Pinckney past Adams. Hamilton failed to undermine Adams in Pinckney’s favor – and now Adams began to suspect and distrust Hamilton.

On 8 February 1797, before a joint session of Congress in Philadelphia’s Congress Hall, Vice President Adams conducted the official count of electoral votes. He opened the sealed reports from each state and read the votes aloud, tallying them as he

read. Once he had finished, he announced that he had been elected president, with 71 electoral votes; that Thomas Jefferson, with 68 electoral votes, would become Vice President; that Thomas Pinckney and Aaron Burr had received 59 and 30 electoral votes, respectively; and that nine other candidates had received a total of 48 electoral votes. Adams had won one more vote than the 70 needed for election. He was the first Vice President to announce his own election as President.

In a farewell speech to the Senate a week later, on 15 February 1797, Adams spoke with humility and affection; he concluded with a tribute to the Senate: Within these walls, for a course of years I have been an admiring witness of a succession of information, eloquence, patriotism, and independence which, as they would have done honor to any Senate in any age, afford a consolatory hope ... that no council more permanent than this, as a branch of the legislature, will be necessary to defend the rights, liberties, and properties of the people, and to protect the Constitution of the United States.⁶⁷

Adams was relinquishing the office that he had held for eight years – the longest duration of any in his career. In some ways, he was the office's first victim,⁶⁸ injured by his and his countrymen's confusion about what the vice presidency was or should be. His successor, Thomas Jefferson, would learn from Adams's experience and benefit by it.⁶⁹

Vice President Adams had educated his countrymen – but in ways that he had not intended, shaping their perceptions of him in ways opposed to his ideas and hopes. What he did not realize was that he had failed to learn how politics in the new nation was really working. Though he never put it in those terms, he had failed to educate his countrymen and he had failed to educate himself. Although relieved to give up the ordeal of the vice

presidency, he knew that, in a few weeks, he would assume another, more demanding role.

NOTES

¹ Douglass Adair (Trevor Colbourn, ed.), *Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays of Douglass Adair* (New York: W. W. Norton for Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1974; reprint ed., Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1998), chap. 1.

² James Grant, *John Adams: Party of One* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 343-344.

³ Diana Jacobs, *Dear Abigail: The Intimate Lives and Revolutionary Ideas of Abigail Adams and Her Two Remarkable Sisters* (New York: Ballantine Books/Random House, 2014), 280.

⁴ Jacobs, *Dear Abigail*, 280-82, and Woody Holton, *Abigail Adams: A Life* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 256-258.

⁵ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, and see also Woody Holton, "Abigail Adams, Bond Speculator," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 64:4 (October 2007): 821-838, and Woody Holton, "The Battle Against Patriarchy that Abigail Adams Won," in Alfred F. Young, Gary B. Nash, and Ray Raphael, *Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 273-287 (notes at 419-420).

⁶ Grant, *John Adams, Party of One*, 344-345.

⁷ Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1975), 225 (on Adams's election to Confederation Congress in 1788); "To James Madison from Tench Coxe, 27 January 1789," FO/NA. See Edmund Cody Burnett, *The Continental Congress* (New York: Macmillan, 1941; rept., New York: W. W. Norton, 1964), 725 (on Adams as prospect for president of Confederation Congress in 1789).

⁸ Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 182-184.

⁹ Steven R. Boyd, *The Politics of Opposition: Antifederalists and the Acceptance of the Constitution* (Millwood, NY: KTO Press, 1979).

¹⁰ John P. Kaminski, *George Clinton: Yeoman Politician of the New Republic* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1989), 166-177.

¹¹ The smoking gun is "From Alexander Hamilton to James Wilson, [25 January 1789]," FO/NA.

¹² Grant, *John Adams, Party of One*, 346-347, offers an interpretation from Adams's perspective. For a pro-Hamilton version, stressing Hamilton's desire to protect Washington and referring to the process of depleting Adams's electoral-vote total without mentioning Adams, see Forrest McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 124 and sources cited in *id.*, 391n12.

¹³ John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 299 & 491-92nn7&8.

¹⁴ Linda Grant De Pauw, Charlene Bangs Bickford, and LaVonne Marlene Siegel, eds., *The Documentary History of the First Federal Congress*, vol. 1: *Senate Legislative Journal* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 9 (entries for 6 April 1789).

¹⁵ Linda Dudik Gurrero, *John Adams' Vice Presidency: The Neglected Man in the Forgotten Office* (New York: Arno Press, 1972 [originally unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California – Santa Barbara, 1978]). See also Jack D. Warren, Jr., "In the Shadow of Washington: John Adams as Vice President," in Richard Alan Ryerson, ed., *John Adams and the Founding of the Republic* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2001), 117-41; Harry C. Thompson, "The Second Place in Rome: John Adams as Vice President," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 10:2 (Spring 1980): 171-8.

¹⁶ "The Vice-President's Speech: Extract from the Journal of the Senate of the United States, Tuesday, 21 April, 1789," in *WJA* 8:485-487 (quotation at 487).

¹⁷ "From George Washington to Henry Knox, 1 April 1789," FO/NA.

¹⁸ R. B. Bernstein, "Parliamentary Principles, American Realities: The Continental and Confederation Congresses, 1774-1789," in Kenneth R. Bowling and Donald R. Kennon, eds., *Inventing Congress: Origins and Establishment of the First Federal Congress* (Athens: Published for the United States Capitol Historical Society by Ohio University Press, 1999), 76-105.

¹⁹ Charlene Bangs Bickford and Kenneth R. Bowling, *Birth of the Nation: The First Federal Congress, 1879-1791* (New York: Published for the New York State Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution and United States Capitol Historical Society by the First Federal Congress Project and the Second Circuit Committee on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution, 1989), 23-24.

²⁰ . "From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 6 December 1787," FO/NA [Early Access document].

- ²¹ For the members of the First Federal Congress, Carol Berkin, *The Bill of Rights: James Madison and the Politics of the Parchment Barrier* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), Appendix: “Biographies.”
- ²² Quoted by William Maclay in diary entry for 25 April 1789, in Kenneth R. Bowling and Helen E. Veit, eds., *The Diary of William Maclay and Other Notes on Senate Debates, March 4, 1789 – March 3, 1791*, vol. 9 of Linda Grant DePauw, Charlene Bangs Bickford, Kenneth R. Bowling, and Helen E. Veit, eds., *The Documentary History of the First Federal Congress...*, 20 vols. to date (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972--), 9:5-6 (quotation at 6).
- ²³ *Id.* (quotation at 6).
- ²⁴ *Id.* For a distilled life of Maclay, see Maclay, *Diary*, 431-441; Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 11-61.
- ²⁵ Kathleen Bartoloni-Tuazon, *For Fear of an Elective King: George Washington and the Presidential Titles Controversy of 1789* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).
- ²⁶ Maclay, *Diary*, 4-5 (entry for 24 April 1789), 16-19 (entry for 1 May 1789), 26-29 (entry for 8 May 1789), 29-32 (entry for 9 May 1789). See also Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 40-42.
- ²⁷ Bickford and Bowling, *Birth of the Nation*, 17-18; Daniel N. Hoffman, *Governmental Secrecy and the Founding Fathers: A Study in Constitutional Controls* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 47-55 (House), 55-69 (Senate).
- ²⁸ Maclay, *Diary*, 33-34 (entry for 11 May 1789 [quotation at 33]).
- ²⁹ Maclay, *Diary*, 35-40 (entry for 14 May 1789 [esp. 37]).
- ³⁰ Ferling, *John Adams*, 310-311.
- ³¹ Warren, “In the Shadow of George Washington,” esp. at 127-128. For the encounter between Washington and the Senate, see Maclay, *Diary*, 128-131 (entry for 22 August 1789).
- ³² Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 48 & 304n77, quoting and citing John Adams to John Trumbull, April 25 and April 2, 1790.
- ³³ See Ellis, *His Excellency*, 190-191.
- ³⁴ “To George Washington from James McHenry, 28 June 1789,” FO/NA.
- ³⁵ See the editorial headnote, “William Jackson to Clement Biddle, 2 May 1790,” FO/NA.
- ³⁶ “From George Washington to David Stuart, 15 June 1790,” FO/NA.
- ³⁷ Guerrero, *John Adams’ Vice Presidency*, 128 (reporting 31 tie-breaking votes); U.S., Congress, Senate, *The Senate 1789-1989*, by Robert C. Byrd, S. Doc. 100-20, 100th Cong., 1st sess., vol. 4, *Historical Statistics, 1789-1992*, 1993, at 640 (reporting 29). See also Mark O. Hatfield, with the Senate Historical Office, *Vice Presidents of the United States, 1789-1993* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), 3-13, esp. 12n1. For the figure of fifteen tie-breaking votes during the First Congress alone, see Warren, “In the Shadow of George Washington,” 132.
- ³⁸ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 19 December 1793. AFPEA/MHS.
- ³⁹ On the relationship between the *Defence* and the *Discourses on Davila*, see John E. Paynter, “The Rhetorical Design of John Adams’s ‘Defence of the Constitutions of ... America’,” *Review of Politics* 58:3 (Summer 1996): 531-560.
- ⁴⁰ In *John Adams and the Fear of American Oligarchy* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2016), Luke Mayville presents a brilliant analysis of Adams’s thinking on aristocracy and oligarchy, concentrating on his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government* – including insightful reflections on *Discourses on Davila* (see, e.g., 100ff.). Richard Alan Ryerson’s analysis parallels Mayville’s and mine. Ryerson, *Republic*, 324-336. See also Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Reflections on Human Nature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1961), 197-207.
- ⁴¹ Henrico Caterino Davila, *The Historie of the Civil Warres of France...* (London: Printed by R. Raworth, and are to be sold by W. Lee, D. Pakeman, and G. Bedell [II: Printed by Ruth Raworth, and are to be sold by Thomas Heath], 1647-48).
- ⁴² Mack F. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629* (Cambridge, Eng., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); J. H. M. Salmon, *The French Religious Wars in English Political Thought* (Oxford, Eng.: Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press, 1959).
- ⁴³ Zoltan Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 168-71. Adam Smith (Ryan Patrick Hanley, ed., and Amyarta Sen, intro.), *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London and New York: Penguin Books/Penguin Classics, 2009); Adam Smith (D.D. Raphael and Adam Macfie, eds.), *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976; rept. pbk. ed., Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1984).

⁴⁴ Marginal note in Adams's copy of the *Discourses*, quoted in Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*, 179.

⁴⁵ Albert Iacuzzi, *John Adams, Scholar* (New York: S. F. Vanni, 1952), 266-267, and see *id.*, 135-157; Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*, 165-179; Zoltan Haraszti, "The 32nd Discourse on Davila," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 11:1 (Jan. 1954): 89-92. The fragment appeared in the *Federalist Gazette of the United States* in 27 April 1791.

⁴⁶ Ryerson, *John Adams's Republic*, 336, reaches the same conclusion.

⁴⁷ R. B. Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 32-38 and notes at 196-198.

⁴⁸ Michael S. Foley, *Law, Men and Machines: Modern American Constitutionalism and the Appeal of Newtonian Mechanics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁴⁹ Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered*, 120-121.

⁵⁰ R. B. Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 79-80.

⁵¹ Alexis de Tocqueville (J. P. Mayer, ed., and George Lawrence, trans.), *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 12.

⁵² Lynton K. Caldwell, *The Administration Theories of Hamilton and Jefferson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944; rept. ed., New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988); Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, 88-91.

⁵³ "To John Adams from Thomas Jefferson, 17 July 1791," FO/NA. See also Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, 92.

⁵⁴ "X. John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 29 July 1791," FO/NA.

⁵⁵ Lynn Hudson Parsons, *John Quincy Adams* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1999), 41-48.

⁵⁶ Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress, passim*; H. J. Jackson, "John Adams's Marginalia, Then and Now," in Robert C. Baron and Conrad Edick Wright, eds., *The Libraries, Leadership, and Legacy of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Books and Massachusetts Historical Society, 2010), 59-79 & notes at 264.

⁵⁷ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 9 June 1789, in *Old Family Letters: Copied from the Originals for Alexander Biddle, Series A* (Philadelphia, PA: Press of J. B. Lippincott Company, 1892), 36-38 (quotation at 38). Compare "X. John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 29 July 1791," FO/NA.

⁵⁸ Kenneth R. Bowling, *The Creation of the Washington, D.C.: The Idea and Location of the American Capital* (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 1991).

⁵⁹ John H. Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949; new ed., 1993).

⁶⁰ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 1 April 1796, *AFPEA/MHS*.

⁶¹ Warren, "In the Shadow of George Washington," 133-134. Warren relies on Shaw, *Character of John Adams*, 240-246, but Ferling has an opposite reading of this period of Adams's life. Ferling, *John Adams*, 299, 318-319.

⁶² John Adams to Abigail Adams, 12 March 1794, *AFPEA/MHS*.

⁶³ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 5 January 1796, *AFPEA/MHS*.

⁶⁴ George Washington, "Farewell Address, 19 September 1796," FO/NA.

⁶⁵ Joanne B. Freeman, "The Presidential Election of 1796," in Richard Alan Ryerson, ed. *John Adams and the Founding of the Republic* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2001), 142-67 (esp. 144-149 on choosing candidates); Jeffrey A. Pasley, *The First Contested Presidential Election: 1796 and the Founding of American Democracy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013), esp. 182-223 on choosing candidates.

⁶⁶ Samuel Flagg Bemis, *Pinckney's Treaty: America's Advantage from European Distress* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1925; revised ed., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1960).

⁶⁷ "The Vice-President's Speech: Extract from the Journal of the Senate of the United States, Wednesday, 15 February, 1797," in *WJA* 8:525-527 (quotation at 527).

⁶⁸ Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 115-116 (on the vice presidency's victims).

⁶⁹ Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, 117-118.

Chapter Eight

“May none but wise and honest Men ever rule under this roof.”

President John Adams

(1797-1801)

On 4 March 1797, wearing a suit of pearl-gray broadcloth and carrying a cockaded hat, John Adams entered the U.S. House of Representatives chamber on the first floor of Congress Hall in Philadelphia. Taking the chair reserved for the speaker of the House, Adams waited to be sworn in as the second president of the United States. Omitting the ceremony characteristic of President Washington’s public appearances and hoping to counter his own reputation for pomposity, Adams had made sure that his inauguration would be simple. Chief Justice Oliver Ellsworth of the U.S. Supreme Court was there to swear him in. Onlookers included the retiring president, George Washington; the new vice president, Thomas Jefferson; members of both houses of Congress; and a number of guests. Abigail Adams was back home in Quincy, tending to many domestic responsibilities, including caring for her dying mother-in-law.

Conscious of everyone’s scrutiny, Adams worried that the audience was comparing him with his predecessor to his own disadvantage. Commanding in posture despite his sixty-five years, Washington attended the inauguration clad in black – the color that his era associated with political power. He looked relieved to be giving up the burdens of office. Because the day marked Washington’s retirement as well as Adams’s inauguration, Adams could not help feeling that Washington’s last appearance on the national scene was eclipsing *his* inauguration.

Before taking the oath, Adams delivered his inaugural address. To allay fears that he wanted to create an American monarchy or aristocracy, he stressed his commitment to American independence, constitutional liberty, and republican government. His last sentence, more than 700 words long, presented a set of carefully-framed “if” clauses sketching his life, career, and political values, as well as the challenges awaiting him. By his era’s oratorical standards, it was an outstanding performance. He won approval for his speech’s substance and for his skilled delivery, though he had not slept the night before and felt ill throughout the ceremony.¹

After Adams finished, Chief Justice Ellsworth administered the constitutional oath of office. Adams then accepted congratulations from Washington and the other guests, and the inauguration was over. The next day, Adams wrote to Abigail, describing his self-consciousness about the contrast between him and Washington. He even imagined the other man’s thoughts:

“My dearest Friend, your dearest Friend never had a more trying day than yesterday. A Solemn Scene it was indeed and it was made more affecting to me by the Presence of the General, whose Countenance was as serene and unclouded as the day. He Seemed to me to enjoy a Tryumph over me. Methought I heard him think Ay! I am fairly out and you fairly in! See which of Us will be happiest.”²

An iconic figure for all Americans, Washington helped to define the presidency by his eight years in that office. To a greater extent than any later president, except perhaps Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Washington had fused his identity with the presidency; for decades, Americans used Washington as a measuring rod to assess his successors.³ Adams was the first ordinary American (by comparison with Washington) to be president. He tried to emulate Washington’s conduct – but fundamental differences between them in background and temperament doomed him to failure. Washington had been a veteran soldier and general. By

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contrast, Adams had no military experience; the short, stout lawyer from Braintree could not project authority, dignity, and gravity the way the tall, erect, powerfully built Washington could.

Washington had had more than twenty years' experience of wielding executive power – from his appointment as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army in 1775 through his last days as president in 1797. In the process, he had come to embody the Revolution and the American nation.⁴ Adams had never held an executive office. He was a veteran legislator and diplomat, he had chaired or served on countless committees in the Continental Congress, and he had spent eight years as vice president – but he had never been a state governor or the head of an executive department. And he was all too aware of that lack of experience. Moreover, Washington was a product of Virginia's colonial and Revolutionary aristocracy, whereas Adams was a creature of relatively democratic New England; Washington's Virginia background helped to groom him for national leadership in ways that Adams's New England origins did not.

As to temperament, Washington had a long and difficult history of restraining his formidable temper and cultivating his ability to project dignified calm, which sometimes came across as chilly formality. Adams knew that his own volcanic temper was set on hair-trigger; unlike Washington, he had not perfected the ability to keep himself in check. Adams also knew that his turbulent emotions raised doubts about whether he could muster the self-command that a president should have. His critics focused on his outbursts. At the height of the clashes between Adams and his cabinet, Secretary of War James McHenry wrote to Secretary of the Treasury Oliver Wolcott, mocking the president: "Whether he is sportful, playful, witty, kind, cold, drunk, sober, angry, easy, stiff, jealous, careless, cautious, confident, close or open, is almost always in the *wrong place* or to the *wrong persons*."⁵

Adams also brought with him inconvenient intellectual and political baggage that shaped Americans' perceptions of him. Recalling his writings and his service as American minister to England and as vice president, many Americans saw him as an advocate of high-toned government, believing that he yearned to bring aristocracy and monarchy to America. Not only did his *Defence of the Constitutions* and his *Discourses on Davila* contain passages that his foes used to indict him for those sins; his 1789 campaign for an ornate title for the president seemed to confirm these propensities.

Finally, unlike Washington, Adams had not been the Electoral College's unanimous first choice. Rather, he had won by a thin margin in the first contested presidential election, in which partisan alliances had backed candidates bearing partisan labels. Could a president who had won his office so narrowly in such a contest live up to the ideal of nonpartisan executive power?⁶ Adams shared that ideal, but his version differed from the activist presidency embraced by Washington and Hamilton. Instead of energy and activism, Adams extolled balance. His view of constitutionalism in general and American constitutionalism in particular grew out of his allegiance to the principles of balanced government, shaping and reflecting a balanced society. He saw the presidency as the key institution in maintaining balance within the constitutional system.⁷ Would he be able to remain true to those ideals?

Adams's first decision as president was to retain Washington's cabinet as his own. First, he wanted to avoid appearing to criticize Washington. Replacing Washington's appointees, he worried, might signal implied censure of Washington's judgment in making those appointments. As he explained to Benjamin Rush years later: "Till 1797 when I was chosen President of U.S. I had never had much intercourse with any of the secretaries of departments; but now it became my duty to look into them. Washington had appointed them, and I knew it would turn the world

upside down if I removed any one of them.”⁸ Adams also preferred to keep incumbents in place because it was hard to persuade talented men to join the federal government. And he had no concerns that any of Washington’s men would advance himself at the Adams administration’s expense.

Retaining Washington’s cabinet sowed the seeds of discord in Adams’s administration, however, hampering its – and his – effectiveness. The heads of departments felt no loyalty to Adams. They were loyal to Washington (Secretary of War James McHenry) or to former Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton (Secretary of State Timothy Pickering and Secretary of the Treasury Oliver Wolcott, Jr.). The one cabinet member in neither camp – Attorney General Charles Lee – did not head a cabinet department (the Justice Department was not created until 1870); rather, he was a one-man law firm for the federal government, with his own private practice. As a cabinet member, he was largely ineffectual.⁹

Pickering, Wolcott, and McHenry had interlocking backgrounds, the nexus points being service in Washington’s administration and intellectual kinship with Hamilton. Pickering, a fellow citizen of Massachusetts, succeeded Samuel Osgood as Postmaster General in 1791 and Henry Knox as Secretary of War in 1795; he replaced Edmund Randolph as Secretary of State in 1795, following Randolph’s resignation. Pickering and Hamilton, veterans of the Continental Army, had served under Washington; they shared a skeptical view of human nature, a bias for England in foreign policy, and a commitment to a strong federal government. Wolcott, a citizen of Connecticut, assisted Hamilton from 1789 to 1791 as auditor of the Treasury; Hamilton helped to secure Wolcott’s elevation to comptroller in 1791 and persuaded Washington to name Wolcott to succeed him as secretary in 1795. McHenry, a Marylander, had befriended Hamilton when they were aides to Washington during the Revolution. In 1787, with Washington, they

were delegates to the Federal Convention; and McHenry succeeded Pickering as secretary of war in 1795. The web of relationships linking Pickering, Wolcott, and McHenry gave Adams no entry, and soon closed against him.

