



JOHN ADAMS

1735 - 1826

“The man to whom the country is most indebted for the great measure of independence is Mr. John Adams ... I call him the Atlas of American independence. He it was who sustained the debate, and by force of his reasoning demonstrated not only the justice, but the expediency of the measure.”

Richard Stockton (attributed), New Jersey delegate
to the Second Continental Congress

circa 1776

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Born

October 19, 1735, Braintree (now Quincy), Massachusetts, son of John Adams and Susanna Boylston [Adams].

Education

Attended Dame and Latin School, graduated from Harvard College (1755); studied law and was admitted to the Massachusetts bar (1758).

Religion

Unitarian

Family

At the age of 28 married Abigail Smith on October 25, 1764; they had five children: Abigail Amelia Adams (1765), John Quincy Adams (1767), Susanna Adams (1768), Charles Adams (1770), and Thomas Adams (1772).

Accomplishments

School Master (1755-58)
Law practice (1758-1771)
General Court [Massachusetts House of Representatives] (1770-71)
Continental Congress (1774-1777)
Chairman of the Board of War and Ordnance (1775-1777)
Commissioner to France (1778-1779)
Minister to the Netherlands (1780-1783)
Minister to Great Britain (1785-88)
Vice President of the United States (1789-97)
President of the United States (1797-1801)

Died

July 4, 1826, Quincy, Massachusetts, where he is buried.

Last Words

"Thomas Jefferson still lives."

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ATLAS OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE

John Adams is often overlooked as one of America's greatest statesmen. Yet he was widely regarded as the most learned and penetrating thinker of his generation and played a central role in the American Founding. "The man to whom the country is most indebted for the great measure of independence is Mr. John Adams," one delegate to the Second Continental Congress wrote. "I call him the Atlas of American independence."

Adams witnessed the American Revolution from beginning to end: In 1761 he assisted James Otis in defending Boston merchants against enforcement of Britain's Sugar Act, and he participated in negotiating the peace treaty with Britain in 1783. He was a key leader of the radical political movement in Boston and one of the earliest and most principled voices for independence at the Continental Congress. Likewise, as a public intellectual, he wrote some of the most important and influential essays, constitutions, and treatises of the Revolutionary period. If Revolutionary leaders like Samuel Adams and Patrick Henry represent the *spirit* of the independence movement, John Adams exemplifies the *mind* of the American Revolution.

Of his many significant contributions to the American Founding, three are most important — concerning his own character, constitutional development, and the principles of political architecture.

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The Life of Adams

JOHN ADAMS WAS BORN ON OCTOBER 19, 1735, in Braintree, Massachusetts. His life and moral virtues were shaped early by the manners and mores of a New England culture that honored sobriety, industry, thrift, simplicity, and diligence.

After graduating from Harvard College, Adams taught school for three years and began reading for a career in the law. He was admitted to the Boston bar in 1758 and soon settled into a flourishing law practice. In 1764, he married Abigail Smith, to whom he was devoted for 54 years. Together they had five children, including John Quincy Adams, who became the sixth president of the United States.

The passage of the Stamp Act in 1765 thrust Adams into the public affairs of colony and empire. In that year, he published his first major political essay, *A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law*, attacking the Stamp Act for depriving the American colonists of two basic rights guaranteed to all Englishmen by Magna Carta: the right to be taxed only by consent and to be tried only by a jury of one's peers.

Between 1765 and 1776, Adams's involvement in radical politics ran apace with the escalation of events. He was a leader of the radical political movement in Boston, and his Novanglus letters are generally regarded as the best expression of the American case against parliamentary sovereignty. By the mid-1770s, Adams had distinguished himself as one of America's foremost constitutional scholars.

The year 1774 was critical in British–American relations, and it proved to be a momentous one for John Adams. With Parliament's passage of the Coercive Acts, Adams realized that the time had now come for the Americans to invoke what he called “revolution-principles.” Later that year, he was elected to the First Continental Congress. Over the course of the next two years, no man worked as hard or played as important a role in the movement for independence. His first great contribution to the American cause was to draft in October 1774 the principal clause of the

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Declaration of Rights and Grievances. He also chaired the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence, he drafted America's first Model Treaty, and, working eighteen-hour days, he served as a one-man department of War and Ordnance. In the end, he tirelessly worked on some thirty committees.

