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## *John Adams' Opinion of Benjamin Franklin*

**I**N 1805 Mrs. Mercy Otis Warren published her *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution; interspersed with Biographical, Political, and Moral Observations*, not realizing, perhaps, that in at least one New England household the work would create a tempestuous storm of indignation and vilification. The head of the household in question was John Adams—former school teacher, lawyer, revolutionary, diplomat, Vice-President, President, and, since 1801, New England farmer. It is difficult to say exactly when Adams first obtained his copy of Mrs. Warren's book, but by July, 1807, besides supervising the farm work, carrying on a large correspondence, and caring for his family, he had found time to read it and to prepare the first of a series of letters to the authoress questioning her historical accuracy and interpretation. Adams' grandson, Charles Francis, set the scene for this series in the following manner:

This work seems to have been generally well received, though freely dealing with critical questions, and still more with the action of distinguished men. Unfortunately for the preservation of harmony between these old friends, there appeared references to the course of Mr. Adams which . . . coming upon him at a time when his feelings had not entirely recovered from the blow received in the election [of 1800], created extraordinary irritation. He proceeded at once to address directly to Mrs. Warren a series of ten letters, in the course of which he went largely into the defence of himself . . . without sparing his indignation against her.<sup>1</sup>

Though the immediate target of his indignation was Mrs. Warren, Adams' volleys in this series were often delivered indirectly, a good many of them reaching her only after having ricocheted off the well-armored reputation of Benjamin Franklin. In fact, while

<sup>1</sup> "Correspondence between John Adams and Mercy Warren . . .," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Fifth Series, IV (1878), 318.

reading the letters one often wonders if Adams' ire was not stirred as much by Mrs. Warren's warmly favorable presentation of Franklin as by her somewhat cool, aloof treatment of her old friend, John Adams.<sup>2</sup> The first letter of the series mentions one of the issues on which Adams differed with Franklin—whether legislatures should have one, or three, branches<sup>3</sup>—and most of the others contain at least one or two unkind references to the then-departed philosopher.

For example, in reply to Mrs. Warren's assertion that Adams was ridiculed by the courtiers and royal family in France, the former President shot back a bristling "Was the Grand Franklin not ridiculed?", and went on to relate an anecdote about the Duchess de Polignac, who,

when in company with the King and Queen was always launching out in panegyrics upon the Grand Franklin. The King sometimes smiled, sometimes snickered, but said very little. After sometime upon a visit to the Royal manufactory of Porcelaine . . . he gave secret orders to have a chamber pot made of the finest materials and most exquisite workmanship with the most exact portrait of the Grand Franklin painted on the bottom of it on the inside; and this most elegant piece of Furniture for a lady's bedchamber, the King presented to the Duchess with his own hand, that she might have the satisfaction of contemplating the image of her great philosopher and politician whenever she had occasion to look at it.<sup>4</sup>

And, apparently feeling that further emphasis of this point was needed, Adams also recalled the time he

dined at a great house in Paris, in company with Archbishops and Bishops . . . Dukes . . . and Counts and many ladies. Dr. Franklin too was one of the company. I observed some thing circulating from hand to hand round the table, and very shrewd looks, shrugs, and gesticulations, with some half suppressed tittering. . . . It was carefully concealed from me.

<sup>2</sup> In late 1807 Mrs. Warren broke off this series and a "social rupture" occurred between the old friends. Eventually mutual acquaintances interceded and the whole series was submitted to Elbridge Gerry for arbitration. *Ibid.*, 319. The fact that Gerry was able to effect a reconciliation is a measure of his political talent.

<sup>3</sup> Adams to Mercy Warren, July 11, 1807, *ibid.*, 325-326.

<sup>4</sup> Adams to Mercy Warren, Aug. 3, 1807, *The Adams Papers*, (microfilm), Reel 118. This passage and the following one were elided by Charles Francis Adams in "Adams-Warren Letters." I depended upon the microfilm *Papers* only in those cases where items could not be found in other sources. Quotations from *The Adams Papers* are from the microfilm edition, by permission of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

But after the company rose from Table, two Abbes of my acquaintance came to me . . . and showed me the picture. . . . With all the skill of the finest artists in Paris, America was represented as a virgin, naked and as beautiful . . . as the Venus of Medicis; and the Grand Franklin, with his bald head, with his few long scattering, straight hairs, in the act of debauching her behind her back. Can you imagine any ridicule more exquisite than this, both upon America and Franklin?<sup>5</sup>

Even more “exquisite,” perhaps, is contemplation of the underlying motivational forces which drove Adams, a reasonably “puritanical” New Englander, to torture himself by telling such stories to a gentlewoman who had long been an extremely close friend. Though Mrs. Warren may have underrated his historical role in the Revolution, Adams’ vilification of Franklin was more than a means of castigating her; it was, in fact, a heartfelt animosity toward his old Revolutionary colleague, an animosity which had developed over a period of time, and which can be reasonably well traced.