Adams's decision created another problem. A president's second-term cabinet often lacks the best and brightest. Once a president has gone through the best talent available in his first term, he finds his choices limited to the "second string," at best. In the 1790s, the burdens of service in the federal government eclipsed any attraction in becoming a department head; prospective appointees often declined to serve, making it harder for a president to find leading talents. Thus, Adams began his presidency with leftovers from Washington's presidency – not a guarantee of success.¹⁰

Not until Congress created the Navy Department in 1798 did Adams have a cabinet member loyal to him. Benjamin Stoddert of Maryland was an able administrator and a useful partner in building up the navy. Like the ancient Greek leader Themistocles, Adams and Stoddert believed in strengthening the nation's "wooden walls." The navy that they developed proved invaluable when the United States fought the quasi-war with France; ships built under their supervision played distinguished roles in American naval history thereafter.¹¹

Adams lacked support in Congress as well as in the executive branch. In the 1790s, Congress did not yet have the party structure enabling later party leaders to discipline members and command support. Few Congressional Federalists felt loyalty to Adams equal to their loyalty to Washington or to Hamilton. As Adams recognized, he had few or no tools or powers to enforce his will as president; he had only "speeches, written recommendations, and messages."¹² These limits, combined with the era's wariness of executive power, hampered the new president's ability to do his job

Family difficulties plagued Adams. For much of his presidency, he felt keenly the absence of his wife. Abigail largely avoided the nation's capital, worrying about its climate's dangers to her health. She preferred to stay in Quincy, in the family home that she had labored to perfect since they acquired it in 1788. During their separations, John and Abigail regularly wrote to each other; as always, each derived comfort from their correspondence. The family was scattered, with some children doing well – or seeming to do well – and others dealing with personal problems. Abigail Adams Smith was mired in her unhappy marriage to Col. William Stephens Smith, a rash financial speculator and an improvident provider. John Quincy Adams became American minister to Prussia during his father's presidency (with his younger brother Thomas Boylston Adams again serving as his secretary). Charles Adams had married a sister of Col. Smith and appeared to be thriving as a lawyer in New York City.

The nation's domestic and foreign problems gave Adams reasons for disquiet. The United States was a fragile Union seeking to hold itself together despite political strife. Most politicians viewed partisan competition as a danger to the republic, not a legitimate governing assumption of American political life.¹³ The foremost problem facing the nation was the state of world politics – specifically the troubled relationship between the United States and France.¹⁴ Since 1789, revolutionary unrest had consumed France; since 1792, the country had been at war with the rest of Europe.

Divisions over France pervaded domestic politics and interacted with domestic issues; when Federalist economic policies caused factional strife, it was because those policies resonated with foreign crises requiring the federal government to raise revenues. Republicans backed France as the nation's oldest ally, a fellow republic seeking to throw off monarchy and aristocracy. By contrast, Federalists distrusted France as a source of democratic chaos, an enemy

of religion, law, and good order. Most Federalists embraced American neutrality; some urged that the nation join Britain and its European allies in opposing France. These political rifts dominated Washington's last years in office and persisted under Adams.

By comparison, American relations with Britain and with Native American nations were quiet under Adams. Two commissions established under the Jay Treaty of 1794 continued negotiations with Britain, and their work extended into the nineteenth century. One commission was settling American claims for property destroyed by British forces during the Revolution; the other was adjusting claims by British subjects for debts owed by Americans from before the Revolution. Adams insisted that, in any joint action by Britain and the United States, the new nation had to maintain an independent stance so that the two countries would be on an equal footing.¹⁵ Careful work by Washington and his advisors, notably Pickering, placed U.S. relations with Native American nations on a mutually respectful basis, quieting the clashes that had raged on American frontiers in the early 1790s. Adams continued these policies.¹⁶

Determined to ease tensions with France, Adams pondered a mission to resolve disputes between the two nations, modeled on John Jay's 1794 mission to Britain. At first, the French seemed uninterested; in 1796, the French foreign minister, the comte de Talleyrand, had refused to receive Charles Cotesworth Pinckney when he sought to present his credentials as American minister. On receiving news of Talleyrand's rebuff, Adams called a special session of Congress, the first under the Constitution. On 16 May 1797, he read Congress an angry speech insisting that France owed the United States fair treatment: "[W]e are not a degraded people, humiliated under a colonial spirit of fear and sense of inferiority, fitted to be the miserable instruments of foreign influence."¹⁷ Yet he still wanted to find a route to peace.

Adams hoped to send a respected Republican to France, such as Vice President Jefferson or former Representative Madison, but both men declined. Pickering, Wolcott, and McHenry opposed the idea, hinting that they would resign in protest if Adams named a Republican envoy. Hoping to mollify his cabinet, Adams adopted a different model for the mission. He chose three men, balanced geographically and ideologically: Charles C. Pinckney (Federalist from South Carolina), John Marshall (Federalist from Virginia), and Elbridge Gerry (Republican from Massachusetts). Adams's cabinet objected to Gerry; Adams had chosen him both because he wanted a balanced mission and because he trusted Gerry, an old friend from the Second Continental Congress and a fellow signer of the Declaration of Independence. Adams picked another old friend, Francis Dana, a Federalist, to replace Gerry – but Dana declined to serve, citing ill health. Adams restored Gerry to the mission.

When the Americans reached Paris, Talleyrand refused to receive them. As they debated what to do, three French agents met with them and demanded an apology for Adams's May 1797 message -- and hinted at the payment of bribes to secure access to Talleyrand. The Americans spurned these terms; Pinckney replied, "No, no, not a sixpence!" – a flat phrase that gave rise to the slogan, "Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute!"¹⁸ The American diplomats' report to Adams labeled the French agents as X, Y, and Z – hence, the "XYZ Affair." They agreed that Marshall would deliver the mission's documentation to Adams; Pinckney would follow, and Gerry would stay in France on the chance that the French might reconsider.

Even before Marshall's arrival in Philadelphia, news of the mission's failure reached American shores. Certain that France could not have refused negotiations, Republicans charged Adams with having sabotaged the mission. On his arrival, Marshall closeted himself with the president, who debriefed him and reviewed the documents he brought. At the right time, Adams

made the mission's documents available to the public and to Congress. Proof of French responsibility for the mission's failure embarrassed Republicans; an enraged American public demanded war with France.¹⁹ The United States abrogated its alliance with France; American and French warships clashed on the high seas in a "quasi-war," the first undeclared war under the Constitution. The people rallied around Adams; for the first time, he was popular.²⁰

Adams ordered mobilization of the army to prepare for a French invasion. To lead the army, he named Washington commander-in-chief, stressing the general's military experience and his own lack of expertise. Second, Adams ordered that the navy be strengthened to meet the quasi-war's demands, making the navy the primary safeguard against invasion. Bolstering his efforts, merchants in ten cities organized private subscription ventures to raise funds to build frigates for the navy.²¹

Seeking to defend the nation against subversion, Federalists in Congress drafted four bills, focusing on what they saw as the major domestic problems rooted in the threat of war. Targeting hostile resident aliens and journalists, Congress sought to strengthen American law on immigration and to tighten limits on press criticism of government or its officials.

Since the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, European refugees had poured into the United States, which had no immigration policy. Some were Irish refugees who had sided with the French; some were liberal French exiles fleeing France to save their lives; still others were backers of the French Revolution from other European nations, seeking refuge from persecution. Federalists worried that these new arrivals would subvert the U.S. government, creating a regime like the revolutionary French Republic.²²

Partisan criticism of the government and its leaders also alarmed the administration and its supporters, including Abigail Adams. The question Federalists asked was: What should the

limits on freedom of speech and press be? English common law taught that criticizing the government or its officials was punishable as the crime of seditious libel. At common law, truth was no defense against a charge of seditious libel; the greater the truth, the greater the libel. True or false, seditious libel inflicted injury on the reputations of the government and its officials. Why did the government's reputation matter? Federalists saw the government under the Constitution as dangerously fragile. If its legitimacy was no stronger than its officials' reputations, an attack on one was an attack on the other – so both had to be protected.²³

Congress framed three bills to prevent subversion by suspect aliens and a fourth limiting criticism of the government; Adams signed the bills into law.²⁴ The Naturalization Act imposed exacting requirements on foreign nationals seeking to become naturalized citizens. The Alien Enemies Act empowered the president to deport any alien resident who came from a country with which the United States was at war. The Alien Friends Act gave the president full discretion, without due process, to deport any alien national deemed a threat to domestic peace.²⁵

The Sedition Act banned spoken or published criticism of the government or of specific officials – the president and Congress (leaving Federalists free to attack Vice President Jefferson) – though it made truth a defense to charges under the act. This act was to expire on 3 March 1801. Republicans charged that that expiration date proved the bill's political character; it could be used only against critics of the Adams administration. If Adams were re-elected in 1800, the Federalists could re-enact the bill; if not, the bill would be unavailable to any Republican successor to use against Federalist opponents.²⁶

Federalists saw the Sedition Act as a weapon that the government could use to defend itself against a barrage of criticism. And yet such ardent Federalists as Hamilton and Marshall doubted the measure's wisdom, though they accepted its constitutionality.²⁷ By contrast, Abigail

Adams was firmly convinced of the need to punish sedition. Like others backing the Sedition Act, she insisted that the statute was legally and politically warranted, a safeguard against those who would bring the Terror's bloodshed to American shores.²⁸

Administration officials never used the alien statutes, but they did wield the Sedition Act against Republican printers – including Benjamin Franklin Bache of the Philadelphia *Aurora*, Matthew Lyon of Vermont, and James Thomson Callendar of Virginia.²⁹ The Sedition Act undergirds the most serious charge leveled by posterity against President Adams – that he had violated freedom of the press.³⁰ In the 1790s, the nation's press was a collection of newspapers and a few magazines; those writing for and editing them were not professional journalists, but rather fiercely partisan writers and printers allied with or opposing a specific partisan alliance. Standards of journalistic objectivity did not exist.

Adams's views of the press were those of his era, not of ours.³¹ Like his contemporaries, he viewed the press as a collection of partisan printers. Shaping his opinion was the viciousness with which opponents in the press assailed his character, views, and conduct as president. Their treatment of him left its mark – including his willingness to see the press as a hostile force whose power had to be checked to preserve the government. Even if he could remain unmoved under a hail of journalistic criticism, Abigail, could not. She was outraged, both as a loyal wife and as a convinced Federalist. By the standards of his time, Adams's decision to sign the Sedition Act into law was not unreasonable or indefensible – though it was certainly open to severe criticism under standards then available.³²

Vice President Jefferson reassured Republicans that the “reign of witches” symbolized by the Alien and Sedition Acts was sure to pass away.³³ At the same time, he and Madison, who was in political retirement but working behind the scenes, sought to rouse Republican opposition

to Adams's administration. Their tools were the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions. The Kentucky Resolutions, drafted by Jefferson and adopted in 1798 by Kentucky's legislature, denounced the Alien and Sedition Acts as unconstitutional and claimed that a state had the authority to declare them null and void within its borders – *nullification*. The Virginia Resolutions, drafted by Madison and adopted in 1798 by Virginia's legislature, also attacked the statutes' constitutionality. Instead of using nullification, they declared that a state could *interpose* its authority to protect its citizens from federal prosecutions under what they deemed to be an unconstitutional statute, while seeking help from other states.³⁴

The Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions failed to unite popular opposition against the Alien and Sedition Acts; the other states rejected Virginia's and Kentucky's constitutional arguments – their visions of federal constitutional power and of press freedom, their readings of the statutes, and their proposed remedies, nullification and interposition.³⁵ Even so, federal prosecutions of editors for sedition began to shift public opinion in favor of those prosecuted and against the prosecutions. These cases persuaded many Americans that the government should not be able to prevent publication of criticism of the government or its officials, and the government should not prosecute printers for publishing criticism of the government if they published true criticism for good reasons and good motives.³⁶

Adams was often an absentee president. Each year, he traveled to Quincy, staying there for months at a time, to be with Abigail. His absence from the capital troubled many of his supporters; Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert and General Uriah Forrest, among others, urged him to return to Philadelphia. Forrest wrote in 1799, "The public sentiment is very much against your being so much away from the seat of government, from a conviction that, when you are there, the public vessel will be properly steered; and that these critical times require an

experienced pilot. The people elected you to administer the government. They did not elect your officers, nor do they (however much they respect them) think them equal to govern, without your presence and control....”³⁷

Adams had reasons for his absenteeism. He was following precedents set by Washington and by himself as vice president – but Adams was gone 385 days in four years whereas Washington was gone only 181 days in eight years.³⁸ During the early Republic, the federal government was a part-time government, with long periods when Congress was adjourned and the rest of the government was on hiatus. Adams’s times away coincided with these hiatuses. Delays in travel slowed the pace of events, reducing the need to respond to crises quickly. Moreover, outbreaks of yellow fever in Philadelphia forced government officials, including Adams, to relocate (with Trenton as a temporary capital) to avoid sickness.³⁹

Adams insisted that being an absentee president was not the same as being an inactive president. He received and answered daily dispatches from his cabinet. He assured Forrest: “I do administer [the government] here at Quincy, as really as I could do at Philadelphia.... [N]othing is done without my advice & direction, when I am here... The post goes very rapidly and I answer by the return of it, so that nothing suffers or is lost.”⁴⁰ By these means, Adams sought to maintain control over his administration when he was away.

Unfortunately, Adams’s long absences led not to coordinated government, but to cabinet government. Pickering, Wolcott, and McHenry worked together in Adams’s absence to strengthen the nation’s armed forces on Hamiltonian terms. At their request, Hamilton guided their deliberations and their decision-making. Hamilton justified himself in running Adams’s government behind the president’s back, but his reasoning was tainted with the arrogance that his enemies often denounced in him: The nation had to be governed, he thought; if Adams would not

oversee his own administration, and if the government needed overseeing, he would do it through Adams's advisors. Though in 1800 Adams at last took charge of his government, forcing McHenry and Wolcott to resign and firing Pickering, and though he denounced Hamilton as a potential Caesar, he never learned the full extent of Pickering's, Wolcott's, and McHenry's collaboration with Hamilton behind his back, nor did he grasp that his own quasi-negligence was a contributory cause.

The division in Adams's administration between the president and most of his cabinet signaled another kind of trouble. No longer a unified partisan alliance, the Federalists were splitting into two factions, a process that began in the last years of Washington's presidency; "High" Federalists allied with Hamilton confronted a moderate group, Adams Federalists, loyal to the president. Any problem highlighting the differences between these groups might rupture the Federalist partisan alliance.⁴¹

Organizing the army gave rise to a host of administrative, political, and personal problems highlighting divisions within Adams's administration and among Federalists. The first questions focused on Washington's staff officers: who would choose them, and what seniority would they have? More allied with Washington and Hamilton than with Adams, Congress sought to write Hamilton's and Washington's views into law, giving the general discretion to choose his aides and rank them in order of seniority as he saw fit. They hoped that Washington would choose Hamilton as second in command, Inspector General, with Henry Knox and Charles C. Pinckney next in line. Adams, who distrusted Hamilton as too young and too ambitious, refused to give him so high a rank. Knox, indignant that anyone should be deemed to outrank him, withdrew from consideration. Pinckney offered to serve in any capacity. Washington insisted

that Adams honor his preferences for seniority. The wrangling exacerbated Adams's distrust of Hamilton and provoked his annoyance with Washington for trying to dictate terms to him.

Exasperated, Adams reviewed the American-French crisis. In confidential letters sent through the second half of 1798, William Vans Murray, American minister to the Netherlands, reported to Adams that the French might welcome reopening negotiations. Delighted with the news, which reinforced his doubts about war with France, Adams instructed Vans Murray to open back-channel talks with the French. He was not yet ready to confide in his cabinet.⁴²

At the same time that the French crisis provoked Adams, he and the cabinet also had to deal with a related crisis raging on the island of Saint Domingue, then a French colony. In 1791 a slave revolt had brought civil war to Saint-Domingue. Defeating their masters, the rebels created Haiti, the only republic besides the United States in the Western Hemisphere. At first, the Washington administration sought to aid the French planters, but by 1794 relations between the United States and France were deteriorating. Federalists saw the Haitian revolution as a chance to undercut French interests in the New World. One advocate for Haiti was Timothy Pickering; southern Federalists agreed with him on favoring independence for Haiti to strike a blow against French power. Through Pickering, the Adams administration continued to assist Haiti, to promote its interests, and to confirm its independence. The island became an American base during the quasi-war with France, as American warships battled French privateers in the Caribbean. American pro-Haitian policy continued until 1801, when the Republicans succeeded the Federalists; the United States then reversed its stance on Haiti, continuing that hostility for decades. Adams was more interested in causing trouble for the French than in the interests of the Haitian people.⁴³

Private worries intruded into Adams's October 1799 travel from Quincy to the temporary capital at Trenton. Stopping to visit his son Charles in New York City, Adams discovered that Charles was alcoholic and penniless and had abandoned his wife and daughters. Adams disowned him. Reporting Charles's condition to Abigail, Adams wrote that he envied Washington's childless state.⁴⁴ Then, he continued his journey, heartbroken.

Based on hopeful reports from William Vans Murray and from John Quincy Adams about France's willingness to negotiate, Adams surprised and angered his cabinet with a set of abrupt decisions. He would send a peace mission to France. At first he wanted to send Vans Murray, in whom he already had confidence, but his cabinet insisted that he add members acceptable to High Federalists. Adams's first choices for a peace mission consistent with his cabinet's demands were William Vans Murray, Chief Justice Oliver Ellsworth, and former Virginia governor Patrick Henry, who had moved into Federalist ranks to oppose Virginia's Jeffersonian Republicans. When Henry declined, citing his age and bad health, Adams named Governor William Richardson Davie of North Carolina, a Jeffersonian Republican, instead. As with the XYZ mission, Adams balanced the trio geographically and politically. Again, as with Gerry, Adams's choice of Davie angered and divided his cabinet; Pickering, McHenry, and Wolcott opposed Davie, while Stoddert and Lee stood by the president. Despite Federalist efforts to downplay the peace mission or to persuade its members not to serve, the three diplomats sailed for France in November 1799.

Another opponent of the peace mission made an unexpected intervention at this point. Inspector General Hamilton had come to Trenton to meet with Secretary of War McHenry and General James Wilkinson to discuss troop deployments in the Old Northwest. Hamilton disputed Adams's decision to send negotiators to France and demanded that Adams suspend or cancel the

mission. Adams refused, railing against Hamilton's opposition to his policies.⁴⁵ Each man left the meeting thinking the other mad. Adams pursued his peace efforts; Hamilton planned to manipulate Federalist politics against the president in 1800.

Washington's death on 14 December 1799, which prompted weeks of national mourning, exacerbated the rancor within the Adams administration. The passing of "the father of his country" actually freed Adams to be his own man in the presidency and to challenge his advisors. Washington's death also left the army without a commander; this vacancy gave Adams the chance to forestall a needless war with France.

At the beginning of May 1800, Adams abruptly ended his working vacation. Heeding the urgent appeals of Stoddert, Forrest, and other supporters, he traveled from Massachusetts to Trenton, having kept his travel plans to himself. On his arrival, Adams confronted his department heads. He declared his determination to end the quasi-war, to support the peace mission, to reject Hamilton as Washington's replacement as head of the army, and to disband the army. His decisions left his cabinet shaken, appalled, and angry.

On 5 May, in a vehement argument with McHenry, Adams rebuked him, denouncing Hamilton and mocking his ambitions while praising Jefferson. He concluded by demanding McHenry's resignation; McHenry resigned on 12 May, making his letter effective at the end of June and giving Adams time to find a successor. Adams also wrote to Pickering, demanding his resignation; Pickering refused, citing his need for his government salary to support his family. Unmoved, Adams fired him a week later. This was the first time in American history that a president dismissed a cabinet member; Adams followed the "decision of 1789," by which the First Federal Congress recognized the president's constitutional power to fire heads of executive departments.⁴⁶ Though Adams kept Wolcott at the Treasury for the time being, he confined

Wolcott to his Treasury responsibilities, barring him from discussions of war, peace, and foreign policy.⁴⁷

Reorganizing his administration, Adams turned to John Marshall, who had impressed him with his legal skill, his diplomatic record, and his loyalty.⁴⁸ At first, Adams wanted Marshall to become Secretary of War, but, after dismissing Pickering, he nominated Marshall as Secretary of State. Adams persuaded another ally, the Massachusetts politician Samuel Dexter, to lead the War Department. Wolcott resigned on 31 December 1800; Adams named Dexter Secretary of the Treasury; Dexter also served as Secretary of War through the end of Adams's term.

The quasi-war raised domestic problems for Adams. In March 1799, federal taxes on dwelling houses, land, and slaves to raise revenue for the war sparked outrage in Pennsylvania; John Fries, a Continental Army veteran, organized a tax-resistance movement. After insurgents led by Fries clashed with local authorities, state militia, and U.S. marshals, government officials arrested Fries and twenty-nine other men and tried them for treason and other crimes in federal court in Pennsylvania. Fries and two other defendants were convicted of treason and sentenced to hang. Reviewing their sentences, Adams decided that none of the convicted men had committed treason as defined by the Constitution. On 21 May 1800, in the face of his advisors' opposition, he pardoned all three men and granted amnesty to all participants in the rebellion. Notwithstanding Adams's generous measures, Pennsylvania's German voters, who had sided with Fries, voted against the Federalists in 1800.⁴⁹

The 1800 election, which promised to be more stormy than that of 1796, was pivotal for the United States.⁵⁰ Federalists faced Republicans, but a dramatic split divided Federalist ranks, pitting Adams Federalists against High Federalists. The resulting fray seemed to nervous observers so bitter that it might tear the republic apart.

Republicans backed Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr; opposing them were Federalists John Adams and Charles C. Pinckney, a veteran of the XYZ mission. All four men were candidates for the presidency under the Constitution's definition of the process, but Federalists agreed that Adams was their choice for President and that Pinckney was destined for the vice presidency; Republicans agreed that Jefferson was their candidate for president and Burr was their choice for the vice presidency.

One Federalist who did not want Adams to have a second term was Alexander Hamilton. Angered by Adams's disbanding of the army and his rejection of Hamilton's plans for military preparedness, Hamilton launched a verbal war against Adams. He even sought to confront Adams again in person, demanding to know why the president had labeled him the head of a British faction and insisting on an apology for the slur. Hamilton echoed the preliminaries of an honor dispute – but Adams ignored Hamilton.

In October 1800, Hamilton published a furious, disdainful pamphlet eviscerating Adams's character and conduct. He hoped to circulate it privately among leading Federalists to persuade them to back Pinckney instead of Adams. Unfortunately for both men, the pamphlet leaked far beyond its intended audience. Republican operatives published a special edition "for the public," to spread Hamilton's intemperate attack far and wide. Instead of shifting the Federalists from Adams to Pinckney, Hamilton had proved that the Federalist partisan alliance was disintegrating, undermining both candidates and destroying his own stature as a Federalist leader. Even close friends of Hamilton bemoaned his imprudence and tactlessness.⁵¹

In this period, states held elections at different times of the year, rather than agreeing on one day in late fall (the modern practice). In the spring of 1800, the elections in New York City signaled the likelihood of a Republican victory nationwide; Burr devised and used new forms of

electioneering and campaigning, overcoming the efforts of Hamilton and the Federalists. The Republicans carried New York City and the state; further developments, state by state, confirmed the pattern foreshadowed by New York's results.