Shortly after the battles at Lexington and Concord, Adams began to argue that the time had come for the colonies to declare independence and to constitutionalize the powers, rights, and responsibilities of self-government. In May 1776, in large measure due to Adams's labors, Congress passed a resolution recommending that the various colonial assemblies draft constitutions and construct new governments. At the request of several colleagues, Adams wrote his own constitutional blueprint. Published as *Thoughts on Government*, the pamphlet circulated widely and constitution-makers in at least four states used its design as a working model for their state constitutions.

Adams's greatest moment in Congress came in the summer of 1776. On July 1, Congress considered final arguments on the question of independence, and John Dickinson, a delegate from Pennsylvania, argued forcefully against it. When no one responded to Dickinson, Adams rose and delivered a rhetorical tour-de-force that moved the assembly to vote in favor of independence. Years later, Thomas Jefferson recalled that so powerful in "thought & expression" was Adams's speech, that it "moved us from our seats." He was, Jefferson said, "our Colossus on the floor."

In the fall of 1779, Adams drafted the Massachusetts Constitution, which was the most systematic constitution produced during the Revolutionary era. It was copied by other states in later years, and it was an influential model for the framers of the Federal Constitution of 1787.

Adams spent much of the 1780s in Europe as a diplomat and propagandist for the American Revolution. He succeeded in convincing the Dutch Republic to recognize American independence and he negotiated critical loans with Amsterdam bankers. In 1783 he joined Benjamin Franklin and John Jay in Paris and played an important role in negotiat-

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ing a Treaty of Peace with England. Adams completed his European tour of duty as America's first minister to Great Britain.

It was during his time in London that Adams wrote his great treatise in political philosophy, the three-volume *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*. Written as a guidebook for American and European constitution-makers, the Defence was influential at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, and it was used by French constitution-makers in 1789 and again in 1795.

After his return to America in 1788, Adams was twice elected vice president of the United States. His election to the presidency in 1796 was the culmination of a long public career dedicated to the American cause. Unfortunately, the new President inherited two intractable problems from the Washington administration: an intense ideological party conflict between Federalists and Republicans, and hostile relations with an increasingly belligerent French Republic. This last, known as the Quasi-War, became the central focus of his administration. Consistent with his views on American foreign policy dating back to 1776, Adams's guiding principle was "that we should make no treaties of alliance with any European power; that we should consent to none but treaties of commerce; that we should separate ourselves as far as possible and as long as possible from all European politics and war." The crowning achievement of his presidency was the ensuing peace convention of 1800 that re-established American neutrality and commercial freedom. When Adams left office and returned to Quincy in 1801, he could proudly declare that America was stronger and freer than the day he took office.

The bitterness of his electoral loss to Thomas Jefferson in 1800 soon faded as Adams spent the next twenty-five years enjoying the scenes of domestic bliss and a newfound philosophic solitude. During his last quarter century he read widely in philosophy, history, and theology, and in 1812 he reconciled with Jefferson and resumed with his friend at Monticello a correspondence that is unquestionably the most impressive in the history of American letters.

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John Adams died on July 4, 1826, fifty years to the day after the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Character Matters

DESPITE HIS EXTRAORDINARY ACHIEVEMENTS, Adams has always posed a genuine problem for historians. From the moment he entered public life, he always seemed to travel the road not taken. Americans have rarely seen a political leader of such fierce independence and unyielding integrity. In debate he was intrepid to the verge of temerity, and his political writings reveal an utter contempt for the art of dissimulation. Unable to meet falsehoods halfway and unwilling to stop short of the truth, Adams was in constant battle with the accepted, the conventional, the fashionable, and the popular.

When Adams spoke of moral goodness and right conduct, he most often had in mind the ordinary virtues associated with self-rule. Mastery of oneself for Adams was the indispensable foundation of a worthy life and the end to which virtues like moderation, frugality, fortitude, and industry are directed.

As a young man, John Adams was always looking inward — surveying, evaluating, and judging the state of his soul. He imposed on himself a strict daily regimen of hard work and spartan austerity. He constantly cajoled and implored himself to rise early, to apply himself to a rigid system of work and study, to conquer his passions, and to ferret out any weaknesses in his character. A 21-year-old Adams resolved:

to rise with the Sun and to study the Scriptures, on Thursday, Fryday, Saturday, and Sunday mornings, and to study some Latin author the other 3 mornings. Noons and Nights I intend to read English Authors. This is my fixt Determination, and I will set down every neglect and every compliance with this Resolution. May I blush whenever I suffer one hour to pass unimproved.