Adams’ earliest recorded notices of Franklin, far from being antagonistic, emit an air of admiration, if not reverence. On March 14, 1756, Adams “spent the evening very sociably at Mr. Putnam’s. Several observations [were made] concerning Mr. Franklin, of Philadelphia, a prodigious genius, cultivated by prodigious energy.”<sup>6</sup> Four years later Franklin’s gift to Mr. Quincy of some Rhenish vine cuttings, and his advice upon the possible establishment of a wine industry in New England, revealed to Adams an “amazing capacity for business, his memory amidst so much business; as counsellor, postmaster, printer, so many private studies, and so many public avocations too.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, during the pre-Revolutionary period, Adams’ picture of Franklin coincided with that held by most of his countrymen—the picture of a diligent, “prodigious genius.”

This opinion had not changed in 1774, when, in his *Novanglus*, Adams referred to Franklin as “an active and very able man,” “a sagacious gentleman,” “eminent philosopher and distinguished patriot.”<sup>8</sup> In March of the same year, in the course of jotting down

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Charles Francis Adams, *The Works of John Adams . . . With a Life of the Author* (Boston, 1850), II, 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 82.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 19.

some thoughts on how he would go about writing up a "history of the contest between Britain and America," Adams began his list of important personages with "Franklin, Lee, Chatham, Camden."<sup>9</sup>

All of these observations were based on hearsay, rather than on direct contact, for Adams did not meet Franklin until after the latter's return from England on May 5, 1775. On the 6th, Franklin was chosen to represent Pennsylvania in the Second Congress which was to convene four days later.<sup>10</sup> Adams, a delegate to the Congress from Massachusetts, thus met the Pennsylvanian sometime in May, although the occasion of their meeting does not seem to have been recorded by either. In fact, Franklin was seldom mentioned by Adams during this period, in either his letters or diary, nor does Franklin's name often appear in Adams' record of the debates in Congress. This might easily be explained by the fact that Franklin, like Jefferson and Washington, very seldom spoke publicly. This reticence later led Adams to the conclusion that his own efforts in Congress had been far more valuable than those of his older colleague.

Congress had seen Franklin and me together before them above a year, *i.e.* from May, 1775, to the autumn of 1776. They had seen me active and alert in every branch of business. . . . On the contrary, they had seen Franklin, from day to day, sitting in silence, a great part of his time fast asleep in his chair. He was employed on committees, more in compliance with the prejudices of the people in Europe and America, than for any use he was, or any service he performed.<sup>11</sup>

At the time, however, Adams and Franklin seem to have gotten on well enough. Adams wrote to his wife that Franklin was "a great and good man," and when Franklin went to Washington's camp in October, 1775, he met Mrs. Adams at a dinner and greatly impressed her. She gave him a letter for her husband in which she wrote of Franklin: "I thought I could read in his countenance the virtues of his heart; among which patriotism shone in its full lustre, and with

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 338.

<sup>10</sup> Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1938), 520.

<sup>11</sup> Adams to Mercy Warren, Aug. 8, 1807, "Adams-Warren Letters," 431. Jefferson said of both Washington and Franklin: "I never heard either of them speak ten minutes at a time, nor to any but the main point which was to decide the question. They laid their shoulders to the great points, knowing that the little ones would follow of themselves." Van Doren, 529.

that is blended every virtue of a Christian; for a true patriot must be a religious man."<sup>12</sup>

In Congress the following year, Franklin and Adams agreed, without apparent difficulty, upon the final form of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. A month later, Adams made a speech in support of a motion by Franklin "that votes [in Congress] should be in proportion to numbers" of inhabitants;<sup>13</sup> this agreement between the two would have been natural, as both men were from large states. In September, 1776, they journeyed together to a conference with Lord Howe on Staten Island, and Adams later recalled that

At Brunswick, but one bed could be procured for Dr. Franklin and me, in a chamber little larger than the bed. . . . The window was open, and I, who was an invalid and afraid of the air in the night, shut it close. . . . 'Oh!' says Franklin, 'don't shut the window, we shall be suffocated. . . . I believe you are not acquainted with my theory of colds.' Opening the window, and leaping into bed, I said I had read his letters to Dr. Cooper, in which he had advanced, that nobody ever got cold by going into a cold church or any other cold air, but the theory was so little consistent with my experience that I thought it a paradox. However, I had so much curiosity to hear his reasons that I would run the risk of a cold. The Doctor then began a harangue upon air and cold, and respiration and perspiration, with which I was so much amused that I soon fell asleep, and left him and his philosophy together, but I believe they were equally sound and insensible within a few minutes after me, for the last words I heard were pronounced as if he was more than half asleep.<sup>14</sup>