The 1800 election returns resembled those of 1796, with regional loyalties eclipsing party loyalties.⁵² Adams (65 votes) and Pinckney (64) finished one electoral vote apart, indicating Federalist planning to avoid a tie. But Adams finished eight votes behind Jefferson and Burr, who tied with 73 electoral votes each. This defeat was relatively close, rather than the national humiliation of historical myth.⁵³ The electoral results also indicated that the Republicans would capture both houses of Congress, ending Federalist majorities that had held Congress since 1789. Federalists complained after 1800 that the Constitution's three-fifth clause skewed the Electoral College results to favor Jefferson, a slaveowner; they argued that the clause's augmentation of the representation of slave states in the House and thus in the electoral college gave an unfair political edge to slave states. The three-fifths clause might have given states with large slave populations only a negligible advantage, in light of other factors at issue in 1800.⁵⁴

With the omens of Republican success and Federalist failure arrived news of a family tragedy, making retirement increasingly welcome for John and Abigail Adams. On 30 November 1800, Charles Adams died, aged thirty.⁵⁵ (His widow Sarah, known as Sally, had left him weeks before, taking their children with her; they visited with her mother. By the end of January 1800, Sally and her children went to live with Abigail.) With Charles's death, his father could mourn him; in later years, John even recognized that his insistence that Charles enter the law as a career might have contributed to his son's self-destruction.⁵⁶

The Electoral College tie between Jefferson and Burr portended trouble for the nation. Competing interests tried to sway the lame-duck House of Representatives, which had the

responsibility to break the tie. Although the Constitution specified how the House should decide a contested presidential election, political uncertainties put into play by the 1800 electoral-vote tie left the nation in a state of uncertainty.⁵⁷ Adams, whose third-place finish excluded him from consideration by the House, found bitter amusement in the election's results. He wrote to William Tudor, "Mr Hamilton has carried his Eggs to a fine Markett.... The ... very two Men, of all the World, that he was most jealous of, are now placed over him."⁵⁸

Finding Jefferson dangerously radical and therefore unacceptable, some Federalists pondered making a deal with Burr. Burr was not tied to any particular set of principles; his supporters claimed, and Federalists agreed, that Burr was more open-minded and less ideologically rigid than Jefferson, and thus open to a deal by which he could win the presidency and Federalists could continue to shape policy. Alarmed at the threat of Burr allying himself with the Federalists, Jeffersonian Republicans demanded that Burr defer to Jefferson, which he was prepared to do, and that he declare himself unworthy to be president by comparison with Jefferson, which he was *not* prepared to do. Rejecting what he saw as a dishonorable slap at his fitness for leadership, Burr began to consider Federalist offers of support. Appalled, Hamilton wrote frantic letters to leading Federalists begging them not to back Burr – even at the price of accepting Jefferson. Hamilton pointed out that, though he disliked Jefferson's principles, Jefferson had principles, whereas, in Hamilton's eyes, Burr was committed only to forwarding his own career.⁵⁹

Federalists alarmed by the tug-of-war between Jefferson and Burr in the House and unprepared to accept either suggested that Adams become a caretaker president – if need be, continuing beyond the end of his term of office. Stung by his defeat and increasingly looking forward to retirement, Adams rejected their proposal on principled and personal grounds. He was

sick of the presidency and of politics, he declared; he wanted to rejoin Abigail in Quincy.

Further, he insisted, he had to honor the people's decision to deny him a second term.

Adams and Jefferson had one last face-to-face meeting during the deadlock. According to Jefferson, Adams told him that he had the power to break the impasse: "You have only to say that you will do justice to the public creditors, maintain the navy, and not disturb those holding office, and the government will instantly be put into your hands." Jefferson declined to give such assurances, as they would violate his sense of integrity. He added, "It was the first time in our lives we had ever parted with anything like dissatisfaction."⁶⁰ Adams never wrote about this meeting, the only time that he played any direct role in the effort to resolve the electoral crisis.

Two weeks before the inauguration, the House broke the deadlock in Jefferson's favor on the thirty-sixth ballot. For the rest of his time in office, Adams worked to foster an orderly transfer of power. His actions during this crisis rendered a service to the nation and its constitutional system as great as Washington's in refusing to seek a third term. Adams's willingness to accept his defeat and to help smooth Jefferson's way to the presidency helped to ensure the first peaceful transfer of political authority from one partisan group to another under the Constitution. 1800 became a precedent governing later presidential elections.

The closing months of Adams's presidency gave rise to a myth that he sought political retribution against Republicans; the myth's focus was the federal judiciary, the Constitution's problem child. Since the federal courts began their work in 1790, federal judges complained about their burdens – but their pleas for help went answered.⁶¹ Though in 1799 Adams urged judicial reform, Congress ignored his suggestion. At the end of 1800, however, once the Federalists saw that the election had cost them the presidency and both houses of Congress, the

need for judicial reform blended with partisanship to make the nation's courts a pressing subject.⁶²

Article III, section 1, of the U.S. Constitution authorizes “one supreme Court, and such other inferior Courts as the Congress may from time to time ordain and establish.” This provision paralleled many states’ approach to structuring their court systems – by enacting judiciary statutes. The Constitution’s framers similarly left the federal judiciary’s design to the first Congress under the Constitution.⁶³ The Judiciary Act of 1789 created a three-tier court system, with the Supreme Court at its apex and federal district courts, with jurisdiction only over customs and revenue cases, at its base. Federal circuit courts, the middle layer, were the system’s main trial courts, staffed by each state’s U.S. district judge and by two Supreme Court Justices “riding circuit” from state to state. The statute divided the nation into three judicial circuits, Eastern, Middle, and Southern. Congress imposed circuit-riding on the Justices to give them something to do while the Supreme Court’s caseload developed, so that their idleness would not cause them to form dangerous ambitions.

Circuit-riding was onerous. Associate Justice James Iredell died in 1799 at forty-eight, after repeated complaints to his brethren about having to ride over 1,500 miles, twice a year, on the Southern Circuit. Associate Justice Samuel Chase fell off his horse and nearly drowned while riding the Middle Circuit. For a decade, the Justices petitioned Congress to reform the federal judiciary and lift their circuit-riding burden, but to no avail until early 1801.⁶⁴

The Federalist effort at judicial reform produced the 1801 Judiciary Act, which freed the Justices from the burden of circuit-riding and redesigned the federal judicial pyramid.⁶⁵ District courts would henceforth be the main U.S. trial courts. Each circuit court, with its own judges,

would become an appellate court between that circuit's district courts and the Supreme Court. The Justices would stick to the business of the Supreme Court.

In his last two weeks in office, Adams nominated and the Senate confirmed loyal Federalists to the posts created by the 1801 Act. These actions gave rise to the myth of the "midnight judges" – supposedly, Adams stayed up till well after midnight on his last day as president naming federal judges to the posts created by the 1801 Act. Nominating and confirming federal judges are indeed complicated processes, but the tale of the "midnight judges" seized the Republicans' imagination; they were ready to believe that Adams would treat them treacherously.⁶⁶

As Congress struggled to redesign the judiciary, Adams faced a new vacancy on the Supreme Court. On 5 December, he received a letter from Chief Justice Ellsworth. He sent Adams the Convention of 1800 (the Treaty of Mortefontaine), which ended the quasi-war between France and the United States and resolved other disputes between the two nations. Having led the negotiations of that treaty, he felt free to resign from the Court, citing ill health.⁶⁷ Ellsworth's letter dumped a large problem into Adams's lap: how to pick Ellsworth's successor? Could Adams keep the Supreme Court's leadership in Federalist hands? Must he yield to pressure from High Federalist senators to name a Chief Justice acceptable to them though not to him? If he did not find a candidate acceptable to the Senate, would he have to leave the choice of a Chief Justice to his Republican successor? Should he listen to the entreaties of some Federalist senators and name himself Chief Justice?

Adams rejected the most often named candidates – Associate Justices William Cushing (too old and frail) and William Paterson (preferred by High Federalists). Instead, he nominated Governor John Jay of New York. He reasoned that Jay's familiarity with the Court (he had been

its first Chief Justice) and the esteem he had from both High Federalists and Adams Federalists might make him an ideal candidate. The Senate swiftly confirmed him. Nobody had asked Jay whether he wanted the office, however. Writing Jay to inform him of his appointment, Adams conceded that he had not sought Jay's consent but assured him of the Senate's and his own high regard for him, as well as his confidence that Jay would do his duty to the nation and its courts:⁶⁸

Adams rightly worried that Jay might decline reappointment. On 2 January 1801, Jay wrote a respectful but coldly blunt letter of refusal. He made his reasons clear – the burdens of the Chief Justiceship and the record of congressional indifference to the Justices' pleas for help through the 1790s. Thanking Adams for the honor, Jay was firm in saying no.⁶⁹

In mid-January, according to Marshall's account, Adams opened Jay's letter and informed Marshall, "Mr. Jay has declined his appointment." After a colloquy with Marshall, Adams declared, "I do not know whom I shall appoint.... I believe that I must appoint you."⁷⁰ Marshall suited Adams. He was young enough, at forty-five, to serve a long time as Chief Justice. Also, he was loyal to Adams, which pleased Adams and discomfited High Federalist senators. He was popular after his role in the XYZ Affair. He had diplomatic experience, fitting the era's view that the Court should be a source of expertise in national security and diplomacy.⁷¹ Finally, he was a Virginian and a protégé of Washington. Thus, Adams solved the problems posed by Ellsworth's resignation. Reluctantly, the Senate confirmed Marshall; he served both as Chief Justice and as secretary of state for the remaining two months of Adams's term.

Exhausted and knowing that Abigail needed him at home, Adams left the capital very early on 4 March 1801. There is no evidence for the myth that he refused to attend Jefferson's inauguration because he was deeply hurt by his defeat in 1800. The conditions of travel facing

Adams were so inconvenient that a carriage leaving the nation's capital at 4 a.m. on inauguration day was his only chance for a swift exit. It appears that neither Adams nor Jefferson contemplated Adams's attendance at Jefferson's inauguration.⁷²

The two men had a brief correspondence suggesting anything but bitterness or resentment on Adams's part. Writing just after the House made Jefferson president, Adams informed him that the seven horses and two carriages housed in the Executive Mansion's stables with harness and other property belonged to the United States; he added that "they will certainly save you a considerable Expence as they belong to the stud of the President's Household."⁷³ Adams wrote again to thank Jefferson for forwarding a letter addressed to "the President" which he had inadvertently opened, only to reseal it as he recognized that it was for Adams. Adams sadly informed Jefferson of the death of his son Charles, the subject of the forwarded letter. He added, "This part of the Union is in a state of perfect Tranquility and I See nothing to obscure your prospect of a quiet and prosperous Administration, which I heartily wish you."⁷⁴

On 2 November 1800, his first night in the Executive Mansion, he had written to Abigail, "Before I end my Letter I pray Heaven to bestow the best of Blessings on this House and all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise Men ever rule under this roof."⁷⁵ Did Adams deserve being numbered among those 'honest and Wise men'?

When Adams became president, the "age of experiments in government" had come to an end. The thinking politicians no longer were interested in making experiments in government; they focused on supervising experiments already established. Their greatest challenge was making sure that the government would continue as a workable system. In this new political world, politicians were tense and prone to overreaction. For anyone, it would have been a difficult time to become president. Fearful of appearing inadequate by contrast with his

predecessor or his vanquished rival, unsure of the loyalty and competence of those serving under him, and wondering whether he could meet the obligations that he had sworn to undertake, Adams found being President “a splendid misery,” as Jefferson called it.⁷⁶

One of Adams’s greatest achievements as president is that he proved that someone *not* George Washington could be president, showing that the office was not uniquely crafted to fit “the Father of His Country.” Taking charge of the presidency and becoming his own man after Washington’s death, Adams helped to shape the office in his own image. Only then could he show what a presidency tailored for him, suited to his intellect, personality, and political virtues, would look like. By then, however, it was too late to alter the public’s views of him.

Adams was deeply proud that he had averted a disastrous war with France. Throughout that crisis, he drew on his expert awareness of diplomacy’s pitfalls and possibilities. His patience steadied the nation’s response to the crisis with France, enabling him to resolve that crisis and to stabilize French-American relations. He showed prudent firmness in resisting demands for war from the people and from his advisors.

Adams’s greatest presidential legacy was his appointment of John Marshall to the Supreme Court. On 17 August 1825, Adams proudly wrote to Marshall: “There is no part of my Life that I look back on with more pleasure, than the short time I spent with you. And it is the pride of my life that I have given to this nation a Chief Justice equal to Coke or Hale, Holt or Mansfield.”⁷⁷ Marshall was the most creative, politically adept Chief Justice in U.S. history; his nationalist vision and legal skill raised the Court to an eminence rarely questioned.⁷⁸

As important as anything else he did as president was his willingness to leave office at the end of his term. Adams not only accepted his defeat in 1800 – he cooperated in making a smooth transition of power to Jefferson. He also spurned efforts by Federalists to persuade him

to continue as a caretaker president after the end of his term. Adams thus helped to establish the tradition of orderly transitions of power from one party to another in presidential elections.

Given these achievements, Adams's presidency was not the failure that many have deemed it. Against these successes, we must revisit the greatest blots on his record – his signing the Sedition Act into law and his concurrence in enforcing it against critics of himself and his administration. To be sure, the statute was not unique. In England and in the states, the common-law crime of seditious libel was well known, and states also had sedition statutes. The difference between harsh laws on the books and freer, less stringent law as applied meant that most American printers felt free to publish, and in fact did publish, material that some viewed as seditious. Even so, we cannot dismiss the sedition prosecutions of 1798 to 1800. Further, the Sedition Act had an unintended consequence. It created a libertarian counter-blast enshrining a new understanding of freedom of speech and press, recognizing the people's right to criticize their elected officials and their government, free of threat of prosecution. That libertarian counter-blast helps explain why the Sedition Act is the indelible taint on Adams's presidency.⁷⁹

On 4 March 1801, John Adams began his long trip home to Quincy and to Abigail. He was content to end his public career quietly and privately. He knew that he was entering the closing stage of his life – retirement and reflection.

NOTES

¹ John Adams, Inaugural Address, 4 March 1797, in James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897*, 10 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1896), 1:228-232 (quotation at 231).

² John Adams to Abigail Adams, 5 March 1797. AFPEA/MHS.

³ On Washington as president, Ralph Ketcham, *Presidents Above Party: The First American Presidency, 1789-1829* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1984), 89-93; Ray Raphael, *Mr. President: How and Why the Founders Created a Chief Executive* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 156-198; and Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (New York: Free Press/Macmillan, 1987), 41-89. On the creation of the presidency, Ketcham, *passim*, and Raphael, *passim*. On FDR's influence on his successors, William E. Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to Barack Obama* (4th ed., Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009 [1st ed. 1983]).

⁴ Schwartz, *George Washington*; and Garry Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (New York: Doubleday, 1984); Edmund S. Morgan, *The Genius of George Washington (Third George Rogers Clark Lecture)* (Washington, D.C.: Society of the Cincinnati, 1980; rept., New York: W. W. Norton, 1980); Charles S. Sydnor, *Gentlemen Revolutionaries: Political Practices in George Washington's Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1952); Ketcham, *Presidents Above Party*, 89-93; and John E. Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington: The Political Genius of an American Icon* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009). Glenn A. Phelps, *George Washington and American Constitutionalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), is indispensable.

⁵ Quoted in Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 105. -- From James McHenry to Oliver Wolcott, 9 November 1800, in George Gibbs, ed., *Memoirs of the Administrations of Washington and John Adams, Edited from the Papers of Oliver Wolcott* (2 vols., New York: Printed for the Subscribers, 1840), 2:445.

⁶ Ketcham, *Presidents Above Party*, 93-99, on Adams.

⁷ Bruce Miroff, "John Adams and the Presidency," in Thomas Cronin, ed., *Inventing the American Presidency* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 304-325.

⁸ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, April 22, 1812, in John G. Schutz and Douglass Adair, ed., *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1966), 212-215 (quotation at 214).

⁹ On Pickering, Gerald Clarfield, *Timothy Pickering and American Diplomacy, 1795-1800* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1969); Gerald Clarfield, *Timothy Pickering and the Republic* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980). On McHenry, Karen E. Robbins, *James McHenry: Forgotten Federalist* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013). There is no modern life of Wolcott or of Lee.

¹⁰ Charles O. Jones, *The U.S. Presidency: A Very Short Introduction*, 2d edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 80-84; Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, "President Obama's Second Term: Staffing Challenges and Opportunities," *Brookings Issues in Governance Studies* No. 57 (February 2013), <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2013/02/obama%20second%20term%20staffing%20tenpas.pdf>

¹¹ Robert L. Scheina, "Benjamin Stoddert, Politics, and the Navy," *American Neptune* 36:1 (Jan. 1976): 54-69; Robert F. Jones, "The Naval Thought and Policy of Benjamin Stoddert, First Secretary of the Navy," *American Neptune* 24:1 (Jan. 1964): 61-69; John J. Carigg, "Benjamin Stoddert," in Paolo E. Coletta, ed., *American Secretaries of the Navy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1980), 58-75.). See also sources cited in notes 21-22 *infra*.

¹² Jean S. Holder, "The Sources of Presidential Power: John Adams and the Challenge to Executive Primacy," *Political Science Quarterly* 101:4 (1986): 601-616 (quotation at 603).

¹³ Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), *passim*; Daniel Sisson, *The American Revolution of 1800* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974); and Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 261, 284-87.

- ¹⁴ Marie-Jeanne Rossignol (Lillian A. Parrott, trans.), *The Nationalist Ferment: The Origins of U.S. Foreign Policy, 1792-1812* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004). On France, William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- ¹⁵ Ralph Adams Brown, *The Presidency of John Adams* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1971), 153-55.
- ¹⁶ Daniel H. Unser, "'A Savage Feast They Made of It': John Adams and the Paradoxical Origins of Federal Indian Policy," *Journal of the Early Republic* 33:4 (Winter 2013): 607-41, esp. 614, 622-33; Rossignol, *The Nationalist Ferment*, 92-115.
- ¹⁷ John Adams, "Special Message to Congress, May 16, 1797," in Richardson, ed., *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 1:233-239 (quotation at 235).
- ¹⁸ William Stinchcombe, *The XYZ Affair* (New York: Praeger, 1980).
- ¹⁹ Gordon S. Wood, *Empire for Liberty: A History of the Early American Republic, 1789-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 241-243; Rossignol, *The Nationalist Ferment*, 60-62.
- ²⁰ Alexander de Conde, *The Quasi-War: The Undeclared Naval War with France* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958); Rossignol, *The Nationalist Ferment*, 99-101.
- ²¹ Frederick C. Leiner, *Millions for Defense: The Subscription Warships of 1798* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000); Ian W. Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), esp. Part I.
- ²² Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997); Michael Durey, *With the Hammer of Truth: James Thomson Callendar and America's Early National Heroes* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990).
- ²³ Joanne B. Freeman, "Explaining the Unexplainable: The Cultural Origins of the Sedition Act," in Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 20-49.
- ²⁴ 1798 Naturalization Act (An act supplementary to and to amend the act, entitled "An act to establish an uniform rule of naturalization, and to repeal the act heretofore passed on that subject"), Sess. II, Chap. 54; 1 Stat. 566, 5th Congress; June 17, 1798; 1798 Alien Enemies Act (An act respecting alien enemies), Sess. II, Chap. 66; 1 Stat. 570, 5th Congress; July 6, 1798; 1798 Alien Friends Act (An act concerning aliens), Sess. II, Chap. 58; 1 Stat. 577, 5th Congress; June 25, 1798; and 1798 Sedition Act (An act in addition to the Act, entitled "An Act for the punishment of certain crimes against the United States"), Sess. II., Chap. 74, 5th Congress, July 14, 1798.
- ²⁵ I am indebted to Kelly Garner, a graduate of New York Law School, and Joel Collins Sati, a graduate of CCNY, for excellent research papers illuminating these statutes.
- ²⁶ Phillip I. Blumberg, *Repressive Jurisprudence in the Early American Republic: The First Amendment and the Legacy of English Law* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 82-90, and sources cited. But see Wendell Bird, *Press and Speech Under Assault: The Early Supreme Court Justices, the Sedition Act of 1798, and the Campaign Against Dissent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), and Wendell Bird, "New Light on the Sedition Act of 1798: The Missing Half of the Prosecutions," *Law and History Review* 34 (August 2016): 541-614; Freeman, "Explaining the Unexplainable," *passim*.
- ²⁷ Blumberg, *Repressive Jurisprudence*, 92-99.
- ²⁸ Cappon, 1:265-282 (seven letters, 20 May to 25 October 1804, between Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson, with Abigail beginning and ending the exchange). Woody Holton, *Abigail Adams* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 241-243. On the Terror in American thought, Rachel Hope Cleaves, *The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery* (Cambridge, Eng., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- ²⁹ Blumberg, *Repressive Jurisprudence*, 99-147; James Morton Smith, *Freedom's Fetters: The Alien and Sedition Acts and Civil Liberties* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955; rev. 1963); and Durey, *With the Hammer of Truth*. See also sources cited at note 80 *infra*.
- ³⁰ Blumberg, *Repressive Jurisprudence*, 90-92, (criticism of Adams); David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 506-507 (unconvincing defense of Adams). For overviews of Adams and the press, Walt Brown, *John Adams and the Press: Politics and Journalism at the Birth of the Republic* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1995), *passim*; and Richard D. Brown, "The Disenchantment of a Radical Whig: John Adams Reckons with Free Speech," in Richard Alan Ryerson, ed., *John Adams and the Founding of the Republic*

(*Massachusetts History Society Studies in American History and Culture*, no. 7) (Boston: Northeastern University of Press for MHS, 2001), 171-185.

