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John Adams: Realist of the Revolution

It is now two centuries since John Adams lost the presidency to his longtime friend and political foe Thomas Jefferson and retired from public life. He had been one of the most brilliant and energetic of the Founding Fathers, the first great nationalist, possibly the most influential architect of the new nation's government and identity. He also possessed an extraordinary level of personal probity that few, if any, American public figures have equaled. In 1801 he left the presidency, he said, with a conscience "clear as a crystal glass," and an examination of his record in office shows him, astoundingly, to be nearly justified in making this claim. As Joseph Ellis, so far his canniest and most insightful biographer, put it, "Adams stands out as a statesman of unquestioned character who truly did prefer being right to being president."

Yet so far Adams has never achieved the mythical status of his great contemporaries, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Jefferson. Even during his lifetime it was becoming evident that he would never share in the adulation accorded these chosen few. This was partly, he believed, because he had not courted the public or succeeded in fashioning a charismatic image. "Popularity was never my mistress, nor was I ever, or shall I ever be a popular man. But one thing I know, a man must be sensible of the errors of the people, and on his guard against them, and must run the risk of their displeasure sometimes, or he will never do them any good in the long run." True enough, but the statement would seem wildly idealistic to most of today's politicians, with their reckless addiction to opinion polls.

Another factor in Adams' image problem might lie, simply and unfairly, with his physical stature and his demeanor. Of medium height and distinctly portly, Adams presented a faintly comic

appearance that his unbridled tongue and temper did nothing to improve. He did not have Washington's fine Roman mien, or Jefferson's devastatingly attractive fatal flaws; his virtues were of the bourgeois variety, not very sexy. Nor did he, like Franklin, turn his unprepossessing physique to his own advantage, creating a homespun, backwoods, authentically "American" persona. He was constitutionally averse to posing and posturing. He could be brilliantly eloquent—in his two-hour speech urging the ratification of the Declaration of Independence, he spoke "with a power of thought and expression that moved us from our seats," according to Jefferson—but he was fatally deficient in the all-important quality of politic reticence, of which both Washington and Jefferson were past masters. Adams understood this, but what he called "the gift of silence" seemed beyond him. "Eloquence in public Assemblies is not the surest road to Fame and Preferment," he admitted, "at least unless it be used with great caution, very rarely, and with great Reserve."

There were other, more substantial reasons why it was Jefferson and not Adams who emerged as the new Republic's poster boy. Jefferson was a dreamer and a visionary with a uniquely felicitous gift for giving verbal expression to everything America wanted to believe about itself, while Adams was a realist—not a cynic, but a simple realist—who recognized the fatal limitations that human nature must necessarily place on human potential. Adams looked to the bad old world, Jefferson to the glorious future, and it goes without saying that the Jeffersonian message was vastly more attractive.

Their attitudes to the French Revolution were a case in point. Adams, like his contemporary Edmund Burke, correctly predicted bloodshed and eventual tyranny even in the Revolution's early days. "Everything will be pulled down. So much seems certain. But what will be built up? Are there any principles of political architecture?" He was deeply skeptical, too, about the ideology (a neologism he approved, amused by its likeness to "idiocy") in which it was fomented: he was scornful of the French *philosophes* with their naïve faith in Reason, remarking that "it would seem that human Reason and human Conscience, though I believe there are such things, are not a Match, for human Passions, human Imagination, and human Enthusiasm." In old age he commented on the Revolution with a brutal realism guaranteed to distress political radicals from that day to this:

I acknowledge that the most unaccountable phenomenon I ever beheld, in the seventy-seven, almost, years that I lived, was to see men of the most extensive knowledge and deepest reflection entertain for a moment an opinion that a democratic republic could be erected in a nation of five-and-twenty millions people, four-and-twenty millions and five hundred thousand of whom could neither read nor write.

Jefferson, on the other hand, took a stubbornly optimistic view of the Revolution's eventual outcome, serene in the belief that violence acted as a necessary and even desirable cleansing agent. "My own affections," he wrote, "have been deeply wounded by some of the martyrs to this cause, but rather than it should have failed I would have seen half the earth desolated. Were there but an Adam and an Eve left in every country, and left free, it would be better than it is now." This strikes a chilling note, and reminds us that Jefferson was the progenitor of a strain of doctrinaire American radicalism that would one day tolerate and even condone the genocidal purges of Mao and Stalin.

It seems clear though that each time and place chooses the heroes it needs, and for the new American republic at the beginning of the nineteenth century, poised to conquer a continent, full of confidence and vigor, it was Jefferson's vision of American virtue and limitless potential that appealed. Jefferson had always stood for personal liberation, Adams for setting limits. And for many years—until, it might be hoped, the present moment—America has not had the slightest interest in considering limits.