But he did not always succeed. In order to bolster and inflame his

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flagging spirit after an extended period of lethargy and weakness, Adams sketched a fable of Hercules, adapting the story to his own situation. “Let Virtue Address me —,” Adams wrote.

Which, dear Youth, will you prefer? a Life of Effeminacy, Indolence and obscurity, or a Life of Industry, Temperance, and Honour? Take my Advice . . . Let no trifling Diversion or amuzement or Company decoy you from your Books, i.e., let no Girl, no Gun, no cards, no flutes, no Violins, no Dress, no Tobacco, no Laziness, decoy from your Books.

The goal of self-knowledge and self-rule for Adams was rational independence in the fullest sense. He was always demanding of himself that he return to his study to tackle the great treatises and casebooks of the law:

Labour to get Ideas of Law, Right, Wrong, Justice, Equity. Search for them in your own mind, in Roman, grecian, french, English Treatises of natural, civil, common, Statute Law. Aim at an exact Knowledge of the Nature, End, and Means of Government. Compare the different forms of it with each other and each of them with their Effects on Public and private Happiness. Study Seneca, Cicero, and all other good moral Writers. Study [Montesquieu], Bolingbroke [Vinnius?], &c. and all other good, civil Writers, &c.

Like many great-souled men, John Adams was ambitious and desiring of fame, but unlike most such men he spent a good deal of time thinking about his ambition and its relationship to his moral and political principles. The passion for fame was both an intellectual and a personal problem for Adams because it cut two ways. On the one hand, there is a kind of fame that is benevolent and noble in purpose — the kind associated with Pericles, Cato, and Washington. On the other hand, there was a passion for fame that could also serve malevolent and base ends — the kind associated with Alcibiades, Caesar, and Napoleon.

Adams understood benevolent fame to be motivated by a desire to promote the public good, and is achieved either by performing some great deed or through an act of unusual genius that benefits the common weal.

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But he did not take the well-being or the opinion of others as his Pole Star. Ultimately, benevolent fame is connected to higher principles that the honorable man seeks for selfish reasons. Such men act because they love that which is noble, good, and just for its own sake.

Never the hypocrite, Adams lived by his own words and avowed principles. He always chose to act in ways he thought right or just, regardless of reward or punishment. The linchpin that united theory and practice in Adams's moral universe was the virtue of integrity. Success, reputation, and fame were not ends in themselves for Adams; they had to be attached to a noble end and to some virtuous action. He would not violate his strict code of character to achieve the favorable opinion of posterity. Above all else, John Adams was a man of strict principle, a man of unyielding integrity, a man of firm justice.

The Principles of Liberty

DURING HIS RETIREMENT YEARS, John Adams was fond of saying that the War of Independence was only a consequence of the American Revolution. The real revolution, he declared, began, 15 years before any blood was shed at Lexington, as an intellectual and moral revolution in the minds and hearts of the American people. Adams played an important role in shaping this intellectual and moral revolution by articulating in his many writings a new theory of constitutional development.

In 1765 Adams responded to the Stamp Act with *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, which was primarily an essay in moral education. Its purpose was to rekindle the American "spirit of liberty." But what did Adams mean by a "spirit of liberty"? Spiritedness for Adams united in body and soul certain "sensations of freedom" and certain "ideas of right."

Adams meant to inspire the colonists' *sensations* of freedom, and thus guarantee present freedoms, by calling for a remembrance of things past: He implored all patriots to recall the hardships endured by the first settlers and to honor their heroic deeds. On a deeper level, however, the revolu-

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tion for Adams was about certain *ideas* of right, and so he appealed to the colonists' reason, imploring them to study the philosophical foundations of their rights and liberties. The Americans, he wrote, have a "habitual, radical Sense of Liberty, and the highest Reverence for Vertue" that can and must be appealed to in the face of British tyranny.

Liberty, for Adams, meant freedom from foreign domination, freedom from unjust government coercion, freedom from other individuals, and freedom from the tyranny of one's passions. A free people ought to be jealous of their rights and liberties, and they must always stand on guard to protect them. Adams knew that genuine freedom is fragile, fleeting, and rare; few people have it and those who do must fight to keep it. Ultimately, the spirit of liberty for Adams was a certain kind of virtue: it "is and ought to be a jealous, a watchful spirit." The maxim that he chose to define the spirit of liberty was "Obsta Principiis," meaning, to resist first beginnings. He implored his fellow citizens to resist the "first approaches of arbitrary power."