³¹ Brown, *John Adams and the American Press*, and Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 105-58; and Jeffrey L. Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001); and Brown, "The Disenchantment of a Radical Whig."

³² Leonard W. Levy, *Emergence of a Free Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), chapters 9-10. On the difference between law on the books and law as applied, Levy, *Emergence of a Free Press*; Jeffery A. Smith, *Printers and Press Freedom: The Ideology of Early American Journalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Jeffery A. Smith, *Franklin and Bache: Enlightening the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Compare also the monographs by Blumberg and by Bird.

³³ "From Thomas Jefferson to John Taylor, 4 June 1798," FO/NA.

³⁴ Ethelbert Dudley Warfield, *The Kentucky Resolutions of 1798: A Historical Study* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1887); Andrew C. Lenner, *The Federal Principle in American Politics, 1790-1833* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield/Madison House, 2001), esp. chap. 2.

³⁵ *The Virginia report of 1799-1800, touching the alien and sedition laws; together with the Virginia resolutions of December 21, 1798, including the debate and proceedings thereon in the House of Delegates of Virginia and other documents illustrative of the report and resolutions* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970) (rept. of 1850 ed.); *The address of the minority in the Virginia legislature to the people of that state: containing a vindication of the constitutionality of the Alien and Sedition laws.* ([Richmond, Va.?): [Printed by Augustine Davis?], [1799?].

³⁶ Morris D. Forkosch, "Freedom of the Press: Crosswell's Case," *Fordham Law Review* 33 (1989): 415.

³⁷ Uriah Forrest to John Adams, 28 April 1799, in *WJA* 8:637-638, quoted in Brown, *Presidency of John Adams*, 135.

³⁸ In 1797, the Adamses left Philadelphia on 19 July, returning on 10 November. In 1798, they left Philadelphia on 25 July, with Adams returning alone about 20 November, leaving Abigail in Quincy. In 1799, Adams left Philadelphia on 11 March, returning on 10 October. In 1800, Adams left Washington before 30 June to return to Quincy; he arrived back in Washington on 1 November, the first president to serve in the nation's permanent national capital. Brown, *Presidency of John Adams*, 134-137, and White, *The Federalists*, 42n23.

³⁹ George Boudreau, *Independence: A Guide to Historic Philadelphia* (Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2012), 307-314.

⁴⁰ "From John Adams to Uriah Forrest, 13 May 1799," FO/NA [Early Access document]

⁴¹ Manning J. Dauer, *The Adams Federalists* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953, 2d ed. 1968)

⁴² On Murray, Peter P. Hill, *William Vans Murray: Federalist Diplomat* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1961). In 1787, Vans Murray dedicated a pamphlet to Adams: [William Vans Murray], *Political Sketches, Inscribed to His Excellency John Adams... By a Citizen of the United States* (London: Printed for C. Dilly, 1787). The letters from Vans Murray appear in the appendix to volume 8 of *WJA*.

⁴³ Robin Blackburn, "Haiti, Slavery, and the Age of the Democratic Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 63:4 (Oct. 2006): 643-674; Donald R. Hickey, "America's Response to the Slave Revolt in Haiti, 1791-1806," *Journal of the Early Republic* 2:4 (Winter 1982): 361-379; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 45-82; Don E. Fehrenbacher (completed and edited by Ward A. McAfee), *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 111-118; and Rossignol, *Nationalist Ferment*, 119-140. Laurent DuBois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Laurent DuBois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for Omohundro Institute for Early American History and Culture, 2004); and Laurent DuBois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2012); Arthur Scherr, *John Adams, Race, and Slavery: Ideas, Politics, and Diplomacy in an Age of Crisis* (Santa Barbara, CA/Denver, CO: Praeger, 2018), 43-136, 172-174 (notes at 201-233, 244). Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, *The Problem of Democracy: The Presidents Adams Confront the Cult of Personality* (New York: Viking, 2019), 416-417, offers a more muted assessment of Adams's views.

⁴⁴ James Grant, *John Adams: Party of One* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 422; Edith B. Gelles, *Abigail and John: Portrait of a Marriage* (New York: William Morrow, 2009), 260-262.

⁴⁵ For a pro-Hamilton account, Forrest McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 347-348 and sources at 445nn37-39. For a pro-Adams version, Grant, *John Adams: Party of One*, 421-423.

⁴⁶ James Hart, *The American Presidency in Action, 1789: A Study in Constitutional History* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 178-184; Leonard D. White, *The Federalists: A Study in Administrative History, 1789-1801* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 19-25; and Gerhard Casper, *Separating Power: Essays on the Founding Period* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 33-44.

⁴⁷ John E. Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 393-394 and sources cited.

⁴⁸ R. Kent Newmyer, *John Marshall and the Heroic Age of the Supreme Court* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001); and Jean Edward Smith, *John Marshall: Definer of a Nation* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997).

⁴⁹ Paul Douglas Newman, *Fries' Rebellion: The Enduring Struggle for the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁵⁰ Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 199-261; see also Joanne B. Freeman, "The Election of 1800: A Study in the Logic of Political Change," *Yale Law Journal*: 108:8 (June 1999): 1959-1994. See also Susan Dunn, *Jefferson's Second Revolution: The Election Crisis of 1800 and the Triumph of Republicanism* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004); John Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Edward J. Larson, *A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election of 1800, America's First Presidential Campaign* (New York: Free Press, 2007); James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, & the New Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002); Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 80-108; Bernard A. Weisberger, *America Afire: Jefferson, Adams, and the Revolutionary Election of 1800* (New York: William Morrow, 2000); James Roger Sharp, *The Deadlocked Election of 1800: Jefferson, Burr, and the Union in the Balance* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010). This literature focuses on the contest between Jefferson and Burr, omitting Adams once the electoral ballots were cast and counted. See also R. B. Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 128-134; Raphael, *Mr. President*, 199-229.

⁵¹ "Letter from Alexander Hamilton, Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq. President of the United States, [24 October 1800]," FO/NA. It is also available in Joanne B. Freeman, ed., *Alexander Hamilton: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2001), 934-971. On this pamphlet, and on its continuing effects on Adams, Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 105-109, 148-158; Raphael, *Mr. President*, 221-223.

⁵² Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 199-261; Joanne B. Freeman, "The Presidential Election of 1796," in Ryerson, ed., *John Adams and the Founding of the Republic*, 142-170.

⁵³ Brown, *Presidency of John Adams*, 193.

⁵⁴ George William Van Cleve, *A Slaveholders' Union: Slavery, Politics, and the Constitution in the Early American Republic* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 139-141

⁵⁵ Gelles, *Abigail & John*, 261-262.

⁵⁶ Ferling, *John Adams*, 405-406.

⁵⁷ Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 241-53; Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson*, 128-134.

⁵⁸ "From John Adams to William Tudor, Sr., 13 December 1800," FO/NA [Early Access document].

⁵⁹ McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton*, 352-53.

⁶⁰ "Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, 16 January 1811," FO/NA.

⁶¹ Wythe Holt, "'To Establish Justice': Politics, the Judiciary Act of 1789, and the Invention of the Federal Courts," *Duke Law Journal*, 1989: 6 (1989): 1421-1531; Wythe Holt, "'Federal Courts Have Enemies in All Who Fear Their Influence on State Objects': The Failure to Abolish Supreme Court Circuit-Riding in the Judiciary Acts of 1792 and 1793," *Buffalo Law Review* 36:2 (1987): 301-340; Wythe Holt, "'Federal Courts As the Asylum to Federal Interests': Randolph's Report, the Benson Amendment, and the 'Original Understanding' of the Federal Judiciary," *Buffalo Law Review* 36:2 (1987): 341-372. See also Wilfred J. Ritz (Wythe Holt and L. H. LaRue, eds.), *Rewriting the History of the Judiciary Act of 1789: Exposing Myths, Challenging Premises, and Using New Evidence*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990).

⁶² Mary Sarah Bilder, Maeva Marcus, and R. Kent Newmyer, eds., *Blackstone in America: Selected Essays of Kathryn Preyer* (Cambridge, Eng., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7-91.

⁶³ Ritz, Holt, and LaRue, *Rewriting the History of the Judiciary Act of 1789*, 27-52. See also Maeva Marcus, ed., *Origins of the Federal Judiciary: Essays on the Judiciary Act of 1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), *passim*.

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- ⁶⁴ Joshua Glick, "On the Road: The Supreme Court and the History of Circuit Riding," *Cardozo Law Review* 24 (2003): 1735; and articles by Holt cited *supra* note 61; Marcus, ed., *Origins of the Federal Judiciary*, *passim*.
- ⁶⁵ Kathryn Turner, "Federalist Policy and the Judiciary Act of 1801," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 22 (Jan. 1965): 3-32, reprinted in *Blackstone in America*, 10-38.
- ⁶⁶ Kathryn Turner, "The Midnight Judges," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 109:4 (February 1961): 494-523, reprinted in *Blackstone in America*, 59-91.
- ⁶⁷ Kathryn Turner, "The Appointment of Chief Justice Marshall," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 17:2 (April 1960): 143-163, reprinted in *Blackstone in America*, 39-58 (from perspective of the judiciary); and R. B. Bernstein, "President John Adams and Four Chief Justices: An Essay for James F. Simon," *New York Law School Law Review* 57:3 (2012/13), 441-463 (from perspective of Adams).
- ⁶⁸ John Adams to John Jay, 19 Dec. 1800, in Maeva Marcus, ed., *The Documentary History of the Supreme Court of the United States*, 8 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985-2007), 1:145-146. (Hereafter *DHSC*.)
- ⁶⁹ John Jay to John Adams, 2 January 1801, in Marcus, ed., *DHSC*, 1:146-147.
- ⁷⁰ Quoted in Marcus, ed., *DHSC* 1:928; see also *id.*, 152-155.
- ⁷¹ I am indebted to Kevin Arlyck for this view of the Court's role in national-security issues in the early Republic, the subject of a dissertation at New York University that I hope will soon take book form.
- ⁷² Brown, *Presidency of John Adams*, 206-208.
- ⁷³ "From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 20 February 1801," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ⁷⁴ "From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 24 March 1801," *FO/NA* [Early Access document], answering "To John Adams from Thomas Jefferson, 8 March 1801," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ⁷⁵ Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 2 November 1800. AFPEA. MHS.
- ⁷⁶ "From Thomas Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry, 13 May 1797," *FO/NA*.
- ⁷⁷ "From John Adams to John Marshall, 17 August 1825," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ⁷⁸ On Marshall, R. Kent Newmyer, *The Supreme Court Under Marshall and Taney*, second ed. (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2006 [orig. ed., 1968]); R. Kent Newmyer, *John Marshall and the Heroic Age of the Supreme Court* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001); Charles F. Hobson, *The Great Chief Justice: John Marshall and the Rule of Law* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996); and Jean Edward Smith, *John Marshall: Definer of a Nation* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).
- ⁷⁹ Leonard W. Levy, *Legacy of Suppression: Freedom of Speech and Press in Early American History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960); Leonard W. Levy, *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963; rept., with new intro. Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 1989); Levy, *Emergence of a Free Press*. See also James Morton Smith, *Freedom's Fetters: The Alien and Sedition Acts and American Civil Liberties* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955; rev. ed., 1963); Smith, *Printers and Press Freedom*; Smith, *Franklin and Bache*; and Jeffery A. Smith, *War and Press Freedom: The Problems of Prerogative Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals*; Durey, *With the Hammer of Truth*; Aleine Austin, *Matthew Lyon: "New Man" of the American Revolution, 1749-1822* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1981); Geoffrey Stone, *Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime from the Sedition Act of 1798 to the War on Terror* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004); John C. Miller, *Crisis in Freedom: The Alien and Sedition Acts* (Boston: Atlantic/Little, Brown, 1955); Irving N. Brant, *The Bill of Rights: Its Origin and Meaning* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965); Juhani Rudanko, *The Forging of Freedom of Speech: Essays on Argumentation in Congressional Debates on the Bill of Rights and the Sedition Act* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003); Brown, *John Adams and the Press*; Pasley, *Tyranny of Printers*; and Blumberg, *Repressive Jurisprudence*. See also the works by Wendell Bird cited *supra* note 26.

Chapter Nine

“In dogmatizing, laughing, and scolding I find delight...”

Retirement and Reflection

(1801-1812)

On 17 March 1801, two weeks after leaving Washington, D.C., John Adams reached Peacefield, in Quincy. Until his death in 1826, this house was his home. Living with him were Abigail and the widow and children of their son Charles. He and Abigail enjoyed frequent visits by their son Thomas Boylston Adams and less frequent visits by their other surviving children, Abigail Adams Smith and John Quincy Adams. In keeping the name Peacefield, he was commemorating one of his presidency’s greatest triumphs – his avoidance of war with France in 1800. (Later in his life, he jokingly named the house Montezillo – Italian for “little hill,” half in emulation and half in mockery of Jefferson’s Monticello.¹)

Adams was the second former president of the United States, but in 1801 the modern role of ex-president did not yet exist; its invention awaited Jefferson’s retirement in 1809.² In 1797, when George Washington left the presidency, he was still the acclaimed “first citizen” of the United States – but the national veneration he received owed more to his service during the Revolution than to his presidency. At his death, his countrymen identified him with the Revolution and the creation of the American nation, mourning him as “the first of men” and (in a phrase borrowed from the Roman Republic) the “father of his country.”³ In 1812, Adams speculated sourly that, if Washington had not died in 1799, the Virginian would have allowed

himself to be persuaded to stand for a third term as president in 1800, and probably would have won.⁴

As the first president defeated for re-election, Adams played a unique role in the history of the presidency; his defeat thrust him into obscurity rather than into eminence. Few recognized what posterity has come to admire – Adams's sense of fair play in relinquishing the presidency after his defeat in 1800 and in ensuring a peaceful transition from the Federalists to the Republicans. Despite his willingness to leave office as a defeated former president, his bitterness at having been rejected by the people hung like a storm cloud over his first years in retirement. Adams felt that rejection especially keenly because he contrasted it with his lifetime of public service and the high points of his administration.

Soon after his return, the members of the Massachusetts state legislature journeyed from Boston to Quincy to pay Adams honor and to thank him for his decades of public service. Though the occasion moved him to tears, as the first time that a public body had done him honor,⁵ it was the only such visit. For the rest of his life, Adams had visits only from family members and a few friends; his retirement was quiet. His electoral defeat led too many of his fellow citizens to forget him; few sought his opinions on issues of the day, and, reluctant to expose himself to further political brickbats, he decided to keep his opinions to himself or to share them only with family members and trusted friends.

Convinced that the people had spurned and forgotten him, Adams veered between accepting his situation and complaining about it. When he complained, the usual suspects were at hand – his principal foe, Hamilton; his adversaries among the Federalists, notably Pickering; his erstwhile friend and victorious rival, Jefferson; the august Washington; the venerated Franklin; and lesser players, the journalist-printers who had used him as a convenient target..

Adams was struggling to decide what to do with his remaining years. The question of his future was pressing; the United States had no system of presidential pensions, and he was at a loss to know how to support himself and his family. He briefly considered resuming the practice of law, but he gave up that idea because of his age (he was 65 in 1801), his years away from the bar, and the loss of his teeth, which would have garbled any attempt he made to address a judge or a jury. Another reason was the major transformation of Massachusetts law between the 1770s and 1801, from the law of a colonial society that was a backwater of the British Empire to the law of an entrepreneurial economy and society feeling the first stirrings of industrialization.⁶

Adams's financial situation worsened soon after his return home. While in Europe, John Quincy Adams had transferred his parents' and his own funds overseas to a London bank, Bird, Savage, and Bird. But, in the spring of 1803, the younger Adams discovered to his horror that the bank had failed, taking with it \$18,000 of his parents' funds as well as \$13,000 of his own money. Blaming himself for not having monitored the bank's fortunes, John Quincy Adams reorganized the family's finances. As part of his plan, he made a series of gradual purchases from his father of the family mansion and its adjoining lands; he used the payments of the purchase price to create an annuity supporting his parents, while granting them a life estate in Peacefield. John Quincy Adams's financial acumen and his ability to recover swiftly from a disaster helped ease his parents' financial worries. Nonetheless, John Adams reproached himself for his preference for investments in land, instead of heeding advice (particularly from Abigail) to liquidate some of his holdings and make use of the cash.⁷

His financial future put on a secure footing by his son's management, Adams lived quietly, receiving the occasional visitor and sitting in his study and looking out the window as he smoked. As long as his health permitted it, he worked side by side with the hired workers who

cultivated his farm. He also made repairs to the house and to stone fences on the property. For the most part, he lived the life of the mind, reading widely and deeply on a host of subjects, including comparative religion and government, and revisiting the political battles of his life.

John Adams's retirement is a story of intellectual adventures – of exploring new ideas, bodies of knowledge, and the world of the past. Like other founding fathers, he faced an increasing flow of letters seeking his recollections of the Revolution, in particular the year 1776. These inquiries stimulated his memories and spurred his desire to represent himself to the inquirers, and to posterity, as a leading figure of the Revolution. With each such letter, Adams felt a more urgent need to explain himself and the history that he had helped to make.

Though he had abandoned thoughts of resuming his law practice, Adams's focus on the past committed him to a different kind of lawyering, with himself as his client – pleading his own case for his life and career, with posterity as the court. Having left office repudiated and disgraced (as he saw it), Adams wanted to turn his back on politics and government, to lose himself in family concerns and running his home and his farm – and yet he wanted to justify himself to his countrymen and to the future.

Adams's efforts to defend his legacy and to shape his historical reputation resembled the actions of such other leading founding fathers as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Their last great battle was to demonstrate that they deserved to be remembered. In particular, Adams hoped that what his contemporaries seemed to have denied him – gratitude and remembrance – future generations would grant him. But he would receive that gratitude and remembrance from them only if they understood why he deserved them. He hoped that posterity would form a just estimate of his efforts – one, he hoped, that would not be tainted by ignorance, malice, or prejudice.⁸

Aided by his sons, Adams launched a valiant effort to organize his massive collection of papers – the raw material from which he planned to make his case for himself at the bar of history. These papers spanned his busy and eventful life and also generations of Adams family history stretching back to the early seventeenth century. Exploring his family’s past, he thought, was essential to understanding and explaining his own story. The process took months, but at last, his papers in order, Adams was ready to take up his pen.

Adams then began to write his *Autobiography*, which he launched with great energy in 1802. He worked on it intermittently for the next five years, breaking off in 1807, when he had reached the middle of the year 1780. The manuscript comprises 440 pages, divided into three parts – “John Adams,” “Travels and Negotiations,” and “Peace.” The first part, completed in 1802, addressed both his own life and, as prologue, his family’s history from the first Henry Adams’s arrival in America. He completed the second part in 1806 and left the third part unfinished. At first, Adams wrote from memory, but he made extensive use of his papers, incorporating and reworking extracts from his diaries and letters into his *Autobiography*.⁹ A prolific and assiduous correspondent, Adams drew on his past in writing letters, many of which read like draft material awaiting amalgamation into his *Autobiography*. Adams wrote letters for many reasons beyond communication with his correspondents. He wanted to clarify his thinking, to test ideas, to retell stories of his life, and to revive friendship with former political friends and allies. The most notable early example of this last use is his rich and intimate correspondence with the Pennsylvania physician, revolutionary, and public servant Benjamin Rush, spanning the years from 1805 until Rush’s death in 1813.¹⁰ Adams explained to Rush his use of letter-writing: “[Samuel] Johnson said when he sat upon his throne in a tavern, there he dogmatized and was contradicted, and in this he found delight. My throne is not in a

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tavern, but at my fireside. There I dogmatize, there I laugh, and there the newspapers sometimes make me scold, and in dogmatizing, laughing, and scolding I find delight, and why should I not enjoy it, since no one is the worse for it, and I am the better.”¹¹

Though Rush was more than ten years younger than Adams, the two men had much in common. Both had served as delegates to the Second Continental Congress, both had signed the Declaration of Independence, and both had played prominent and controversial roles in winning independence. Rush counted Adams and Jefferson among his valued friends, though he charted an independent political course, allowing him to maintain cordial relations with both even as politics divided them. Rush also shared with Adams a simmering resentment of George Washington. During the Revolutionary War, when he was inspector general of the Continental Army’s medical facilities, Rush clashed bitterly with Washington, who engineered his dismissal. For the rest of his life, Rush insisted that Washington had showed criminal indifference to the health of the men under his command. Adams sympathized with Rush’s wounded feelings, for they paralleled his own resentment, which sometimes broke through the surface of his letters, of Washington’s eclipse of Adams despite what Adams deemed to be Washington’s meagre talents. In one letter, Adams presented for Rush’s edification a list of ten reasons why Washington was deemed a great man and then pointed out: “Here you see that I have made out a list of ten talents without saying a word about reading, thinking, or writing....”¹²

Opening their hearts to each other through their frank and candid letters, Adams and Rush recognized that they were kindred spirits. For example, both not only loved their country and were proud of their respective parts in the Revolution that gave it birth, but they also were thin-skinned when contemplating the injuries that they had suffered from those whom posterity had anointed as the Revolution’s leading figures. Adams could not resist sniping at Franklin and

Jefferson in writing to Rush. In particular, he enjoyed drawing contrasts between his and Jefferson's administrations – always to Jefferson's discredit.¹³ Further, as Adams pointed out, Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson shared a valuable trait, the gift of silence, that neither he nor Rush had.¹⁴ Adams's correspondence with Rush evoked from him a broad, generous sense of humor about himself, Rush, the claims of history, and the vicissitudes of politics.

On 8 January 1810, Adams wrote to another friend, Judge Joseph Ward, a newsy and chatty letter that took up the subject of Jefferson. In the course of his criticisms, Adams not only cited the Virginian's funding of journalists and printers to attack him but addressed a charge made by one particular printer formerly in Jefferson's employ. Adams addressed the publication in 1802 by James Thomson Callendar of charges that Jefferson had had a sexual relationship with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings. Though Adams noted that Callendar was so untrustworthy that "I believe nothing that Callendar Said, any more than if it had been said by an Infernal Spirit," he also discussed Callendar's accusation, its source, and its consequences. Adams made clear that he saw the Hemings-Jefferson liaison as directly attributable to the existence of "Negro Slavery"; for him, such reports, true or not, exemplified "infamy ... [and] black Licentiousness." This letter illustrates the feelings on race intermingled with slavery that occasionally emerged in Adams's reflections and letters:

Callender and Sally will be remembered as long as Jefferson as Blotts in his Character.