There have been a number of Adams biographies in the last century. Gilbert Chinard's major work was published soon after World War I. Page Smith's comprehensive two-volume work, an act of *pietas* corresponding to Dumas Malone's six-volume study of Jefferson, appeared in 1962. In 1977 Peter Shaw put a less devout spin on Adams studies with his challenging psychological study, *The Character of John Adams*, and in 1992 John Ferling produced a balanced, thorough, full-scale biography which, though awkwardly written, moved far beyond the hagiography of Smith's work, encompassing Adams' negative traits with honesty and sympathy. A year later Joseph Ellis' *Passionate Sage* synthesized Adams studies in an elegant, highly intelligent portrait of the elder statesman. At this point Adams was finally recognized, at least within the academy, as the great man he undoubtedly was. A

canvas of professional historians, the so-called “Schlesinger Polls,” had ranked Adams as a “near great” chief executive, and as a uniquely eloquent advocate and tireless laborer in the cause of American independence he was widely judged to belong at the very top.

The historians knew that Adams was a star, but the average American didn't; what was obviously needed was a blockbuster biography, and David McCullough, biographer of another outspoken, unpretentious, peppery American president, Harry Truman, stepped into the breach.¹ He was eminently suited to write the sort of accessible, popular work that was called for, and his sense that Adams was the sort of subject that would be widely appealing to our own time turned out to be a sure one.

As Peter Shaw noted nearly a quarter of a century ago, the publication of the Adams papers, which did not begin until 1961, opened to view the colorful side of Adams with such impact that he was in danger “of going from a nonentity to a character: explosive of temper, all too quotably biting in his criticism of others, consumedly envious, brutally awkward in company.” Brilliantly erudite—Adams was, by general consensus, the best-read of the famously well-read Revolutionary leaders—he also possessed a sharp, idiomatic gift for skewering everything and everyone, himself included. He was utterly honest and self-revealing, and unlike his great contemporaries he left behind a rich, unedited, and intimate record of his thoughts and feelings in many thousands of letters. His correspondence with his wife Abigail, mostly carried out between 1775 and 1785 when the two spent most of their time apart, is full of dazzlingly rich material; the 109 letters he wrote to Thomas Jefferson during the last fourteen years of their lives, and the 49 he received in return, make up what is certainly the greatest correspondence in American letters, probably one of the greatest of all time.

In at least one respect, McCullough's *John Adams* is a resounding success: it brings out everything that is colorful and appealing in its subject's character, and it does this largely by letting Adams himself do the talking. Adams' always candid commentary gives the events in which he participated a vivid glow. Observing his fellow-delegates to the Second Continental Congress, for instance, he finds Edward Rutledge “jejune, inane,

¹ JOHN ADAMS, by *David McCullough*. Simon & Schuster. \$35.00.

and puerile,” John Dickinson a “piddling genius” who lent a “silly cast” to the deliberations. The military officers of the American Revolution “worry one another like mastiffs, scrambling for rank and pay like apes for nuts.” The Comte de Vergennes, the French Foreign Minister with whom Adams attempted to negotiate a treaty for the struggling Revolutionaries, “means . . . to keep his hand under our chin to prevent us from drowning, but not to lift our heads out of water.” As for the calculating, worldly Benjamin Franklin, his fellow legate to the French court, “Although he has as determined a soul as any man, yet it is his constant policy never to say yes or no decidedly but when he cannot avoid it.”

Although McCullough has made Adams more accessible and vastly more popular, his book constitutes, in many respects, a step backward. In setting up Adams as a stainless hero, he has ignored or denied his negative qualities, which were mostly self-destructive ones, and in the process made him less credible and, when all is said and done, less interesting. McCullough is an admirer of the Massachusetts Puritan ethos, and he simplifies his subject’s motivations and the traditions from which he grew until he becomes little more than the exemplar of an all-too-familiar type, the homespun, folksy New Englander. The biographer’s fawning first chapter sets the tone. Adams, McCullough writes, was “a plain dressing man. His oft-stated pleasures were his family, his farm, his books and writing table, a convivial pipe. . . .”

Oft-stated, perhaps, but not oft-acted upon. As other biographers have noted, Adams had, at least until late middle age, a distinctly ambivalent attitude toward domestic life. While he clearly loved Abigail and there is no evidence for his ever having been unfaithful, he strongly discouraged her presence at his side throughout his years at the Continental Congresses in Philadelphia, his first embassy to France, and his embassy to Great Britain; therefore, the couple was only seldom together between 1775 and 1785. For years Abigail ran the farm and the family on her own, complaining frequently and bitterly about her lonely lot. As the years wore on, though, she became accustomed to doing things her way, and eventually developed as independent a character as her husband’s. And Adams’ sighs for the solitude of his native acres—oft-stated, it is true enough—should be recognized for what they were: a conventional, even formulaic Ciceronian pose generally affected by statesmen of the time, most

notably by Thomas Jefferson, whose true attitudes to rural pursuits were as ambivalent as Adams'.