They were, then, thrown close together by the fortunes of war, at least physically, and strong friendships have stemmed from less intimate beginnings. However, a month earlier Franklin had been involved in Pennsylvania's constitutional convention, the results

<sup>12</sup> Abigail to John Adams, Nov. 5, 1775, also John to Abigail, July 23, 1775, Charles Francis Adams, *Familiar Letters of John Adams and his Wife Abigail Adams, During the Revolution* (Boston, 1876), 83-84, 122.

<sup>13</sup> "Diary," Aug. 1, 1776, *Papers*, Reel 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Works*, III, 75-76. (In the Autobiography, written in 1806, Adams relied heavily on his Diary.) The passage continued, "I have often conversed with him since on the same subject, and I believe, with him that colds are often taken in foul air in close rooms." "I have heard that in the opinion of his own able physician, Dr. Jones, he fell a sacrifice at last, not to the stone, but to his own theory, having caught the violent cold which finally choked him, by sitting for some hours at a window, with a cool air blowing upon him." *Ibid.*

of which were highly displeasing to Adams: "The Convention of Pennsylvania has voted for a single Assembly. Such is the force of habit; and what surprises me not a little is, that the American Philosopher should so far have accommodated himself to the customs of his countrymen as to be a zealous advocate for it."<sup>15</sup> While this difference of opinion, though of a fundamental political nature, did not make up more than a small part of the barrier that eventually arose between the two men, it was the first indication that such a barrier could arise. (It should be emphasized that the subsequent antagonism seems to have been largely one-sided, for on only one or two occasions did Franklin openly express an unfavorable opinion of Adams.)

Besides being members of the committee to frame a declaration of independence, Adams and Franklin also co-operated in the task of drawing a model treaty for foreign alliances. In the discussions concerning this measure, Adams set forth his firm belief that no treaties should be drawn which would "involve us in future European wars." "Franklin, although he was commonly as silent on committees as in Congress, upon this occasion, ventured so far as to intimate his concurrence with me in these sentiments; though as will be seen hereafter, he shifted them as easily as the wind ever shifted, and assumed a dogmatical tone in favor of an opposite system."<sup>16</sup> Adams' irritation arose primarily from their conflicting views of the objectives and conduct of United States foreign policy, as the record discloses.

Late in 1776 Franklin was sent to France to join Silas Deane and Arthur Lee as commissioners at Versailles, and a few months later William Lee and Ralph Izard were appointed as agents to Holland, Prussia, and Italy. Before long this group split into two mutually antagonistic cliques, with Deane and Franklin opposed to the two Lees and Izard.<sup>17</sup> The causes of this division were complex, involving jealousies and affronts, both real and imagined, and do not need detailed examination here. However, the fact itself is important,

<sup>15</sup> Adams to Francis Dana, Aug. 16, 1776, *ibid.*, IX, 429.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 516. See also, for the model treaty, Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (New York, 1935), 45.

<sup>17</sup> C. F. Adams believed that from this split could be traced the "rise and progress of parties from the date of the Declaration of Independence." *Works*, I, 250.

for it was into this atmosphere that Adams was sent, early in 1778, to replace Deane. "The union between France and the United States had been sealed in February, just at the time when Mr. Adams was embarking on his voyage,"<sup>18</sup> so the new commissioner arrived to find that one of the main reasons for the commission's existence had disappeared.

The two factions, however, had not disappeared and Adams' favor was courted by both parties. This presented him with a serious dilemma. While he inclined toward Lee because of his close associations with Lee's brothers in Congress, "he, at this time, entertained no ill will to Deane, and had a high regard for Dr. Franklin."<sup>19</sup> He therefore tried to steer a middle course; to decide each dispute as it arose, on its own merits. As a result, he soon reaped the displeasure of both parties. In disgust, he wrote to Samuel Adams, Elbridge Gerry, and others expressing his opinion that the foreign service needed reorganizing, that commercial and diplomatic affairs should be completely separated, and that a single minister should be named to replace the commission.<sup>20</sup>

While awaiting developments, Adams busied himself with the badly disarranged financial affairs of the American mission. He was able to lose himself in this task for a time, and the somewhat moralistic financial recommendations he made to "Poor Richard" were graciously received: "I very much approve your plan with regard to our future accounts, and wish it to be followed."<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, the famous Adams vanity must certainly have suffered upon John's finding himself reduced to little more than an accountant for the commission of which he was a full-fledged member. Eventually he complained that "On Dr. Franklin the eyes of all Europe are fixed . . . neither Lee nor myself are looked upon of much consequence."<sup>22</sup> In fact, he had already detected a flaw which he felt had been overlooked by European friends of America in their profound admiration of the "American philosopher": "Dr. Franklin

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 279.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 280.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 159-160; *ibid.*, I, 281.