The story of the latter, is a natural and almost unavoidable Consequence of that foul contagion in the human Character Negro Slavery. In the West Indies and the Southern States it has the Same Effect. A great Lady has Said She did not believe there was a Planter in Virginia who could not reckon among his Slaves a Number of his Children. But

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is it Sound Policy will it promote Morality, to keep up the Cry of such disgracefull Stories, now the Man is voluntarily retired from the World. The more the Subject is canvassed will not the horror of the Infamy be diminished? and this black Licentiousness be encouraged?¹⁵

Another friend with whom Adams corresponded eagerly was Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse (1754-1846). Nearly twenty years younger than Adams, Waterhouse had been a student at the University of Leyden in the Netherlands in the early 1780s; he and Adams had roomed in the same boardinghouse during Adams's mission to the Netherlands, and the doctor had befriended the diplomat and his son, John Quincy. Waterhouse became a leading American physician, distinguishing himself by his research and experiments in combating smallpox; after his work spurred controversy, he reached out to the senior Adams as a kindred spirit and an old friend. Their correspondence continued, by fits and starts, until nearly the end of Adams's life.¹⁶

Just as Adams told Waterhouse that the young physician had much in common with Rush, Adams's letters to Waterhouse resemble his letters to Rush – wide-ranging, philosophical, and playful. For example, in 1805, thanking Waterhouse for a pamphlet on tobacco, Adams held forth in two letters about his own uses of tobacco and his matured skepticism about it.¹⁷ Adams also wrote revealingly to Dr. Waterhouse about his evolving feelings about his political career. For example, on 13 March 1811, after President Madison had dismissed Secretary of State Robert Smith, who took his case to the people by publishing a pamphlet, Adams expostulated to Waterhouse on the plight of a President dealing with an incompetent and recalcitrant Secretary of State. The Smith crisis reminded him of his own struggles with Timothy Pickering:

...Must a President publish a justificatory Proclamation containing all his Reasons, for dismissing a Secretary of State? And when every one of his Reasons is contradicted, misrepresented, abused, insulted, must he answer all these Libels? How many Clerks and Secretaries must he employ? or must he write all this himself? Twenty Scribes would not be sufficient. What would become of the Business of the State?...

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Suppose a President has a Secretary, fastened upon him by a Predecessor, whom he finds incompetent to the high Duties of his office, and thinks it necessary to dismiss him for his Incapacity; or suppose he knows another, infinitely better qualified; must he reveal the whole History of his Administration, and detail every Fact upon which he grounded his Opinion? Every Fact will be denied, every Inference disputed. How long must the Controversy continue[?] It will be a Subject of dispute with Posterity as well as the present Age.¹⁸

Similarly, in 1805 Adams treated Dr. Waterhouse to a memorable blast against the fame of another favorite target, Thomas Paine, as a symbol of the Age of Reason:

— I am willing you should call this the Age of Frivolity as you do; and would not object if you had named it the Age of Folly, Vice, Frenzy, Fury, Brutality, Daemons, Buonaparte, Tom Paine, or the Age of the bottomless Pitt: or anything but the Age of Reason. I know not whether any Man in the World has had more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine. There can be no severer Satyr on the Age. For such a mongrel between Pigg and Puppy, begotten by a wild Boar

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on a Bitch Wolf, never before in any Age of the World was suffered by the Poltroonery of mankind, to run through such a career of mischief. Call it then the Age of Paine.¹⁹

Another of Adams's correspondents was Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, a Dutch Mennonite clergyman and writer whom Adams had met in Holland during his service as American minister in the 1780s. In 1788, Van der Kemp fled Holland to escape persecution and settled in upstate New York. They maintained an episodic, wide-ranging correspondence on matters as diverse as religion, natural history, government, religious freedom, and their memories. Both John and John Quincy Adams exchanged letters with Van der Kemp, and the latter continued to maintain contact with Van der Kemp until his death.²⁰

In 1807, Adams launched another correspondence under less happy circumstances, and with far more painful emotions. He and Abigail had long been friends with James Warren and his wife, the essayist, poet, and historian Mercy Otis Warren, the sister of Adams's old hero James Otis. In 1805, Mercy Otis Warren published her *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*. This book, the first history of the United States written by a woman, presented its author's strong-minded version of the recent past, critically viewing the development of the United States since independence.²¹ Mrs. Warren told a tale of decline from patriotic virtue and selflessness to greed, luxury, and decadence, in which the promise of the Revolution had been lost. A vigorous opponent of the Constitution during the ratification controversy of 1787-88, Mrs. Warren showed no inclination to temper her opinions, even when they might be critical of old friends; Adams was both an old friend and a target. Critics and readers alike welcomed Mrs. Warren's history as one of the most valuable accounts of the Revolution. President Jefferson predicted that her book "will furnish a more instructive lesson to

mankind than any equal period known in history.”²² Adams did not know of Jefferson’s praise for Mrs. Warren’s volumes, but he did not share Jefferson’s high opinion of them.

In 1807, Adams began to read Mrs. Warren’s *History* – and was aghast at what he found there, particularly her treatment of him and his diplomatic and political service. Adams discovered that he was a key figure in her denunciation of the corruption and degradation eroding the Revolution’s democratic promise. She charged him with ambition for seeking appointment after appointment and office after office. Worse yet, she accused him of having been corrupted by his years in Europe, returning to the United States as a monarchist:

Mr. Adams was undoubtedly a statesman of penetration and ability; but his prejudices and his passions were sometimes too strong for his sagacity and judgment.

...Mr. Adams ... resided [in England] four or five years; and unfortunately for himself and his country, he became so enamoured with the British constitution, and the government, manners, and laws of the nation, that a partiality for monarchy appeared, which was inconsistent with his former professions of republicanism. Time and circumstances often lead so imperfect a creature as man to view the same thing in a very different point of light.

After Mr. Adams’s return from England, he was implicated by a large portion of his countrymen, as having relinquished the republican system, and forgotten the principles of the American revolution, which he had advocated for near twenty years.²³

Though these and other accusations in Mrs. Warren’s pages echoed charges against him that he had had to endure as vice president and as president, it was different for Adams to see them set forth in a book, in a historical work addressed to posterity, written by someone whom

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he had thought of as a friend. Beginning on 11 July 1807 and continuing for nearly a month, Adams wrote ten long, hurt, angry letters to Mrs. Warren, defending himself and disputing what he insisted was her unfair treatment of him.²⁴ Though at first he tried to preserve a tone compatible with the long friendship between the Adamses and the Warrens, he could not restrain himself. Soon an anguished, hectoring tone crept into his letters:

Corruption! Madam, I shall not very easily or very soon quit this topic; and I have a right to demand of you, and of General Warren, too, a more explicit acknowledgment of my uncorrupted integrity than any you have made in your History.... I would not hesitate to appeal to all Europe, and am confident you would not find one man or woman who would question my integrity in any transaction of mine abroad, public or private.²⁵

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Adams followed his usual writing practice of tracking his source, chapter by chapter and paragraph by paragraph, amassing qualifications, refutations, and disputations. Infuriated and astonished by his tirades, Mrs. Warren wrote back six equally long, angry, and pointed letters, defending her book and herself. The correspondence makes painful reading. Adams became increasingly distraught as he sought to refute what he deemed libels on his character and his reputation. Mrs. Warren fought equally hard for her work's integrity and her right to present her opinions, even at the risk of wounding an old friend. Each became more offended with the other, more angry and defensive. Mrs. Warren closed the correspondence with a pointed reproof:

I now forbear further remarks. The lines with which you concluded your late correspondence cap the climax of rancor, indecency, and vulgarism. Yet, as an old friend, I pity you; as a Christian, I forgive you; but there must be some acknowledgment

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of your injurious treatment or some advances to conciliation, to which my mind is ever open, before I can again feel that respect and affection towards Mr. Adams which once existed in the bosom of – Mercy Warren.²⁶

Despite Mrs. Warren's efforts to maintain friendly relations with Abigail Adams, and despite an attempt in 1814 by John Adams to offer an olive branch to Mrs. Warren, the damage between them was done; they never resumed their former friendship.²⁷

Concern for his reputation combined with smoldering anger against another foe (this one deceased) to lead Adams back into the political arena in 1809. Breaking his public silence for the first time since his return to Massachusetts, Adams launched what became a series of newspaper articles in the Boston *Patriot* lasting three years.²⁸ He began by responding to a public letter in the Boston *Patriot* from two Massachusetts members of the U.S. House, Erastus Lyman and Daniel Wright, seeking his counsel in a time when the United States confronted Europe at war. Seeing parallels between 1809 and the quasi-war of 1798-1800, when the nation also had faced a war between Britain and France, Adams published his answer in the *Patriot* on 24 March 1809. As he continued writing letters, he was drawn into composing and publishing a lengthy defense, in essay installments, of his presidency and his public career.

Adams shifted his focus from a general defense to a particular attack – refuting the charges made against him by Alexander Hamilton in his 1800 pamphlet assailing Adams's character and conduct. The tone and substance of Adams's essays shifted from refuting Hamilton's charges to attacking Hamilton, voicing the anger that he had nursed against Hamilton for more than a decade. Yet again, Adams followed his preferred method in his longer theoretical and polemical writings, presenting an almost line-by-line response to Hamilton's pamphlet. With

each correction and contradiction, Adams struck a blow at an antagonist who for him was very much alive, given that Hamilton's pamphlet lay open on his desk. It is not clear why the printer of the Boston *Patriot* bore with Adams's torrent of essays explaining, defending, justifying, and attacking – in particular attacking Hamilton, a man five years in his grave.

That Hamilton was dead did not matter to Adams, for his own feelings of anger and injury were as vivid as ever. The hurts inflicted on Adams by Hamilton's intemperate attack were fresh in his mind; his need to defend himself and repair his standing in the eyes of posterity drove him onward. Another possible reason for the timing of Adams's newspaper defense of himself was that he began only after Jefferson had left the presidency and returned to private life at Monticello. His restraint was a matter of propriety that, in various forms, has guided subsequent ex-presidents. Adams chose to remain in the private realm while his old adversary was the nation's chief executive; only after Jefferson had relinquished the presidency and returned to private life did Adams feel able to re-enter the public sphere.

Adams's re-emergence in the political arena perplexed and dismayed one of his other correspondents, a distant relative and Federalist political operative named William Cunningham, who had begun corresponding with him in 1803.²⁹ In their letters, Cunningham repeatedly sought to elicit from Adams quotable attacks on Jefferson or the Republicans for use against Jefferson in the 1804 election. Still smarting from his defeat in 1800, Adams obliged, though he set a condition for his candor: none of his letters could be published until after his death. Though frustrating Cunningham's purpose, that restriction did not affect the correspondence, which continued intermittently for several years.

Beginning in 1809, however, after Adams began his Boston *Patriot* essays and asked Cunningham what he thought of them, Cunningham responded with a mix of agitation and

criticism. He questioned Adams's loyalty to the Federalists and attacked Adams for having abandoned them. Cunningham charged Adams with attacking Hamilton and the Federalists, of whom Hamilton had been a martyred leader, under the pretense of defending himself. As Adams ignored his reproofs, Cunningham raised the stakes. He hinted that he would violate the rule of secrecy that Adams had set for their correspondence and publish their letters while Adams was alive. Aware of the danger posed by his agitated relative, Adams reminded Cunningham of his pledge of secrecy. He then backed off, at first writing guardedly and then declining to answer Cunningham's increasingly troubled letters. In 1812, after a series of bitter, hectoring letters that Adams left unanswered, Cunningham stopped writing. Hoping that Cunningham's silence meant that the business was closed, Adams put the correspondence out of his mind.

Jefferson, by contrast, remained on Adams's mind for reasons beyond their former political rivalry, or others' attempts to elicit criticism of the Virginian from him – and both men were on Benjamin Rush's mind. As Adams and Rush exchanged warm, friendly, and ruminative letters, Rush repeatedly suggested to Adams and to Jefferson that they resume writing to each other. Whenever either man referred to the other in favorable terms, or whenever either man mentioned anything else that provided Rush an opening, the warm-hearted doctor seized the opportunity to urge each man to make overtures to the other.³⁰

There already had been a brief exchange of letters between Quincy and Monticello that Rush did not know about – one between Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson, which did not end as Rush would have wished. In 1804, Jefferson's younger daughter, Maria Jefferson Eppes, died after a difficult childbirth, as her mother had; she was less than four months shy of turning twenty-seven. Abigail had been close to Maria in the 1780s when the little girl had been sent to Europe to live with her father, so Maria's death moved Abigail to write Jefferson a condolence

letter. Even on such an occasion, she felt deeply the partisan wounds from the election of 1800. Not just the storm of abuse and criticism that had buffeted her husband rankled with Abigail. One casualty of Jefferson's purging opponents from government jobs to make way for supporters was John Quincy Adams, who lost his post as magistrate in the U.S. district court for Massachusetts; no loyal mother could forgive such a crass political move. She therefore signed her letter as "one who once took pleasure in subscribing herself your friend."³¹

Choosing to ignore her ominous closing, Jefferson wrote a warm and friendly response.³² To his astonishment, Abigail rejected his friendliness, taking him to task for actions by himself and his allies that were unfriendly to her husband and her family.³³ Abigail was a firm, vigorous, and determined antagonist, giving and asking no quarter. Though Jefferson defended himself as best he could, Abigail remained unmoved, closing the correspondence with a curt observation: "I will not Sir any further intrude upon your time..."³⁴ She distilled this short, sharp exchange of letters in the phrase, "Faithfull are the wounds of a friend."³⁵ Soon after she broke off their correspondence, she showed the exchange of letters to John, who penned a terse note of his own declaring that he had no comment to make.³⁶

In 1811, answering one of Rush's hopeful letters proposing reconciliation, Jefferson forwarded to Rush copies of his exchange of letters with Abigail Adams, implying that Rush's hopes were doomed. Jefferson added a sad reflection: "[J]udge for yourself whether they admit a revival of that friendly intercourse for which you are so kindly solicitous."³⁷ Nonetheless, Rush took each hopeful sign from the two estranged comrades as reason to hope that their friendship could be restored. By contrast, Adams treated Rush's entreaties with self-mocking wit. Writing on Christmas Day 1811, Adams challenged Rush directly, though jokingly: "I see plainly that you have been teasing Jefferson to write to me, or me to write to him." What reason, he asked,

could justify resuming their correspondence? Why, he asked Rush, should he write to Jefferson or should Jefferson write to him, unless each were to wish the other an easy journey to the grave? Adams continued in this vein, and then he dropped a sly hint: “Time or chance, however, or possibly design, may produce ere long a letter between us.”³⁸

Though he did not tell Rush, he had made his decision. The “time” that he mentioned was one week. On New Year’s Day 1812, he wrote Jefferson a gentle, friendly letter hinting at the delivery of a gift – two pieces of “homespun” from a person in whose education Jefferson had taken an interest. What Adams referred to as “two pieces of homespun” actually was a book, a two-volume set of lectures on rhetoric and oratory by John Quincy Adams, then Boylston Professor of Rhetoric at Harvard.³⁹

The letter signed and the package and letter mailed, Adams awaited developments. The letter and the package separated in the mail, the letter arriving before the books. But Adams did not know that yet. As 1811 faded into 1812, he had taken a remarkable step that signaled his emergence from the cloud of despondency and resentment that had enveloped him after his electoral defeat in 1800. Relishing his restored sense of humor and his renewed spirits, Adams was about to enter on one of the intellectually richest and most satisfying periods of his life. He was ready to become the Sage of Quincy.

NOTES

¹ For letters to Jefferson written between 1819 and 1823 dated from “Montezillo Alias the little Hill,” see Cappon, 2: 547-586 (quotation at 2:547, from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 23 Nov. 1819).

² R. B. Bernstein, “Review of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series, Volume I: 4 March – 15 November 1801* (J. Jefferson Looney, ed.),” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26:4 (Winter 2006): 682-98.

³ Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Hero* (New York: Free Press/Macmillan, 1987), esp. 91-103.

⁴ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 12 June 1812, in John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair, eds., *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library Press, 1966; reprint ed., Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc. 2001), 224-226 (esp. 226 numbered paragraph 5). I have used the original 1966 edition; the Liberty Fund reprint differs in pagination. Schutz and Adair presented a carefully edited, excerpted version of the correspondence as it was published in 1892: *Old Family Letters: Copied from the Originals*

for Alexander Biddle, *Series A* (Philadelphia, PA: Press of J. B. Lippincott Company, 1892). I cite mostly to *Spur of Fame* but occasionally to *Old Family Letters*.

⁵ John E. Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 418; see also James Grant, *John Adams, Party of One* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2005), 432.

⁶ See William E. Nelson, *Americanization of the Common Law: The Impact of Legal Change on Massachusetts Society, 1770-1830* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975; new ed., Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994).

⁷ Grant, *John Adams, Party of One*, 432, 495 n.8. On John Quincy Adams's efforts on his parents' behalf, Fred Kaplan, *John Quincy Adams: American Visionary* (New York: Harper, 2014), 195-96. S. R. Coppe, *Bird, Savage, and Bird* (London, UK: Corp. of London, 1981).

⁸ Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 274-288; Douglass Adair (Trevor Colbourn, ed.), *Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays of Douglass Adair* (New York: W. W. Norton for Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1974; rept., Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), 3-36.

⁹ Ryerson, *Republic*, 355-358.

¹⁰ *Spur of Fame*, *passim*. On Rush, Stephen Fried, *Rush: Revolution, Madness, and Benjamin Rush: The Doctor Who Became a Founding Father* (New York: Crown, 2018); David Freeman Hawke, *Benjamin Rush: Revolutionary Gadfly* (Indianapolis, IN, and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971); Donald J. D'Elia, *Benjamin Rush: Philosopher of the American Revolution* (*Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, new series, vol. 64, part 5) (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1974).

¹¹ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 26 March 1806, in *Spur of Fame* 51-52 (quotation at 52).

¹² John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 11 November 1807, in *Spur of Fame* 97-99 (esp. 98). Recent studies of Washington have shown that this barb, though amusing, was deeply unfair. Kevin Hayes, *George Washington: A Life in Books* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Adrienne M. Harrison, *A Powerful Mind: The Self-Education of George Washington* (Lincoln: Potomac Books/University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

¹³ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 25 December 1811, in *Spur of Fame* 200-02 (esp. 201-02).

¹⁴ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 23 July 1806, in *Spur of Fame* 59-61 (esp. 59); John Adams to Benjamin Rush, November 11, 1807, in *Old Family Letters*, 167-173 (esp. 170).

¹⁵ "From John Adams to Joseph Ward, 8 January 1810," FO/NA [Early Access document]. Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997; with new introduction, 1999), and Jan Ellen Lewis and Peter S. Onuf, eds., *Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999). On Callendar, Michael Durey, *"With the Hammer of Truth": James Thomas Callendar and America's Early National Heroes* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990).

¹⁶ Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Statesman and Friend: Correspondence of John Adams with Benjamin Waterhouse, 1784-1822* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1927). On Waterhouse, Stefan C. Schatzki, "Benjamin Waterhouse," *American Journal of Roentgenology*, No. 187 (August 2006):585, www.ajronline.org/doi/full/10.2214/AJR.05.2125 (viewed online 4 Dec. 2014).

¹⁷ John Adams to Benjamin Waterhouse, 13 Feb. 1805 and 19 Feb. 1805, in Ford, ed., *Statesman and Friend*, 11-12 and 13-16.

¹⁸ John Adams to Benjamin Waterhouse, 5 July 1811, in Ford, ed., *Statesman and Friend*, 55-58 (quotation at 56-57).

¹⁹ John Adams to Benjamin Waterhouse, 7 Aug. 1805, in Ford, ed., *Statesman and Friend*, 22-31 (quotation at 31).

²⁰ Harry F. Jackson, *Scholar in the Wilderness: Francis Adrian Van der Kemp* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1963); see also Helen Lincklain Fairchild, *Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, 1752-1829: An Autobiography Together with Extracts from His Correspondence* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1903).

²¹ Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution, Interspersed with Biographical, Political, and Moral Observations* (orig. ed. in 3 vols., Boston: Printed by Manning and Loring, for E. Larkin, 1805; new edition, edited and annotated by Lester H. Cohen, 2 vols., Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1998).

²² "From Thomas Jefferson to Mercy Otis Warren, 8 February 1805," FO/NA.

²³ Warren, *Rise, Progress, and Termination* (1805 ed.), 3: 392-393.

²⁴ This correspondence was published in Charles Francis Adams, ed., "Correspondence Between John Adams and Mercy Warren," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 5th series, 4: 321-511 (1870). I used the 1972 reprint edition in the series *American Women: Images and Realities: Correspondence Between John Adams and Mercy Warren, Including an Appendix of Specimen Pages from the 'History'* (New York: Arno Press, 1972). The pagination for the correspondence is identical to that of the original 1870 edition. The pagination of the selected pages from Warren's *History* is from the 1805 edition.

²⁶ Mercy Warren to John Adams, 27 August 1807, in *Correspondence Between John Adams and Mercy Warren* 479-491 (quotation at 490-491).

²⁷ An appendix to *Correspondence Between John Adams and Mercy Warren*, at 493-511, presents letters between Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren preceding the conflict, letters between Elbridge Gerry and Mrs. Warren addressing the conflict and Gerry's advice to Mrs. Warren as to her proper course of conduct ("silence"), and an abortive attempt in 1814 by Adams, rebuffed by Mrs. Warren, to restore good relations.

²⁸ The best and most thoughtful discussion is Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, chapter 3. See also Ryerson, *Republic*, 359ff.

²⁹ The correspondence is collected in *Correspondence Between the Hon. John Adams, Late President of the United States, and the Late William Cunningham, Esq. Begun in 1803, and Ending in 1812* (Boston, MA: Published by E. M. Cunningham, Son of the Late Wm. Cunningham, Esq., and Tree and Greene, Printers, 1823), (quotation at 114) (hereafter *Adams-Cunningham*). Charles Francis Adams omitted these letters from his edition of his grandfather's *Works* (1850-1856). Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 130-141 and 148-157, gives an excellent analysis; see also Cappon, 2:600n77. Further discussion of the aftermath appears in chapter 10 below.