Adams' long absences caused his sons Thomas and Charles to grow up nearly fatherless. Both became alcoholics in later life: Thomas functioned, though not very well, but Charles killed himself with drink. Charles was also, possibly, a homosexual—he lived for some time with the notoriously gay General Steuben—but this is a possibility McCullough chooses to ignore. As for John Quincy, the Adams golden boy, McCullough depicts his life as the unqualified success his fond parents would have liked it to be, but other historians have recognized that he paid a high price for his sterling record. Ferling, for example, described John Adams in his dealings with his eldest son as “intrusive, demanding, and anxious for his son to succeed,” John Quincy as having to struggle incessantly “with the terrifying burden of complying with the family’s precepts of achievement, ascendancy, and preeminence.” (While some have recently compared John Quincy and his political destiny with George W. Bush, in actuality he resembled no one so much as Al Gore, the son of another would-be dynast: dutiful, hard-working, primed for distinction and public service from early childhood, but finally deficient in the one thing no amount of education and preparation can procure: political stardust.)

Adams, McCullough preposterously continues, “recognized at an early stage that happiness came not from fame and fortune, ‘and all such things,’ but from ‘an habitual contempt of them.’” Any of Adams' contemporaries would have hooted with laughter at this claim, and so would Adams himself: he had been tormented by ambition throughout his career, and had revealed that fact, helplessly and shamefully, on countless occasions. What McCullough might have pointed out is that it is inherently absurd to expect anyone to reach high office without ambition, and that no American president—no, not even Washington—has been free of it.

In his determination to present Adams as a lovable eccentric rather than the three-dimensional, flawed human being he really was, McCullough cheapens the entire enterprise, turning it into a bland, Disneyfied affair. The real Adams needs no apologies. Even his political enemies knew and respected his strengths. Franklin, with whom Adams was constitutionally incapable of

getting along, admired him—within reason: “He means well for his country, is always an honest man, often a wise one, but sometimes and in some things, absolutely out of his senses.” (McCullough is appalled by this, but in fact it was an honest and accurate appraisal.) Even Alexander Hamilton, a virulent enemy to Adams throughout his career, understood his strengths and vastly preferred him to the more radical Jefferson. And Jefferson himself never lost his respect for Adams, even when their personal relationship reached its absolute nadir and the breach between their political creeds was beginning to look unbridgeable. During their joint embassy to France he wrote to his lifelong confidant James Madison that Adams

hates Franklin, he hates Jay, he hates the French, he hates the English. To whom will he adhere? His vanity is a lineament in his character which had entirely escaped me. His want of taste I had observed. Notwithstanding all this he has a sound head on substantial points, and I think he has integrity. I am glad therefore that he is of the commission and expect he will be useful in it. His dislike of all parties, and all men, by balancing his prejudices, may give the same fair play to his reason as would a general benevolence of temper.

But not long later, after a pleasure-trip in the Adams’ company, Jefferson mellowed in his appraisal of Adams and defended him, with all his faults, as he would continue to do for the rest of their lives:

He is vain, irritable and a bad calculator of the force and probable effect of the motives which govern men. This is *all the ill* which can be *said of him*. He is as disinterested as the Being which made him: he is profound in his views, and accurate in his judgment *except where knowledge of the world* is necessary to form a judgment. He is so amiable that I pronounce you will love him if ever you become acquainted with him.

As the reader delves further into the biography, it soon becomes clear that McCullough’s own love for Adams is in very large part formed by his aversion to Jefferson; the book is as much about Thomas Jefferson, the “shadow man,” in Adams’ own assessment, as it is about its putative subject. As McCullough has admitted, he started out to write a study of both men, then found himself increasingly attracted to the honest New

Englander and put off by the devious, slippery Virginian. He began to see the two as personifying a moral dichotomy: it is character, in other words, that defines each man for him, not intelligence, political vision or ultimate influence. “Jefferson,” he writes disapprovingly,

the Virginia aristocrat and slave master who lived in a style fit for a prince, as removed from his fellow citizens and their lives as it was possible to be, was hailed as the apostle of liberty, the “Man of the People.” Adams, the farmer’s son who despised slavery and practiced the kind of personal economy and plain living commonly upheld as the American way, was scorned as an aristocrat who, if he could, would enslave the common people.