By 1774, when Parliament passed the Coercive Acts, Adams thought that tyranny no longer threatened America from a distance — it had arrived. But how should the Americans respond? During the 1760s Adams had attempted to foster an enlightened "*spirit* of liberty" as an antidote to the "*spirit* of subservience." By 1774, however, the time had come for the Americans to invoke what he called "revolution-principles." In that moment, Adams ceased to be a conservative defender of colonial rights and liberties and he became a revolutionary republican.

Adams's revolution-principles were guided by principles of justice and virtue that he learned from "Aristotle and Plato, ... Livy and Cicero, and Sydney and Harrington and Locke." They were, he said, "the principles of nature and eternal reason." But revolutions should not be undertaken for light and transient reasons; they must be pursued with caution, moderation, and prudence. There must be objectively definable principles and observable conditions that justify such a momentous step.

For Adams, the boundary line between resistance and revolution was

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John and Abigail: An Affair to Remember

One of the most well known courtships and marriages of the early American Republic was that of John and Abigail Adams. After a courtship of three years, John Adams married Abigail Smith in 1764. The marriage lasted 54 years, until Abigail's death in 1818. They had five children, one of whom, John Quincy Adams, became the sixth president of the United States.

Before they were married, and anytime they were apart thereafter, they wrote letters to each other. Between 1774 and 1784 the Adamsses saw very little of each other because John was continuously serving the young nation, first in the Continental Congress and later abroad. During that time alone, they exchanged some 300 letters. Their voluminous writings not only present a vivid picture of the day, but also — filled with affection and marital devotion — form one of the greatest correspondences of all time.

As was the common practice of the day, they took literary pennames: Abigail was *Diana*, the Roman goddess of purity and love, and John was *Lysander*, the great Spartan general. John wrote about the “noisy, dirty town of Boston” and the “soul-confounding wrangles of the law,” but also how his future wife had “always softened and warmed my heart [and] shall polish and refine my sentiments of life and manners.” Abigail's letters — remember she was the one who was in

America during the Revolutionary War — blend stories about the children and the difficulties of managing the family farm with descriptions of battles and the domestic production of saltpeter (potassium nitrate), used to make gunpowder. They also talked politics: she advocated independence early (“Shall we not be despised,” she wrote, “for hesitating so long at a word?”) and he wrote her about “the Toil and Blood and Treasure, that it will cost us to maintain this Declaration” but that “through all the Gloom I can see the Rays of ravishing Light and Glory.” Abigail told John that their hearts were “cast in the same mould.” John told Abigail that her letters make “my heart throb like a cannonade.”

In one famous exchange, Abigail playfully told John to “remember the ladies, and be more generous than your ancestors” when the new laws of the nation were written. John replied in kind that “in practice you know that *We* are the subjects” and that he did not want to “completely subject *Us* to the despotism of the petticoat.” But then Abigail revealed her true feelings: “all my desires and all my ambition is to be esteemed and loved by my partner, to join with him in the education and instruction of our little ones, [and] to sit under our own vines in peace, liberty and safety.”

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the constitution. He always sought constitutional solutions to constitutional problems, but when that was no longer possible, a “recourse to higher powers not written” was entirely justified. But he defended the resort to what he called “original power” only when fundamental constitutional principles were at stake. By 1776, the British constitution was broken, unable to accommodate the new demands of empire. Eventually Adams saw it as fundamentally flawed. In the end, the conflict between the center and the peripheries of the British empire could not be resolved precisely because there was no standard, no higher law, no written constitution by which to sort out the conflicting claims of Parliament and the colonies.

During the years of the imperial crisis, Adams developed a radically new theory that sought to identify, protect, and enshrine certain basic rights and liberties — revolution principles — from the intrusions of government through written constitutions. As early as 1775, notably in his *Thoughts on Government*, Adams was advocating that new constitutions be drafted and governments established on the basis of the consent of the governed. For Adams, a written constitution was the product not of history, custom, usage, or the “artificial reasoning” of common-law lawyers, as it was in England, but rather of philosophy and free will, reason and choice, deliberation and consent. What was radically new in all this — which today we take for granted — was that the people’s will was to be captured by special conventions to create and then ratify written constitutions. By lifting the Constitutional Convention above ordinary acts of legislation, Adams and his fellow Revolutionaries created a process by which written constitutions could be sanctified, and come to be respected and defended, as fundamental law. Elaborating the stages of constitutional development — from the spirit of liberty to the principles of the revolution to a supreme written constitution as fundamental law — may very well be Adams’s greatest contribution to America.