³⁰ Lyman Butterfield, "The Dream of Benjamin Rush: The Reconciliation of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson," *Yale Review* 40 (1951): 297-319.

³¹ Abigail Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 20 May 1804, in Cappon, 1:268-269 (quotation at 269).

³² Thomas Jefferson to Abigail Adams, 23 June 1804, in Cappon, 1:269-271.

³³ Abigail Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 1 July 1804, in Cappon, 1: 271-274.

³⁴ Abigail Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 25 Oct. 1804, in Cappon, 280-282 (quotation at 282). The entire correspondence is at *ibid.*, 268-282. See also the editor's commentary in *id.*, 265-268.

³⁵ Abigail Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 1 July 1804, in Cappon, 1: 271-274 (quotation at 274).

³⁶ John Adams, note dated 19 Nov. 1804, in Cappon, 1: 282..

³⁷ "Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, 16 January 1811," FO/NA.

³⁸ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 25 December 1811, in *Spur of Fame* 200-202 (quotation at 202).

³⁹ Cappon, 2: 286-287. John Quincy Adams, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory, Delivered to the Classes of Senior and Junior Sophisters in Harvard University*, 2 vols. (Boston, MA: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1810).

Chapter Ten

“What do we mean by the revolution?”:

The Sage of Quincy

(1812-1826)

John Adams’s decision to resume contact with Thomas Jefferson launched a new chapter of his retirement and a new conception of himself. Not only was he free to rebuild his friendship with the Sage of Monticello – he also was free to become a sage himself, based in Quincy. In this last period of his life, Adams read, wrote letters, conversed with visitors, enjoyed his family, and faced the growing burdens and lessons of old age. Just as, generations later, Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, “I have traveled a good deal in Concord,”¹ Adams traveled a good deal in Quincy.

Adams and Jefferson never saw each other in the years left to them, but their correspondence revived and deepened their friendship. Rich with reflection, argument, humor, and wisdom, their letters became a literary monument to the strength of friendship and to the power of words.² Their correspondence helped to define the central theme of the last fourteen years of John Adams’s life, which echoed through his other letters and his conversations: exploration of the American Revolution and its meaning for the present and for posterity.

Adams and Jefferson offered each other a remarkable mix of reminiscence, history, prophecy, philosophy, religion, speculation, literature, and language. They exchanged congratulations on the fall of Napoleon in 1815 and shared their alarm about Pope Pius VIII’s 1814 revival of the Jesuits. They shared their opinions on Plato and on Native Americans. They

compared reading lists and swapped news of contemporaries. Only in the few years before their deaths in 1826 did old age diminish the river of letters passing between the two men. This correspondence was the core of the last phase of John Adams's life.

Receiving Adams's New Year's Day 1812 letter before the package, Jefferson eagerly wrote back on 21 January 1812.³ Whatever hurt feelings he had described to Rush seemed to dissolve as he read Adams's letter. If anything, Jefferson's response was even more sincere in friendship and in affectionate memory of their labors together in the cause of independence. Jefferson assumed that Adams was serious about the pieces of homespun that were supposed to accompany his letter. Thus, he treated Adams to a thoughtful, informative disquisition on homespun and how desirable it would be for Americans to promote its making. In closing, he shifted back to a warm meditation on their former friendship and the happy prospect of resuming it. A few days after the arrival of Adams's letter the package containing the "homespun" surfaced in the Charlottesville post office and made its way to Monticello, where Jefferson welcomed it with approving comments about John Quincy Adams's scholarship and writing.⁴

Adams wrote nearly four letters to Jefferson for every one that Jefferson wrote to him, at one point noting the difference in output but reassuring Jefferson: "Never mind it, my dear Sir, if I write four Letters to your one: your one is worth more than my four."⁵ Seeking to put their disagreement from 1804 aside, Abigail added a postscript to one of Adams's letters, and twice wrote to Jefferson independently, prompting him to write back.

Sadly for both men, the friend who had worked unceasingly to reunite them died on 19 April 1813 of typhus fever, little more than a year after his campaign to reconcile Adams and Jefferson had triumphed. Jefferson lamented, "Another of our friends of 76. is gone, my dear Sir, another of the Co-signers of the independance of our country. and a better man, than Rush, could

not have left us, more benevolent, more learned, of finer genius, or more honest.”⁶ Adams agreed: “I lament with you the loss of Rush. I know of no Character living or dead, who has done more real good in America.”⁷

Hungry for an intellectual sparring partner, each man jumped from subject to subject, from the antiquarian to the philosophical to the literary to the political, often in the same letter. Each recognized that he needed the other as friend and intellectual counterpart. As Jefferson wrote to Adams, “why am I dosing you with these Ante-diluvian topics? because I am glad to have some one to whom they are familiar, and who will not receive them as if dropped from the moon”⁸ They sought to entertain each other with unexpected reflections on great themes, as when Adams listed what he had learned from Plato, a philosopher whom both men detested: “...Two things only did I learn from him. 1. that Franklins Ideas of exempting Husbandmen and Mariners &c, from the depredations of War, were borrowed from him. 2. that Sneezing is a cure for the Hickups. Accordingly I have cured myself and all my Friends of that provoking disorder, for thirty years with a Pinch of Snuff.”⁹

Sometimes, Adams could not resist baiting Jefferson on politics past and present, but he forsook combative anguish (as in his letters to Mercy Otis Warren about her *History*) for playful mockery. One fine example is the letter that he sent Jefferson on 13 July 1813, exploring a central and long-standing political difference between them:

The first time, that you and I differed in Opinion on any material Question; was after your arrival from Europe; and that point was the french Revolution.

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You was well persuaded in your own mind that the Nation would succeed in establishing a free Republican Government: I was as well persuaded, in mine, that a project of such a Government, over five and twenty millions of people, when four and twenty millions and five hundred thousands of them could neither write nor read: was as unnatural irrational and impracticable; as it would be over the Elephants Lions Tigers Panthers Wolves and Bears in the Royal Menagerie, at Versailles.¹⁰

At the same time, delighting in his bibliophilia, he reported the happiness and frustration that he felt as his friends “Overwhelm me with Books from all Quarters” – rhetorically asking himself and Jefferson: “What Should I do, with all this lumber? I make my ‘Woman kind’ as the Antiquary expresses it, read to me, All the English: but as they will not read the French, I am obliged to excruciate my Eyes to read it myself. And all to what purpose? I verily believe I was as wise and good, Seventy Years ago, as I am now.”¹¹ Still, he kept reading. Jefferson marveled at his friend’s energy:

Forty three volumes read in one year, and 12. of them quartos! dear Sir, how I envy you! half a dozen [octavos] in that space of time are as much as I am allowed. I can read by candlelight only, and stealing long hours from my rest; nor would that time be indulged to me, could I, by that light, see to write. from sun-rise to one or two a'clock, and often from dinner to dark, I am drudging at the writing table. and all this to answer letters into which neither interest nor inclination on my part enters; and often for persons whose names I have never before heard. yet, writing civilly, it is hard to refuse them civil

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answers. this is the burthen of my life, a very grievous one indeed, and one which I must get rid of.¹²

In particular, Adams shared his extensive reading on comparative religion – he was particularly fond of a twelve-volume study by Charles Francois Dupuis, *Origin de tous les cultes* (*Origin of All Religious Worship*), to which he devoted letter after letter. An envious Jefferson answered, “Your undertaking the 12. vols of Dupuis is a degree of heroism to which I could not have aspired even in my younger days...”¹³ Both men also exchanged musings on the classics, philosophy, and aristocracy.

Aristocracy became a regular theme for Adams and Jefferson, who disagreed about the nature of aristocracy, having differing conceptions of the term. Adams disputed Jefferson’s insistence that there is a natural aristocracy among men, grounded in virtue and talent; he insisted that a wide range of personal qualities can make someone an aristocrat. Thus, Adams concluded, we could not define a solely natural aristocracy but had to provide for possible threats to balanced constitutional government from various kinds of aristocracy. Adams complained that, though he had written on aristocracy for much of his life, “I have been So unfortunate as never to be able to make myself understood.” He added, “your [aristocrats] are the most difficult Animals to manage, of any thing in the whole Theory and practice of Government. They will not Suffer themselves to be governed.”¹⁴

In an extensive exchange of letters between Adams and the Virginia agrarian writer John Taylor of Caroline, Taylor rejected the idea of aristocracy altogether, insisting that the United States had perfected popular sovereignty and eliminated the different orders of mankind that classical political thought recognized. In his letters to Taylor, Adams gave no ground,

maintaining the position that he had taken in the *Defence*, but he admitted to Jefferson his amusement (“I gravely composed my risible muscles”) that Taylor took his *Defence of the Constitutions* so seriously when nobody else did: “Is it Oberon? Is it queen Mab, that reigns and Sports with Us little Beings? I thought my Books as well as myself were forgotten. But behold! I am to become a great Man in my expiring moments.”¹⁵

Occasionally Adams and Jefferson plunged into such metaphysical questions as whether they would be willing to live their lives over again. Adams called the letter in which he launched that discussion “the most frivolous letter, you ever read.”¹⁶ Undaunted, Jefferson jumped into the subject as well, and both men gravely delivered their judgments on whether they would relive their lives or accept annihilation.

They treated one constellation of subjects with deadly seriousness – the history of the Revolution, their own places in that history, and the conflict between posterity’s need to understand that history and the forces threatening to deprive later generations of reliable historical knowledge. For example, writing to Jefferson on 30 July 1815, Adams demanded, “Who shall write the History of the American Revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?”¹⁷ Adams noted that extemporaneous speeches had not been preserved, and that texts of preserved speeches veered from hearers’ recollections of what those speakers actually said. Some weeks later, he again asked Jefferson about the Revolution, but this time his focus was different – exploring “Ideas [that] may be peculiar, perhaps singular”:

What do We mean by the Revolution? The War? That was no part of the Revolution. It was only an Effect and Consequence of it. The Revolution was in the Minds of the People, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen

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years before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington. The Records of thirteen Legislatures, the Pamphlets, Newspapers in all the Colonies ought be consulted, during that Period, to ascertain the Steps by which the public opinion was enlightened and informed concerning the Authority of Parliament over the Colonies.¹⁸

Preserving his preoccupation with the Revolution, Adams often took it upon himself to defend the place in history of friends and relatives – particularly his cousin Samuel Adams. In 1814, Adams noted sadly, “I am sometimes afraid that my ‘Machine’ will not ‘Surcease motion’ Soon enough; for I dread nothing So much as ‘dying at top’ and expiring like Dean [Jonathan] Swift ‘a driveller and a Show’ or like Sam. Adams, a Grief and distress to his Family, a weeping helpless Object of Compassion for years.”¹⁹ Five years later, he upbraided his former law student William Tudor for seeming to want to downgrade a man whom Adams revered as a key leader of the Revolution in Massachusetts: “You seem to wish me to write something to diminish the fame of Samuel Adams to show that he was not a man of profound learning, a great lawyer, a man of vast reading, a comprehensive statesman. In all this I shall not gratify you.”²⁰

All the letters that Adams wrote in retirement display a remarkable mix of wisdom, humor, learning, combativeness, and occasional cynicism about his own historical reputation and his likely fate at posterity’s hands. Adams had recovered much of his youthful optimism about America, though he still disputed Jefferson’s views on American exceptionalism, insisting that Americans were not exempt from the forces that had shaped human nature and human experiments in government throughout history. Adams’s retirement letters display the playful, intellectually venturesome, and self-mocking facets of his personality that have endeared him to later generations.

For his part, Jefferson was more formal, more disciplined, and more poised in tone. His letters resemble distilled essays; they are more considered performances on paper, lacking the spontaneity that Adams delighted to indulge – though they often show an intellectual energy and verbal nimbleness matching Adams’s. Both men modeled their letters on Cicero’s letters to his friend Atticus, a body of Roman literature that they both treasured.

Painful events intruded, and at such times each man sought solace from or offered comfort to the other. After Rush’s death, the first such tragic event was the death of John’s and Abigail’s oldest child, Abigail Adams Smith, who succumbed to breast cancer on 15 August 1813 after a long and difficult illness (including a mastectomy in 1811). Having begun a playful letter on Greek literature, Adams changed course, adding a postscript:

your Friend, my only Daughter, expired, yesterday morning in the Arms of Her Husband
her Son, her Daughter, her Father and Mother, her Husbands two Sisters and two of her
Nieces, in the 49th year of her Age, 46 of which She was the healthiest and firmest of Us
all: Since which, She has been a monument to Suffering and to Patience.²¹

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Abigail wrote to Jefferson, as an inconsolable mother seeking to share her sorrow with a father who had also lost a daughter.²² Both parents felt the loss deeply, and not only because of the ordeal of their daughter’s last illness. Both remembered the younger Abigail’s difficult marriage, her frequent unhappiness with her irresponsible and spendthrift husband, and the suffering that their daughter’s unhappiness brought them. Jefferson addressed the younger Abigail’s death in a sympathetic postscript; he knew all too well what it was to lose a daughter before her time:

On the subject ..., I am silent. I know the depth of the affliction it has caused, and can sympathise with it the more sensibly, inasmuch as there is no degree of affliction, produced by the loss of those dear to us which experience has not taught me to estimate. I have ever found time & silence the only medicine, and these but assuage, they never can suppress, the deep-drawn sigh which recollection for ever brings up, until recollection and life are extinguished together.²³

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Adams's most painful loss came in 1818. Jefferson had explained to Adams that the long gap in their correspondence was caused by various ailments that had forced him to visit the local warm springs. On 20 October, Adams began his response as an encouraging and humorous letter to raise Jefferson's spirits – but abruptly he changed tone, reporting that his beloved Abigail had fallen gravely ill: "Now Sir, for my Griefs.! The dear Partner of my Life for fifty four Years as a Wife and for many Years more as a Lover now lyes, in extremis, forbidden to Speak or be Spoken to." Adams then mused on the nature of human existence: "If human Life is a Bubble, no matter how Soon it breaks. If it is as I firmly believe an immortal Existence We ought patiently to wait the Instructions of the great Teacher." He signed himself, "your deeply affected Friend[,] John Adams."²⁴

On 28 October 1818, before Jefferson received Adams's letter reporting his wife's illness, Abigail Adams died, three days after their fifty-fourth wedding anniversary and three weeks short of her seventy-fourth birthday. Jefferson wrote an eloquent condolence letter, referring obliquely to his own losses of his wife and children and to the hope of a future existence:

tried myself, in the school of affliction, by the loss of every form of connection which can rive the human heart, I know well, and feel what you have lost, what you have suffered, are suffering, and have yet to endure. the same trials have taught me that, for ills so immeasurable, time and silence are the only medecines. I will not therefore, by useless condolances, open afresh the sluices of your grief nor, altho' mingling sincerely my tears with yours, will I say a word more, where words are vain, but that it is of some comfort to us both that the term is not very distant at which we are to deposit, in the same cerement, our sorrows and suffering bodies, and to ascend in essence to an ecstatic meeting with the friends we have loved & lost and whom we shall still love and never lose again. God bless you and support you under your heavy affliction.²⁵

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Adams responded with humble gratitude, moved deeply by Jefferson's words: "While you live, I Seem to have a Bank at Monticello on which I can draw for a Letter of Friendship and entertainment when I please." He then reaffirmed his hopes for life after death, and his belief that the Almighty would not be so cruel as to make human beings and then consign them to life on earth only. There must be something after death, he insisted. To try to restore a sense of daily life, Adams noted that the artist John Trumbull had brought him to Boston's Fanueil Hall (though he did not mention that it was to view the original of Trumbull's iconic painting "The Presenting of the Declaration," featuring Jefferson and himself), but he did mention that the trip gave him a cold: "Sick or Well the Friendship is the Same of your old Acquaintance, John Adams."²⁶

Both men's reflections on a future life after death highlighted two other issues on which their ideas had begun to converge: religion and the relationship between church and state. Having left behind as a young man the Congregationalism of his ancestors, the elderly Adams embraced Unitarianism, as Jefferson had, but they followed differing versions of Unitarianism. Jefferson was a deist Unitarian, believing only in God as creator who had left humans on their own after creation, and seeing Jesus as a human being who had all human virtues and never claimed or had anything more. Adams believed in a personal deity, in Jesus as the redeemer of humanity, and in the miracles of the New Testament. Still, they agreed that the state should not be entwined with the church.²⁷

In his last act of public service, Adams gave voice to these beliefs. He accepted election as a Quincy delegate to the Massachusetts constitutional convention of 1820 (which met from 15 November 1820 to 9 January 1821), forty-one years after serving at the first Massachusetts constitutional convention in 1779.²⁸ When the eighty-five-year-old Adams entered the hall, the other delegates stood, their heads uncovered, as a mark of respect.²⁹ They then elected him their president, an honor that he declined on account of his age.³⁰

Adams's only action in the convention was to propose the rewriting of the religious-liberty provision of the declaration of rights, which read: "all men of all religions, demeaning themselves peaceably, and as good subjects of the Commonwealth, shall be equally under the protection of the law."³¹ Adams so phrased his amendment to achieve the broadest measure of religious liberty possible under the Massachusetts form of multiple religious establishments. To seek to disestablish religion would clash with the prevailing religious values of the people of the state and therefore would fail. Adams thus sought to keep his proposal within the structure of church-state relations established by Articles II and III of the 1780 Declaration of Rights, while

expanding the category of citizens whose religious liberty would be protected. His motion failed.

Adams confided to Jefferson his estimation of his own performance:

My appearance in the late convention was too ludicrous to be talked of. I was a member in the Convention of 1779 and there I was loquacious enough I have harranged and scribbled more than my share but from that time to the convention in 1820 I never opened my lips in a publick debate after a total desuetude for 40 years I boggled and blundered more than a young fellow just rising to speak at the bar, what I said I know not, I believe the Printers have made better speeches than I made for myself. Feeling my weakness I attempted little and that seldom. What would I give for nerves as good as yours but as Westley said of himself at my age, "old time has shaken me by the hand, and parallized it."³²

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In the same letter, Adams addressed an issue that both he and Jefferson found troubling and dangerous to the Union – slavery, then dominating the nation’s politics in the Missouri crisis:

Slavery in this Country I have seen hanging over it like a black cloud for half a Century, if I were as drunk with enthusiasm as Swedenborg or Westley I might probably say I had seen Armies of Negroes marching and countermarching in the air shining in Armour. I have been so terrified with this Phenomenon that I constantly said in former times to the Southern Gentleman, I cannot comprehend this object I must leave it to you, I will vote for forceing no measure against your judgements, what we are to see *God* knows and I leave it to him, and his agents in posterity.³³

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Adams never more clearly stated his hesitant approach to slavery than in this letter. He first identified white Southerners as having expertise and thus authority in dealing with slavery and with slaves; second, he deferred to their supposed expertise and authority. This was but the latest example of Adams's gingerly approach to slavery and to race and to the constellation of issues that they symbolized. In 1810, for example, Adams had cited James Thomson Callendar's charges against Jefferson concerning Sally Hemings as epitomizing the bad effects of slavery on slaveowners.³⁴ In 1813, writing to Richard Rush, the noted attorney who was the son of Benjamin Rush, Adams noted similar views: "I have all my life been so sensible of the dangers and difficulties attending this thing that no Southern Gentleman can reproach me with a word or action tending to give discontent to their domesticks or to embarrass them in their intercourse with them, or government of them."³⁵ As to his own family history concerning slavery, Adams boasted,

I have the sweet consolation to reflect, that I never owned a Slave. Not one of my ancestors by my Father, for five generations in this Village of Mount Wollasten, now Quincy, ever owned a Negro. My Mothers Father in Brookline had an old African, named Sharper whom I remember, more than 70 years ago, who was treated by my Grand Father and Grand Mother as kindly as their Son and daughters. And this old creature treated me with so much kindness that I loved him almost as well as any of the family.³⁶

With such reflections, Adams closed an intermittent and confused lifelong struggle with his ideas about slavery and race. Throughout his life, though finding slavery distasteful, he

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believed that it was a historical constant in human civilization. He never developed the antislavery stance associated with Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, or Alexander Hamilton. Not only did he never come out publicly against slavery; he also was mute on issues of race, confiding his discomfort with people of African descent only to a few friends and correspondents. Adams may fit within a category proposed by modern legal scholars, “unconscious racism”; though not a deliberate, self-conscious advocate of racism and white supremacy, he held unexamined assumptions that specified whiteness as the default position for Americans and citizens. His posthumous reputation as a foe of slavery and an advocate of equal rights regardless of race is open to serious question.³⁷

Though in his old age Adams shied clear of such loaded political issues, he found that politics would not leave him alone. In 1823, his unresolved dispute with William Cunningham revived after Cunningham’s suicide. After discovering his father’s correspondence with Adams, Cunningham’s son decided that he was not bound by his father’s commitment not to publish Adams’s letters while Adams was alive, and so informed Adams. Ephraim May Cunningham was as partisan as his father, but whereas William Cunningham had been a High Federalist, his son was a supporter of Andrew Jackson and thus was hostile to Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, his leading opponent in the impending 1824 presidential election. Hoping that publication of the Adams-Cunningham correspondence would be political dynamite to the younger Adams, Ephraim May Cunningham published in 1823 *Correspondence between the Hon. John Adams, Late President of the United States, and the Late Hon. Wm. Cunningham, Esq., Beginning in 1803, and Continuing until 1823*.³⁸ Cunningham directed his enmity at both Adamses.