All this is true enough, but Jefferson’s faults as characterized by McCullough are essentially *symbolic* faults: what effect they had upon his performance as congressional delegate, governor, ambassador, secretary of state, vice-president and president are open to question. Symbolic faults, of course, are faults nonetheless, and Jefferson’s tenure as slaveholder and, in particular, as the father of at least one and probably several enslaved children is one of the more obvious and resonant sins in our history: the Sally Hemings story dogged his political career and will continue to tarnish his image for as long as he is remembered.

But more substantive accusations can be laid at Jefferson’s door. His vision of American liberties and American possibilities, particularly as formulated in the Declaration of Independence, has given license to what has become our mainstream political philosophy: that the rights of the individual are sacrosanct, and that any restrictions on those rights are immoral and unnatural. The group, by inference, is subservient to the individual.

If human beings knew what is good for them, as Jefferson hoped and trusted that they did, this formula just might be appropriate; but, as Adams might perhaps have predicted, Jefferson’s claims have provided a philosophical sanction for greed and despoliation. In Ellis’ words, Jeffersonian political beliefs have led “directly, if inadvertently, to private greed as a natural right by the American plutocracy . . . and the doctrinaire rejection of government’s authority to do anything about it.” Jefferson would, of course, be appalled if he were to come back to

life and see the consumer orgy that the Pursuit of Happiness has unleashed: gigantic malls, Neiman Marcus and Hammacher Schlemmer, Starbucks, 31 flavors of ice cream, and 500-odd cable TV channels. Still, in his unwillingness to place any limits on human ambition, he must bear some responsibility for our contemporary culture.

In a review of *John Adams* published in *The New Republic* last July, Sean Wilentz complained about McCullough's sentimentalized treatment of Adams, and his generally uncritical, history-as-spectacle, heritage-style approach. All of this is perfectly true. His accusation, though, that Adams was "a great American who would prove virtually irrelevant to his nation's subsequent political development," is questionable. While Adams' political philosophy did not, perhaps, make a strong mark on mainstream thought, it *did* make one, fortunately, on the form our government has taken. Of all the Founding Fathers, Adams was the strongest and most persuasive advocate for a firm balance of powers: a tripartite government with a bicameral legislature, a strong executive, and an independent judiciary.

Unicameral legislatures, as proposed by Tom Paine, among others, Adams thought extremely dangerous. Reading Mary Wollstonecraft later in life, he took vigorous exception to her libertarian notion that government was in itself an evil. "She will not admit the only means that can accomplish any part of her ardent prophecies: forms of government . . . to restrain the passions of all orders of men." And against Wollstonecraft's claim that government must be kept simple, he commented that "The clock would be simple if you destroyed all the wheels . . . but it would not tell the time of day."

Adams' resistance to the inexorable development of party politics that took place during his second term as vice-president and his presidency is also to be admired, although in this respect he did indeed prove irrelevant to his nation's further political development. Himself a Federalist, like his predecessor Washington, he viewed the development of both the extremist Republicans under Jefferson and that of the equally extremist High Federalists under the hated Alexander Hamilton with alarm. As his presidency progressed he came to distance himself more and more from the High Federalists; by the time he retired he was a Federalist in name only. "Jefferson had a party," he

remarked, “Hamilton had a party, but the commonwealth had none.”

Wilentz concludes his attack on McCullough by saying that John Adams is not a hero for our time, not someone whose philosophy is applicable to the problems we face today. Here, I think, he is wrong. To be sure there are marks against Adams: his endorsement of the passage and enforcement of the Alien and Sedition Acts is still remembered with bitterness, and while his presidency was ultimately successful in that he managed to follow his own sound judgment and avoid a seemingly unavoidable war with France, he was, as he himself admitted, not really a gifted politician.

It was intellectual leadership that Adams provided in spades, as well as an unswerving belief almost from the beginning that independence was necessary, possible and even inevitable. His dogged energy during the First and Second Continental Congresses might well have been the deciding factor in any number of troubled questions. The U.S. history we have all been spoon-fed in school makes it seem as though the Founding Fathers were all strong for independence and united on the major issues; the reality was quite different. In old age Adams recalled that “Every measure of Congress, from 1774 to 1787 inclusively, was disputed with acrimony, and decided by as small a majority as any question is decided these days.”

In the end it should be clear that Jefferson’s and Adams’ different visions should not be seen as competing versions of the American Revolution, but complementary strands in the same system, which have combined to form a government that, for all its obvious faults, has proved unusually flexible, efficient, and durable. Adams was braver than we can now comprehend in advocating the adoption of many aspects of the British constitution, in the face of widespread (and his own) distaste for all things English. The United States Adams helped created has, so far, outlived his own projection of its lifespan by three-quarters of a century. It is no longer a new nation; it is, in fact, one of the oldest republics in the world. And the oldest functioning written constitution in the world is that of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts—written by John Adams.