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The Principles of Political Architecture

AT THE CORE OF ADAMS'S POLITICAL THEORY, elaborated in his great treatise, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, were three basic but essential principles of political architecture: first, representation instead of direct democracy; second, a separation of the legislative, executive, and judicial powers; and third, a mixture and balance in the legislature between the one, the few, and the many — that is, a mixing of the monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic passions that Adams thought natural to all societies. The combination of these three elements was a true innovation in the history and practice of western constitutionalism.

Adams's three principles of political architecture were the foundation and framework on which he thought all constitutions must be constructed. The first two, representation and separation of powers, were distinctly new: both were logically derived from Lockean natural-rights theory and its corollary theory of consent. Legitimate political power for Adams rested on the principle of representation which in turn rested on the more fundamental principles of consent, equality, and self-government. The purpose of political representation is to serve as a guardian of the people's rights and liberties without being subject to their immediate passions. Separation of powers for Adams is the architectonic principle that defined, shaped, and constitutionalized the republican form of government. The purpose of the separation of powers is to dilute the inherent tendency of all governments — including republics — to centralize political power in the hands of one man or a group of men.

The last principle, however, was hardly a new idea. With its roots in the theory and practice of classical antiquity, the so-called mixed regime rested on an entirely different theoretical foundation. The theory of mixed government was a peculiarly classical notion necessarily related to the question of who should rule, while the separation of powers was a uniquely modern idea connected to the question of the *limits* or *extent* of rule.

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From Adams's perspective there were two critical problems that must be addressed by all republican constitution-makers. The first was the tendency of democracies to democratize. The great danger associated with the doctrine of equality is that it can generate a downward psychological and moral momentum that is hard to resist or control, destroying old manners and mores and transforming the soul in profound ways. Adams feared that unchecked democratization would eventually liberate passions dangerous to democratic government.

The second problem is the ambition of the exceptional few. Adams was particularly fearful of those men whom Abraham Lincoln later referred to as the "tribe of the eagle and the family of the lion" — that is, those talented men consumed with political ambition. But he also understood that a healthy democratic regime must be able to recognize and appreciate the truly great individuals who elevate and ennoble self-government by reminding us of democratic greatness.

Adams's solution was to constitutionalize the naturally occurring conflict between the exceptional few and the many of any given society by incorporating what he called the "triple equipoise" — a mixing and balancing of the one (a president with a legislative veto), the few (a senate) and the many (a house of representatives) — into the legislative branch. His mixed government theory would harness, channel and balance the naturally occurring conflict between the few and the many in politically useful ways, forcing the competing social orders to moderate their passions, to look beyond their immediate self-interest, and to compromise with competing interests.

The mixed regime attempted to harmonize the competing and ineradicable notions of justice held by different social orders (i.e., the few and the many), while the separation of powers was about preventing the centralization of government's coercive power. Adams thought that mixed government and separation of powers could be employed together as overlapping and mutually reinforcing principles. Each order, with its incomplete view of justice, and each branch, with its separate powers, would be

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forced to moderate and elevate its partial claims, thereby producing and necessitating laws that were just, equitable, and, ultimately, for the common benefit.

Independence Forever

JOHN ADAMS HAD AN ENORMOUS INFLUENCE on the outcome of the American Revolution. He dedicated his life, his property, and his sacred honor to the cause of liberty and to the construction of republican government in America. The force of his reasoning, the depth of his political vision, and the integrity of his moral character are undeniable. From the beginning of his public career until the very end, he always acted on principle and from a profound love of country.

We may take the following words that he wrote to a friend during some of the darkest days of the Revolution as a kind of motto to describe who he was as a man and as a patriot: “Fiat Justitia ruat Coelum” — let justice be done though the heavens should fall. To live by such words, though, requires a kind of moral independence that honors doing only what is right and just at all times. “I must think myself independent, as long as I live,” he wrote to his son John Quincy in 1815. “The feeling,” he said, “is essential to my existence.”

As the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence approached, a 91-year-old Adams was asked to provide a toast for the upcoming celebration in Quincy, Massachusetts. He offered as his final public utterance this solemn toast: “INDEPENDENCE FOREVER.” These last words stand as a signature for his life and principles. At a time in our nation’s history when most Americans cynically assume that their political leaders are dishonest, corrupt, and self-serving, we might do well to recall the example of John Adams and restore to posterity the respect and admiration that he so richly deserves.

—C. BRADLEY THOMPSON