Jefferson got wind of the impending publication. Determined not to sacrifice to politics a friendship that meant so much to both men, Jefferson wrote to Adams with sympathy and understanding about the younger Cunningham's betrayal of Adams's trust. Pointing out that those with invidious motives might wish to poison relations between them "by filling our ears with malignant falsehoods, by dressing up hideous phantoms of their own creation, presenting them to you under my name, to me under your's," Jefferson refused to be fooled:

be assured, my dear Sir, that I am incapable of receiving the slightest impression from the effort now made to plant thorns on the pillow of age, worth, and wisdom, and to sow tares between friends who have been such for near half a century. beseeching you then not to suffer your mind to be disquieted by this wicked attempt to poison it's peace, and praying you to throw it by, among the things which have never happened, I add sincere assurances of my unabated, and constant attachment, friendship and respect.³⁹

Deeply touched, Adams wrote back, indulging his gift for dramatic scene-setting in describing the arrival of Jefferson's letter:

Your last letter was brought to me from the Post office when at breakfast with my family. I bade one of the misses open the budget, she reported a letter from Mr. Jefferson and two or three newspapers. A letter from Mr. Jefferson says I, I know what the substance is before I open it; There is no secrets between Mr. Jefferson and me, And I cannot read it, therefore you may open and read it—When it was done, it was

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followed by an universal exclamation, The best letter that ever was written, and round it went through the whole table—How generous! how noble! how magnanimous! I said that it was just such a letter as I expected only it was infinitely better expressed—A universal cry that the letter ought to be printed, No, hold—certainly not without Mr. Jefferson’s express leave.—

Adams explained to Jefferson his correspondence with Cunningham: “The peevish and fretful effusions of politicians in difficult and dangerous conjectures from the agony of their hearts are not worth remembering, much less of laying to heart.” He closed with a self-mocking quip: “In the 89. year of his age still too fat to last much longer. John Adams.”⁴⁰

For Adams, the 1824 presidential campaign was about more than the threats and publications of the Cunninghams. He was so anxious about John Quincy Adams’s chances to win the presidency in that election that he made a great sacrifice – he said nothing in public about John Quincy’s candidacy or fitness for the presidency, lest his words be taken as an effort to impose monarchy on America in the form of his son. When the news arrived of John Quincy’s election after a prolonged tussle in the House of Representatives, John Adams was nearly overcome by emotion.

Though Jefferson had supported Treasury Secretary William Crawford, disdaining Andrew Jackson and regarding John Quincy Adams as too committed to a vigorous national government, on 15 February 1825 he sent his congratulations to the proud father: “it must excite ineffable feelings in the breast of a father to have lived to see a son to whose educn & happiness his life has been devoted so eminently distinguished by the voice of his country.”⁴¹ Meanwhile, on 18 February Adams wrote a loving and proud letter to his son: “...Never did I feel so much

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solemnity as upon this occasion—the multitude of my thoughts and the intensity of my feelings are too much for a mind like mine in its ninetieth year—May the blessing of God Almighty continue to protect you to the end of your life as it has heretofore protected you in so remarkable a manner from your cradle. I offer the same prayer for your Lady and your family.”⁴²

By 1826, Adams was ninety and Jefferson was about to turn eighty-three. Musing on whether they would like to live their lives over or to advance to what comes next, Adams assured Jefferson on 1 December 1825 that he would rather move forward: “I had rather go forward and meet whatever is to come—I have met in this life, with great trials—I have had a Father, and lost him—I have had a Mother and lost her—I have had a Wife and lost her—I have had Children and lost them—I have had honorable and worthy Friends and lost them—and instead of suffering these griefs again I had rather go forward and meet my destiny.”⁴³

Recognizing that their increasing frailty meant that they would not live much longer, Adams and Jefferson reluctantly declined invitations to attend ceremonies marking the fiftieth anniversary of the declaration of American independence, to be held on 4 July 1826.⁴⁴ They disagreed about the significance of the anniversary – Adams saw it as an event restricted to the American people, whereas Jefferson hailed it as a landmark of the age of the democratic revolution, with meaning for people all over the world. Nonetheless, both men were equally determined to live to see the day. They just barely realized their shared wish. Jefferson died early on the afternoon of 4 July; Adams died several hours later that day, murmuring, “Thomas Jefferson survives.” Americans regarded this unusual occurrence as a sign from Providence not only that the torch of responsibility for American freedom was passing from the Revolutionary generation to their successors; but that Heaven itself was conferring a sign of divine favor on Adams, Jefferson, and the American nation.⁴⁵

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In Massachusetts and particularly in Quincy, John Adams's death and funeral were events of state. He was interred beside his wife in the family crypt maintained by the Adamses in Hancock Cemetery. In 1828, he and Abigail were transferred to their current resting place, joined there in 1852 by John Quincy Adams and his wife, Louisa Catherine. They lie in cenotaphs in the crypt of the "Church of the Presidents," the United First Parish Church in the heart of Quincy, Massachusetts.⁴⁶

NOTES

¹ Henry David Thoreau (Jeffrey S. Cramer, ed.), *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* (1854; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 2.

² For now, the definitive edition is Cappon. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*; and *The Papers of John Adams* will publish letters that Cappon apparently did not find. An excellent interim means of checking these editions is <http://wwwFOUNDERS.archives.gov>. Gordon S. Wood, *Friends Divided: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017); Merrill D. Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 197; rept. ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). For an excellent brief discussion, Joanne B. Freeman, "Jefferson and Adams: friendship and the power of the letter," in Frank Shuffelton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Jefferson* (Cambridge, Eng., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 168-78.

³ "Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 21 January 1812," *FO/NA*.

⁴ "Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 23 January 1812," *FO/NA*.

⁵ "From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 15 July 1813," *FO/NA* [Early Access document]. On Rush, Stephen Fried, *Rush: Revolution, Madness, and the Visionary Doctor Who Became a Founding Father* (New York: Crown, 2018).

⁶ "Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 27 May 1813," *FO/NA*.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ "Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 5 July 1814," *FO/NA*.

⁹ "From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 16 July 1814," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].

¹⁰ "From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 13 July 1813," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].

¹¹ "From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 19 April 1817," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].

¹² "Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 11 January 1817," *FO/NA*.

¹³ "To John Adams from Thomas Jefferson, 14 October 1816," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].

¹⁴ "John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 9 July 1813," *FO/NA*.

¹⁵ "John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 15 September 1813," *FO/NA*.

¹⁶ "John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 2 March 1816," *FO/NA*.

¹⁷ "From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 30 July 1815," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].

¹⁸ "From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 24 August 1815," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].

¹⁹ "From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 16 July 1814," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].

²⁰ "From John Adams to William Tudor, Sr., 9 February 1819," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].

²¹ "John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, [ca. 14] August 1813, with Postscript, 16 August 1813," *FO/NA*.

²² "From Abigail Smith Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 20 September 1813," *FO/NA* [Early Access document].

²³ "Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 12 October 1813," *FO/NA*.

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- ²⁴ “From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 20 October 1818,” *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ²⁵ “To John Adams from Thomas Jefferson, 13 November 1818,” *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ²⁶ “From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 8 December 1818,” *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ²⁷ David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006), 73-78; Amy Kittelstrom, *The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015; pbk.), 17-55, notes, 365-71; and esp. Sara Georgini, *Household Gods: The Religious Lives of the Adams Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 7-40 (notes 210-23).
- ²⁸ *Journal of debates and proceedings in the Convention of delegates, chosen to revise the constitution of Massachusetts, begun and holden at Boston, November 15, 1820, and continued by adjournment to January 9, 1821. Reported for the Boston daily advertiser.* (Boston, MA: Published at the office of the Daily Advertiser, 1821). Cited hereafter as *Journal 1821* with page numbers.
- ²⁹ *Journal 1821*: 11-12
- ³⁰ *Journal 1821*: 9-10
- ³¹ *Journal 1821*: 209, and see also 193.
- ³² “To Thomas Jefferson from John Adams, 3 February 1821,” *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ³³ *Id.*
- ³⁴ See chapter nine *supra*.
- ³⁵ “From John Adams to Richard Rush, 20 November 1813,” *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ³⁶ *Id.*
- ³⁷ Arthur Scherr, *John Adams, Slavery, and Race: Ideas, Politics, and Diplomacy in an Age of Crisis* (Santa Barbara, CA/Denver, CO: Praeger, 2018). John R. Howe, Jr., “John Adams’s Views of Slavery,” *Journal of Negro History* 49:3 (1964): 201-206. Charles R. Lawrence III, “The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection: Reckoning with Unconscious Racism,” *Stanford Law Review* 39:2 (January 1987): 317-88; Charles R. Lawrence III, “Unconscious Racism Revisited: Reflections on the Impact and Origins of ‘The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection,’” *Connecticut Law Review* 40:4 (July 2008): 931-77. I am indebted to my students at CCNY, particularly Joel Sati, Tiffany Scruggs, and those taking our course on African American Political Thought and my course on Early American Political Development, for discussions of this topic. I am also indebted to Annette Gordon-Reed and to my former teacher Charles R. Lawrence III.
- ³⁸ *Correspondence Between the Hon. John Adams, Late President of the United States, and the Late Hon. Wm. Cunningham, Esq., Beginning in 1803, and Continuing Until 1823* (Boston, MA: Published by E. M. Cunningham, son of the late Wm. Cunningham/Tree and Greene, Printers, 1823).
- ³⁹ “To John Adams from Thomas Jefferson, 12 October 1823,” *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ⁴⁰ “From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 10 November 1823,” *FO/NA* [Early Access document] Both the previous quotation and this quotation come from this letter.
- ⁴¹ “To John Adams from Thomas Jefferson, 15 February 1825,” *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ⁴² “From John Adams to John Quincy Adams, 18 February 1825,” *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ⁴³ “From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 1 December 1825,” *FOnline*, NA [Early Access document].
- ⁴⁴ “From John Adams to John Whitney, 7 June 1826,” *FO/NA* [Early Access document]. “From John Adams to Roger Chew Weightman, 22 June 1826,” *FO/NA* [Early Access document]. “From Thomas Jefferson to Roger Chew Weightman, 24 June 1826,” *FO/NA* [Early Access document].
- ⁴⁵ Andrew Burstein, *America’s Jubilee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), chapter 11.
- ⁴⁶ For a contemporary newspaper’s coverage of the funeral and other ceremonies marking the passing of John Adams in 1826, see Wood *JA 1784-1826*: 873-878.

Epilogue

“Whether you or I were right Posterity must judge”:

The Legacies of John Adams

John Adams worried about his historical legacy, doubting that posterity would venerate him or even remember him. On 25 March 1809, he complained to Benjamin Rush:

I am weary, my Friend of that unceasing Insolence of which I have been the object for twenty years. I have opposed Nothing to it but stoical Patience, unlimited submission, passive obedience and Non Resistance. Mausoleums, Statues, Monuments will never be erected to me. I wish them not. Panegyrical Romances will never be written, nor flattering orations spoken to transmit me to Posterity in brilliant Colours. No nor in true Colours. All but the last I loath. Yet I will not die wholly unlamented.¹

After Rush had persuaded Adams and Jefferson to resume their friendship, Adams wrote with candor to Jefferson about their political differences: “Whether you or I were right Posterity must judge.”² He thus identified the purpose of their correspondence.

Adams was right to submit himself to posterity’s judgment – although posterity has taken

a long time to do him justice. Following decades of neglect, he has rejoined the leading ranks of the Founding Fathers. Statues of him and of Abigail and the young John Quincy stand in the town of Quincy, and there are monuments to him of various kinds across the nation.³ Adams has been portrayed on stage and screen by actors as various and talented as William Daniels, George Grizzard, Paul Giamatti, Vic Morrow, Peter Donaldson, Henry Strozier, and Henry Thomas.⁴

How do we remember John Adams? How should we remember him? Popular culture presents him as a character – crusty, tactless, "obnoxious and disliked," yet also honest, brave, patriotic, loveable, and lucky enough to be married to Abigail Adams.⁵ Disgruntled critics reject that version of Adams as sanitized for popular consumption and thus historically suspect. Refusing to venerate him, they invoke reasons valid and invalid. They attack him for favoring or hoping to found an American monarchy and titled aristocracy. They denounce Adams for signing the Alien and Sedition Acts into law, for presiding over his administration's prosecutions of Republican newspaper editors under the Sedition Act, and for the Alien Acts' threats (never put into practice) to deport aliens. Some take part with the victims of these measures; others regard these actions and statutes as foreshadowing the USA PATRIOT Act, Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, and "extraordinary rendition."⁶

Understanding Adams rather than forgiving or demonizing him requires us to see him in context.⁷ Because Adams's life and career are documented more thoroughly and accessibly than ever before, such an approach is both possible and necessary, as the availability of more evidence in more accessible forms drives scholarship. In response, a profusion of scholarship has illuminated many dimensions of his life. We may know John Adams better than he knew himself.

The central theme of Adams's life is his immersion in politics, focusing on the American

Revolution. Repeatedly, he sacrificed family happiness and domestic bliss to his public duty to the Revolution. Though it imposed painful costs on his family and on himself, he saw the cause as worth those costs. His commitment to the Revolution was so strong, making him willing to incur such costs, because he identified with and cherished the constellation of ideas about human nature, society, politics, and government that he advocated. Even in old age, he marshaled those ideas in service of the nation that the Revolution created and the history that it made. Reinforcing his intellectual and political fealty to the Revolution was his personal stake in his ideas and in his record of public service.

Recognizing how integral his Revolution-centered career was to his life, posterity has cast Adams as a leading “founding father” – a twentieth-century phrase with cultural and political weight.⁸ That label’s modern significance and the veneration given those who qualify for it resonate with Adams’s ultimate goal – enduring fame. Adams wanted to make sure that posterity would remember him for his disinterested labors in the service of the public good. For Adams, achieving fame was an irrefutable sign that he *deserved* to be remembered, for he knew that one had to merit fame to achieve it.

Did Adams achieve that goal? The record is uneven. In his lifetime and since his death, Adams’s critics have neglected his achievements while highlighting ways that he went too far, said too much, claimed too much, and otherwise got himself in trouble. Even those making a case for him have tended to stress the personal rather than the political.

Unwittingly, Adams gave his critics help. He clashed with the icons of the American founding in ways tailor-made to affront contemporaries and to disgust later generations seeking a usable past.⁹ Long before his death, he dug his reputation’s grave with his mouth and his pen. Theodore Parker rightly noted of Adams: “He was terribly open, earnest, and direct, and could

not keep his mouth shut.”¹⁰ Adams quarreled with Benjamin Franklin in Paris and upbraided him in heated letters to Congress, only to be skewered forever by the sage’s angry wit. He mocked the icon of icons, George Washington, only to have his mockery rebound against himself, cited as proving his own petty jealousy. Most people remember his vice presidency for his failed campaign to confer an elaborate, unwanted title on the president. And, though he twice stood for the Presidency against his friend and rival Thomas Jefferson, winning once and losing once, his victory in 1796 turned to ashes in his mouth, and his defeat in 1800 embittered him. He spent the rest of his life trying to overcome what he saw as an epic repudiation. In retirement, he vented indignation at posterity’s preference for Jefferson over himself, disputing what he saw as Jefferson’s devious claims to an outsized place in American memory. Jefferson’s admirers paid Adams back in full measure, denouncing him for jealousy, vanity, and arrogance.

Unlike Jefferson, Adams did not write the words or the music to the American democratic epic; he missed the chance to define his own vision of American national identity and values. The Declaration – often called “Jefferson’s Declaration” – is the American political testament, inspiring people around the world with its affirmation of “unalienable rights.” Adams focused on systems of constitutional government and problems of constitutional design, but these matters rarely capture the popular imagination.

Thus, for example, the resolution that Adams drafted for the Second Continental Congress in May 1776 calling on the colonies to frame new state constitutions seems technical, lawyerly, and dry by contrast with the Declaration. Similarly, his 1774-75 *Novanglus* essays and his other formal writings on politics and constitutionalism remain embedded in their argumentative context. Adams would not be surprised by their neglect, for, by his own admission, his books were too heavy and dull to win an enthusiastic readership.

Neglect would be sad enough, but hostile critics past and present have used Adams's writings to torpedo his reputation. Misusing what he wrote about monarchy and aristocracy, they have tried to prove him a perfidious foe of the Revolution from within or a Revolutionary fallen from grace. They have assumed that anyone who wrote so much about monarchy and aristocracy must favor them. So often have they convicted Adams of these anti-democratic sins by using his own words against him that condemnation of Adams echoes to this day.¹¹ (Never mind that most Americans before 1776, and most European *philosophes* before 1789, would have seen monarchy and aristocracy as Adams did, as default positions of human government.¹²)

Other factors helped to consign John Adams to the margins of history.

Adams had no political heirs to keep his memory green. He had broken with the Federalists; too many of them had been allies of Hamilton, and thus had no inclination to honor Adams or to promote his legacy. Even had they been sympathetic to him, by 1820 the Federalists were politically extinct, in no position to advocate for anyone. Adams's one plausible heir, Chief Justice John Marshall, spent his judicial career shifting his focus from politics to law, to protect the federal judiciary from Republican attack and to advocate his own jurisprudential nationalism. He showed no interest in advocating for Adams's political legacy.

Adams found himself sidelined in the new republic's partisan battles, both because the vice presidency was a hopeless office for one who wanted to remain active in public life and because Jefferson and Hamilton emerged as the leading contenders in the battles over public policy and politics. Their political heirs continued their passionate rivalry, refighting their original brawls or staging sequels to them. This ongoing contest has preoccupied politicians, polemicists, and historians up to our own day. That obsession with partisan fireworks eclipsed Adams, the man who despised party.

The controversial acts of Adams's presidency – signing the Alien and Sedition Acts into law and enforcing the Sedition Act – made him look like an enemy of freedom of speech and press. Further, the myth of the “midnight judges” – the bumper-sticker term for the Federalists' reshaping of the federal judiciary in 1801 – has draped itself over Adams, without justification.

Adams's failure to win re-election in 1800 eroded his significance in American history. Particularly in the twentieth century, scholars of American government defined as a test of a president's success or failure his ability to win a second term. On this theory, most one-term presidents fall into historical irrelevance. As the first one-term president, Adams became the prototypical presidential failure.

The lack of interplay between the issues dominating Adams's writings and those preoccupying later generations also undercut Adams's claim to fame. Adams never grappled with the nature of federalism. Yet that issue pervaded American constitutional controversy between the 1820s and the 1860s ultimately was crucial, in its interaction with slavery, to defining what kind of nation the United States would be. The terrible war that the crisis over slavery and federalism spawned was pivotal to that process of national definition. Adams's silence on federalism excluded him from those controversies. Moreover, his views on slavery and race put him on what might be called the wrong side of those political, moral, and intellectual battles, the side dismissed by later generations as the doughfaces – Northerners fearful of challenging slavery or even sympathetic with it.¹³ Adams also missed the court cases in 1783 that ended slavery in his native state; and most New Englanders found it easy to forget that they once had had both slavery and the racial ideology that undergirded it.¹⁴ In any event, John Adams played no role in the constitutional, political, moral, and cultural controversies that we associate with the Civil War.

Following that war, the nation's constitutional agenda diverged more sharply from the issues to which Adams had given priority. Adams was irrelevant to the task of reconstructing the Union from 1865 to 1877. After Reconstruction's end, American constitutional argument shifted from issues of federalism, Union, slavery, and rebuilding the Union to contests regarding federal state attempts to assert regulatory power over the economy. Those contests unfolded in a nation shaped by new and powerful forces that Adams had barely perceived – urbanization, immigration, and industrialization.¹⁵ Seeking support from the past for their positions in these arguments, scholars, jurists, politicians, and polemicists ransacked writings by Jefferson, Hamilton, Marshall, and Madison, but they never deemed John Adams relevant. Adams's political thought describes a world of static constitutional and political principles. By contrast, arguments about politics, government, and constitutional change offered by those whom later controversialists invoked presuppose development over time, a concept overlooked in Adams's thought.¹⁶

Finally, historical neglect of Adams may also have roots in his descendants' overzealous guardianship of his papers. Charles Francis Adams published only selections from his grandparents' letters and other writings; the capstone of his efforts was a ten-volume selected edition of John Adams's writings (1850-1856). For a century thereafter, the family refused scholars access to Adams's unpublished papers. Writing history and biography depends on the availability of sources; as Arnold Rampersad commented on writing his intellectual life of W.E.B. DuBois, "I've since joked that an intellectual biography is what you write when you don't have access to the papers."¹⁷ By guarding his papers from view, the Adams family tied John Adams's tongue, leaving him represented only by his grandson's somber and stuffy edition. Although Charles Francis Adams was his era's best historical editor, he purged his grandfather's

writings of his erratic spelling and punctuation, his earthiness, his humor, and his candor.¹⁸ As one scholarly admirer, Zoltan Haraszti, wrote with regret in 1952, “But he has been silenced after all.”¹⁹

Even the first book-length treatment of Adams’s political thought showed less interest in Adams than in the concerns of the author’s time. In 1915, the political scientist Correa M. Walsh juxtaposed Adams’s faith in separation of powers and checks and balances unfavorably with the progressive movement’s rejection of such concepts in favor of an agenda promoting efficient governance.²⁰ A reader of Walsh’s study can only wonder why he bothered.

By contrast, after World War II, Adams’s ideas attracted growing, respectful interest. The first to reinvent Adams as a sage for modern times were such conservative thinkers as Russell Kirk, who saw in the Cold War a return of the controversy swirling around the French Revolution, and such defenders of a moderate conservative tradition as Clinton Rossiter.²¹ The Cold War revived arguments about revolution’s origins, history, and development, contrasting the American and French Revolutions – and bracketing the French and Russian Revolutions. As part of that revival, conservatives and liberals embraced Adams’s critique of the French Revolution, yoking Adams with Edmund Burke and enlisting both men in their battle against the twentieth century’s Communist revolutions.²² This anti-revolutionary canon began with Adams and Burke, finding new targets in Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and the Gulag Archipelago. So, too, in 1952, the literary scholar Zoltan Haraszti published a monograph examining the marginalia that Adams wrote in his books, rearranging them in dialogue form to show Adams arguing with the authors he was reading. In the process, he not only created a remarkably fresh, intimate portrait of Adams as thinker – his Adams was an honorary Cold Warrior, combating the French Revolution and its supposed twentieth-century heirs.²³

In the 1950s and 1960s, a surge in popular attention, sparked by the opening of the Adams papers, evolved in parallel with scholarly investigations of John Adams. In 1954, perhaps to take advantage of tax benefits conferred by the 1954 Internal Revenue Code, and also to follow the lead of *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, the flagship of the “documentary editing revolution,” the Adams family unsealed the Adams papers.²⁴ Working with the Massachusetts Historical Society and Harvard University Press, the family created the Adams Manuscript Trust; the Adams project produced a 608-reel microfilm edition and an ongoing letterpress edition of the Adams papers.

The first product of opening the Adams papers was Lester J. Cappon’s 1959 edition of the full correspondence between John and Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Reviewers hailed the two volumes as an American literary classic, heaping praise in particular on Adams’s literary and philosophical talents. In 1961 appeared the first installment of the *Adams Papers*, L. H. Butterfield’s edition of *The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*. *Life* magazine serialized extracts from those volumes. Reviews, including one commissioned by the *American Historical Review* from President John F. Kennedy, were many and glowing. The *Adams Papers* revealed Adams as an unexpectedly vivid, funny, and human writer. The acclaim continued with the publication of the first volumes of Adams family correspondence, which brought renewed admiration for Abigail Adams as a writer, and an edition of John Adams’s legal papers.

These publications separated Adams’s two identities by focusing on differing bodies of his writings. One identity – Adams as character and literary figure, drawn from his diary, autobiography, and letters – captured the public’s attention. The other identity – Adams as political and constitutional thinker, drawing on his more formal political and constitutional writings – remained the province of scholars. Thus, monographs published in the 1960s by

Edward Handler and John R. Howe, Jr., illuminated Adams anew as a political thinker, though neither book made an impression beyond academic circles. This evolving split has dominated the history of Adams's reputation ever since, as evidenced, for example, by David McCullough's *John Adams*. McCullough's approach to Adams, emphasizing character and personality and downplaying ideas, has overshadowed work by such biographers as John Ferling and James Grant, and monographic examinations of his thought by such scholars as C. Bradley Thompson, Luke Mayville, and Richard Alan Ryerson.

Nonetheless, Adams's overarching perspective as a thinking politician is an essential component of his intellectual legacy. Adams offered a realistic understanding of American politics; he focused on the American constitutional experiment's interactions with such social forces as aristocratic power and ambition, and the need for vigilance against abuses of power from any source. He imagined himself hectoring posterity about the Revolution's nature and American constitutionalism's future. The new scholarship would have captivated him.

Resigned to having no intellectual legacy at all, to his books and other writing being ignored by posterity, Adams chose instead to hope that he would be remembered for his part in the Revolution. Perhaps, however, there is a way to salvage John Adams's thought – reviewing how it worked might help us ponder how it might be of use again today.

Adams was skeptical of the idea of popular sovereignty that came to be central to American political thought. Those advocating popular sovereignty argue that, if the people are the governors, then we can set aside the old idea of government as hostile to the people. Adams rejected that belief, insisting that the people had violated their own liberties often and that a government based on popular sovereignty could easily do the same thing. If we remain willing to reconsider skeptically the claims of popular sovereignty in general, or those of a government

grounded on popular sovereignty in particular, then we can heed the potential threats to liberty and democracy masked by a government endangering those great goods under the mask of popular sovereignty.

At the same time, we should reconsider the idea that the theory about factionalism, constitutionalism, and the extended republic devised by James Madison is a stark alternative to Adams's arguments about aristocracy, like matter and antimatter – or that Madison's work rendered Adams's ideas and conceptions of government and politics obsolete. Maybe the two bodies of thought are not antithetical, nor one obsolete and the other dominant. Maybe they are complementary.

Imagine Adams's analysis grounded in classical political thought – in the theory of the one, the few, and the many – as hierarchical or vertical, and then imagine Madison's political thought as emphasizing the horizontal – a politics of relative equality among political actors in an extended geographical realm. If we intersect those two bodies of thought, as if they were the x and y axes of analytical geometry, that synthesis produces a more complex and nuanced vision of American politics and of American constitutionalism; it enables us to draw on the wisdom of both models without sacrificing either. Such an approach to American political thought might well establish that Adams's political thought has renewed relevance for our time.

In that light, the story of Adams's legacies has one final, ironic twist. In 1809, he mocked the idea that anyone would erect monuments to him, mixing self-conscious wistfulness, self-denying nobility, and self-satirizing humor. In our time, contradicting his expectations, there is a campaign to create such a monument in the nation's capital.²⁵ And yet the premise of that campaign – that Adams deserves a national monument because he has none – is erroneous. The capital does have a monument to John Adams – one peculiarly suited to him.

In 1800, President John Adams signed into law the bill creating the Library of Congress. In 1871, Congress launched a plan to build a separate home for the Library, which until then had been housed in the U.S. Capitol. Congress had many reasons to move the Library to a separate location. For one thing, in 1851 a fire had nearly consumed the collection and endangered the Capitol; for another thing, the spectacular growth of the Library's holdings required the institution to grow.²⁶ More than a generation in the making, the Library's magnificent building, opened in 1897.

In 1928, more than thirty years later, Librarian of Congress Herbert Putnam argued that the Library needed an annex to accommodate its collection's continued growth. Creation of that building took another decade. The large, boxy structure, known as the Annex, opened at the end of 1938.

On 13 April 1976, the Library of Congress renamed the Annex the Thomas Jefferson Building, marking Jefferson's birthday in the bicentennial year of the Declaration of Independence. A little more than four years later, on 13 June 1980, the Library renamed its original building the Thomas Jefferson Building and opened the James Madison Memorial Building. At that time, the Library again renamed the building first known as the Annex (and then as the Thomas Jefferson Building) as the John Adams Building, honoring its namesake for his role in creating the Library of Congress.²⁷

Thus, John Adams has his monument – a building lacking architectural distinction or grace, but stuffed with books. It is an appropriate monument for a man who cared little about architecture but who expressed his revolutionary zeal and wrought his greatest intellectual and political achievements by daring to read, think, speak, and write.

NOTES

¹ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, March 23, 1809, in *Old Family Letters: Copied from the Originals for Alexander Biddle, Series A* (Philadelphia, PA: Press of J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1892), 224-228 (quotation at 226).

² "John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 1 May 1812," *FO/NA*.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_memorials_to_John_Adams

⁴ See Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, "The Adamases on Screen," in David Waldstreicher, ed., *A Companion to John Adams and John Quincy Adams* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 487-509.

⁵ See R. B. Bernstein, "John Adams: The Life and the Biographers," in David Waldstreicher, ed., *A Companion to John Adams and John Quincy Adams* (Malden, MA, and Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 5-35 (esp. 24-34); Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, "The Adamases on Screen," in *id.*, 487-509.

⁶ For an example following 11 September 2001, see Jeffrey L. Pasley, "Publick Occurrences: Federalist Chic," *Common-Place*, vol. 2, no. 2, January 2002: <http://www.common-place.org/publick/200202.shtml> (visited 16 February 2008). For the leading critique that appeared before 11 September 2001, see Sean Wilentz, "Review: America Made Easy: John Adams is Not the Hero We Need and David McCullough Is Not the Historian We Need," *The New Republic* (July 2, 2001), at 40ff. A book-length example is Richard Rosenfeld, *American Aurora: The Suppressed History of Our Nation's Beginnings and the Heroic Newspaper That Tried to Report It* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996). See the review by Joanne B. Freeman for H-LAW: Joanne B. Freeman. "Recapturing the Sense of Crisis": Review of Rosenfeld, Richard N., *American Aurora: A Democratic-Republican Returns. The Suppressed History of Our Nation's Beginnings and the Heroic Newspaper that Tried to Report It*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. August, 1998. URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2252>

⁷ "Rebecca West once said that to understand is not to forgive. It is only to understand. It is not an end but a beginning. Knowledge is power." Victoria Glendinning quoting Rebecca West, quoted in R. B. Bernstein, *Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xviii

⁸ On this concept, see R. B. Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. 3-11.

⁹ On this concept, see Henry Steele Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past: And Other Essays in Historiography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966).

¹⁰ See Parker's wonderful essay on John Adams in Theodore Parker, *Historic Americans* (1870; reprinted, Boston: American Universalist Association, 1908), 97-157 (quotation at 142).

¹¹ The most splenetic example of this view is Rosenfeld, *American Aurora*.

¹² Even now, nearly a century after its appearance, the best study of the subject of monarchism in this period remains Louise B. Dunbar, *A Study of "Monarchical" Tendencies in the United States from 1776 to 1801*, in *University of Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences* 10:1 (March 1922), reprinted with new preface (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970), esp. 129-134 (on John Adams). Eric Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), came to hand too late for use in this book, but should be viewed with skepticism. On aristocracy, see William Doyle, *Aristocracy and Its Enemies in the Age of Revolution* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009); William Doyle, *Aristocracy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Jonathan Powys, *Aristocracy* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1984). See also the discussion in R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800: The Challenge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), 27-82 and *passim*.

¹³ Arthur Scherr, *John Adams, Slavery, and Race: Ideas, Politics, and Diplomacy in an Age of Crisis* (Santa Barbara, CA/Denver, CO: Praeger, 2018), bashes Adams but takes even more pleasure in bashing scholars whom the author regards as unduly kind to Adams on this subject. On the doughfaces, I am grateful to Prof. Joanne B. Freeman for many discussions of the subject.

¹⁴ Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Jared Ross Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (New York: New York University Press, 2017). One possibility is the influence of the Broadway musical (later a film) *1776*, which portrays John Adams as a near-abolitionist. Sherman Edwards and Peter Stone, *1776* (New York: Viking, 1970).

¹⁵ See Robert N. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967); Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896* (New York:

Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁶ On this aspect of Jefferson's thought, see Hannah Spahn, *Thomas Jefferson, Time and History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012). On Adams's immersion in history but his inability or disinclination to consider evolution of political and constitutional ideas over time, see John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), esp. 209-210, and H. Trevor Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1965; rept. ed., Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund,), 83-106 in original ed., and 100-128 in reprint edition. On this idea of change, see also Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001).

¹⁷ Arnold Rampersad, in interview, quoted in Gail Porter Mandell, *Life into Art: Conversations with Seven Contemporary Biographers* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991), 45. See also Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976; pbk, New York: Schocken Books, 1990).

¹⁸ Lester J. Cappon, "American Historical Editors before Jared Sparks: 'they will plant a forest...'", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, 30:3 (July 1973): 375-400. On Charles Francis Adams as historical editor, see Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*, 9, 10, 12, 13, and 46-47.

¹⁹ Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*, 13.

²⁰ See Correa M. Walsh, *The Political Science of John Adams: A Study in the Theory of Mixed Government and Bicameralism* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915).

²¹ See, for example, Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, 3d ed. (Chicago: Regnery Publishing, 2001), 71-74. See also Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion*, second revised ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962 [orig. ed., 1955]). For a scholarly treatment that occasionally parallels conservative arguments, see Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*. John E. Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (Knoxville: University Press of Tennessee, 1992), 3, identifies Page Smith as an Adams biographer responding to Cold War concerns.

²² Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1965; orig. ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1938); Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963; revised paperback edition, New York: Viking Press, 1965; reprint with new introduction by Jonathan Schell, Penguin Classics, 2006). Arendt devotes extensive, favorable attention to Adams, as part of her general preference for the gradualist, incremental nature of the American Revolution.

²³ Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*. For a fascinating essay that digs further into Adams's marginalia, see H. J. Jackson, "John Adams's Marginalia, Then and Now," in Baron and Wright, eds., *The Libraries, Leadership, and Legacy of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson*, 59-79 & 264.

²⁴ On the "documentary-editing revolution," see William W. Freehling, *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), chapter 1. This chapter originally appeared as William W. Freehling, "The Editorial Revolution, Virginia, and the Coming of the Civil War: A Review Essay," *Civil War History* 16:1 (March 1970): 64-72. On the influence of the 1954 Internal Revenue Code, I am indebted to Professor Daniel J. Hulsebosch of New York University School of Law for pointing out this possible causal factor

²⁵ United States. Cong., House Committee on Resources, Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands. Legislative Hearing, H.R. 271, H.R. 980, and H.R. 1668. 107th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2001): 41-43 (testimony of David McCullough, 12 June 2001); H.R. 1668, 107th Cong., 1st Sess. "To authorize the Adams Memorial Foundation to establish a commemorative work on Federal land in the District of Columbia and its environs to honor former President John Adams and his legacy," introduced on 1 May 2001, adopted in House 25 June 2001, adopted in Senate 17 October 2001, signed into law 5 November 2001 as Public Law 107-62. See also Senate Report 107-77, 107th Cong., 1st Sess., 1 October 2001. Trevor Parry-Giles, "Fame, Celebrity, and the Legacy of John Adams," *Western Journal of Communication*, 72:1 (January-March 2008): 83-101.

²⁶ William Dawson Johnston, *History of the Library of Congress, Volume I, 1800-1864* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), 275-287.

²⁷ John Y. Cole, "On These Walls: Inscriptions and Quotations in the Buildings of the Library of Congress," <http://www.loc.gov/loc/walls/> (visited 16 February 2008). This is the online version of John Y. Cole, *On These Walls: Inscriptions and Quotations in the Buildings of the Library of Congress* (Washington, D. C.: Printed for the

Library of Congress by the U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995; reprint, New York: SCALO, 2008). Senate Report 107-77 wrongly claims that the building in question is named for John Quincy Adams. Statement of John G. Parsons, Associate Regional Director for Lands, Resources, and Planning, National Capital Region, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, in Senate Report 107-77 at 4-5 [esp. 5].

Further Reading

To understand the Adamases, begin with their writings. The Note on Sources lists the best ~~electronic/online~~ [online](#) and print editions. The Adamases were extraordinary writers, especially in their letters; reading their own words is still the best way to get to know them.

The best modern biographies are John E. Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (Knoxville: University Press of Tennessee, 1993; paperback edition by Oxford University Press, ~~2010~~[DATE?](#)) and James Grant, *John Adams, Party of One* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005). The best older biography is Gilbert Chinard, *Honest John Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1935). Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1975; Norton [paperback](#), ~~1977~~[DATE?](#)~~bk~~) is an insightful character study. Page Smith, *John Adams* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday ~~& Co., Inc.~~, 1962), is badly organized and badly documented; the book lacks a table of contents and a reliable index. The highly uncritical David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), elevates John Adams's character over his mind. Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), is a well-written examination of Adams's later years.

The best studies of Abigail Adams are: Woody Holton, *Abigail Adams: A Life* (New York: Free Press, 2009); Edith B. Gelles, *Portia: The World of Abigail Adams* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); and Edith B. Gelles, *Abigail Adams: A Writing Life* (~~London~~ [and](#) New York: Routledge, 2002; originally *First Thoughts: Life & Letters of Abigail Adams* [New York: Twayne ~~Publishers~~, 1998]). Edith B. Gelles, *Abigail & John: Portrait of a Marriage* (New York: William Morrow, 2009) is the best study of its subject. Diane Jacobs, *Dear Abigail: The Intimate Lives and Revolutionary Ideas of Abigail Adams and Her Two Remarkable Sisters*

(New York: Ballantine Books, 2014), views Abigail within the context of her relationships with her sisters and her other relatives.

Three fine essay collections are David Waldstreicher, ed., *A Companion to John Adams and John Quincy Adams* (Oxford, UK, and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); Richard Alan Ryerson, ed., *John Adams and the Founding of the Republic* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society/Northeastern University Press, 2001), and Conrad Edick Wright and Robert X. Baron, eds., *The Libraries, Leadership, and Legacy of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (Golden, CO, and Boston, MA: Fulcrum Publishing/Massachusetts Historical Society, 2010).

For political history, see James H. Hutson, *John Adams and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980); Leonard D. White, *The Federalists: A Study in Administrative History* (New York: Macmillan, 1948); Linda Dudik Guerrero, *John Adams' Vice Presidency: The Neglected Man in the Forgotten Office* (New York: Arno Press, 1982); Manning J. Dauer, *The Adams Federalists* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953; second ed., 1968); Stephen G. Kurtz, *The Presidency of John Adams: The Collapse of Federalism, 1795-1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957); Ralph Adams Brown, *The Presidency of John Adams* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1975); Walt Brown, *John Adams and the American Press: Politics and Journalism at the Birth of the Republic* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, 1995); Jeffrey A. Pasley, *The First Presidential Contest: 1796 and the Founding of American Democracy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013); Merrill D. Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue* (Athens: University Press of Georgia, 1976); John P. Kaminski and Jonathan M. Reid, eds., *Adams and Jefferson: Contrasting Anxieties and Aspirations from the Founding* (Madison, WI: Published for the Center for the Study of the American Constitution by Parallel Press, 2013); and Gordon

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No – reprint of unpublished dissertation. Stet. RBB

S. Wood, *Friends Divided: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017).

For John Adams's intellectual life, a focus of this biography, [see](#) Luke Mayville, *John Adams and the Fear of American Oligarchy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), and Richard Alan Ryerson, *John Adams's Republic: The One, the Few, and the Many* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016). Also see C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998); John R. Howe, Jr., *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965); Edward Handler, *America and Europe in the Thought of John Adams* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), Zoltan Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), and Alfred Iacuzzi, *John Adams, Scholar* (New York: S. F. Vanni, 1952). [Correa M. Walsh, *The Political Science of John Adams: A Study in the Theory of Mixed Government and the Bicameral System* \(New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons/The Knickerbocker Press, 1911\), the first academic study of its subject, is an outdated critique of Adams's thought by a Progressive-era polemicist who disdained checks and balances.](#)

[Two](#) new studies deserve mention. Sara Georgini, *Household Gods: The Religious Lives of the Adams Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), is a beautifully-crafted, formidably-researched, and enlightening study of the evolving relationship of the Adamses with religion, by a senior editor of the *Adams Papers* project. Arthur Scherr, *John Adams, Race, and Slavery: Ideas, Politics, and Diplomacy in an Age of Crisis* (Santa Barbara, CA [and](#) Denver, CO: Praeger, 2018), is intemperate in denouncing John Adams's views of slavery and race, but Scherr has done a valuable job in presenting the evidence, with which all scholars should deal. Both books show the immense value of close, serious research in the papers left by John Adams

and his family. [Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, *The Problem of Democracy: The Presidents Adams Confront the Cult of Personality* \(New York: Viking, 2019\), appeared just as this book was being readied for publication.](#)

Consult this book's endnotes for specialized monographs of value.

A Note on Sources

This book uses various types of sources to cite and quote John Adams's writings. In choosing between print sources and online databases, I have preferred the databases, for they are accessible to all readers. I list reliable sources, both online and print, here.

For the *Diary* and *Autobiography* of John Adams and for the correspondence between John and Abigail Adams, I used *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, online at <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/>.

For sources from the Massachusetts Historical Society digital archive, I have given letter writers and recipients, dates, and the abbreviation *AFPEA/MHS*. (These documents are also available online at the Founders Online website, <http://founders.archives.gov> -- with annotation from the published volumes of the *Adams Papers*.)

The Massachusetts Historical Society website offers a profusion of other Adams papers. The MHS also has digital editions of published volumes of the Adams Papers, including *The Legal Papers of John Adams*, the first fifteen volumes of the *Adams Family Correspondence*, and the first seventeen volumes of *The Papers of John Adams*. Readers may browse these volumes or pursue specific documents at <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/browse>

I also used Founders Online (url given two paragraphs above), a comprehensive database and search engine allowing access to the published volumes of the Harvard University Press edition of the Adams Papers; this database also includes the scholarly editions of the papers of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton.

In citing Founders Online, I have used the abbreviated citations *FO/NA* and I have omitted the citation to the original print edition.

The only previous edition of Adams's papers, Charles Francis Adams, *The Life and Works of John Adams*, 10 vols. (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1850-1856), is accessible online through the Liberty Fund's Online Library of Liberty: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/people/john-adams> . It is also accessible online, though with occasional difficulties, through Google Books. It is available in print through various publishers' print-on-demand editions.

As to print editions, Gordon S. Wood's three-volume edition for the Library of America of selected papers of John Adams, *Revolutionary Writings 1755-1775*, *Revolutionary Writings 1775-1783*, and *Writings from the New Nation, 1784-1826* (New York: Library of America, 2011 and 2016), and Edith Gelles's selected edition, *Abigail Adams: Letters* (New York: Library of America, 2016), are indispensable guidebooks to the high points of these rich manuscript sources; they are based on the MHS Adams Papers project. For the correspondence between John and Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson, the classic edition is Lester J. Cappon, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1959; full paperback reprint, New York: Simon and Schuster/Clarion, 1971). See also Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor, eds., *My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), supplanting L. H. Butterfield, ed., *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adamns Family, 1762-1784* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975); Charles Warren, ed., *Correspondence Between John Adams and Mercy Otis Warren* (New York: Arno Press, 1972; reprinting material from *Collections of the*

Massachusetts Historical Society, Volume IV, 5th series, 1878); *Massachusetts Historical Society, The Warren-Adams Letters, Being chiefly a correspondence among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren*, 2 vols. (New York: AMS Press, 1972, reprinting *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, vols. 72-73 [Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1917-1925]); Worthington Chauncey Ford, *Statesman and Friend: The Correspondence of John Adams with Benjamin Waterhouse, 1784-1822* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1927), and John A. Schutz and Douglass G. Adair, *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1966; reprint with different pagination, Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2001), based on *Old Family Letters, Copied from the Originals for Alexander Biddle, Series A* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1892).

I preserve original spelling and punctuation. For letters, I give the writer and the recipient and the date. For other primary sources, I give the writer, the title, and the date.

I use the following abbreviations:

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| Cappon | Lester J. Cappon, ed., <i>The Adams-Jefferson Letters</i> . |
| Howe | John R. Howe, Jr., <i>The Changing Political Thought of John Adams</i> (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966). |
| Ryerson, <i>Republic</i> | Richard Alan Ryerson: <i>John Adams's Republic: The One, the Few, and the Many</i> (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016). |
| WJA | Charles Francis Adams, ed., <i>The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States</i> , 10 vols. (Boston Little & Brown, 1850-1856). |
| Wood JA 1755-1775 | Gordon S. Wood, <i>John Adams: Revolutionary Writings, 1755-1775</i> . |
| Wood JA 1775-1783 | Gordon S. Wood, <i>John Adams: Revolutionary Writings, 1775-1783</i> . |
| Wood JA 1784-1826 | Gordon S. Wood, <i>John Adams: Writings from the New Nation 1784-1826</i> . |