<sup>21</sup> Franklin to Adams, Sept. 26, 1778, in answer to Adams to Franklin, Sept., 22, 1778, *ibid.*, VII, 43, 48.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 189.



is reported to speak French very well, but I find, upon attending to him, that he does not speak it grammatically. . . . His pronunciation, too . . . which he seems to think is pretty well, I am sure is very far from being exact."<sup>23</sup>

Another abrasive factor, was the way in which Franklin so easily adapted himself to the French social scene, in contrast to Adams, who was perhaps a little awed with, and a little contemptuous of, the grace and ease of the French manner. However, this contrast should not be stressed, for, after having gotten over his initial difficulties with the language, Adams came to enjoy himself.<sup>24</sup> There was, perhaps, a touch of puritanical indignation in his comment that "Mr. Franklin, who at the age of seventy odd had neither lost his love of beauty nor his taste for it, called Mlle. de Passy his favorite, his flame, and his love, which . . . did not displease the young lady."<sup>25</sup> Again, however, the portrait of Adams as a strait-laced provincial bigot should not be drawn with overly strong lines, for he certainly displayed a light-hearted vein in answer to a query from Mercy Warren, his antagonist-to-be:

What shall I say, Madame, to your question, whether I am as much in the good graces of ladies as my venerable colleague? Ah, no! Alas, alas, no! The ladies of this country, Madam, have an unaccountable passion for old age, whereas our countrywomen, you know, Madam, have rather a complaisance for youth, if I remember right. This is rather unlucky for me, because here I have nothing to do but wish I was seventy years old, and, when I get back to America, I shall be obliged to wish myself back again to five-and-twenty.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 132. Adams' study of French began when he boarded ship for Europe, two months earlier.

<sup>24</sup> Adams to Mrs. Adams, Feb. 21, 1779, *Familiar Letters*, 329-330.

<sup>25</sup> *Works*, III, 134.

<sup>26</sup> Adams to Mercy Warren, Dec. 15, 1778, *ibid.*, IX, 474-476. In 1807, Adams recalled to the same correspondent the single instance in which his conduct toward the opposite sex had been questioned: "It was propagated far and wide, and, as I have been well informed, believed by thousands of voters in the Southern States. That I had written to General Pinckney when he was in Europe to go to England and bring over with him four of the prettiest girls he could find there, two of them for my use and the other two for his. But after I had entertained them for some time, I found I was grown old and did not want them. Therefore I borrowed money at eight per cent to pay them for their services, to pay their passage back to England, and set them up in comfortable circumstances there!" Adams to Mercy Warren, Aug. 8, 1807, *Papers*, Reel 118.

Thus, while certainly not a roué, Adams—though he may have envied Franklin's flair for the courtly graces, and may have frowned slightly upon Franklin's way with the ladies—does not really seem to have felt much indignation toward the sage's somewhat uninhibited private life, and neither of these things can be interpreted as being decisive factors in turning Adams against Franklin.

Adams' letters to his cousin Samuel, and to Gerry, coupled with similar ones from Franklin and Lee,<sup>27</sup> soon produced results; Congress appointed Franklin sole minister to the court of France, sent Lee to Spain, and made provision for the other agents. Adams was instructed to exercise his "whole extensive abilities on the subject of our finances."<sup>28</sup> He did this for a time, but after February 11, 1779, no longer in possession of an official position, he found himself completely dependent upon Franklin for his very subsistence. This was an unacceptable situation. After informing his wife that he could not "eat pensions and sinecures, they would stick in my throat,"<sup>29</sup> he requested of M. de Sartine, the Minister of Marine, passage on a French frigate, "as it does not appear that congress have any further service for me to do in Europe."<sup>30</sup>

Although he had been relegated to a diplomatic limbo at the time Franklin was given the top position in Congress' foreign service, Adams, though anxious to be away, displayed no immediate ill-will toward Franklin, perhaps because he had himself been instrumental in effecting the new organization. To Vergennes he described Franklin's promotion as a "masterly measure . . . which has my most hearty approbation."<sup>31</sup> His main complaint centered upon Congress' apparent neglect of John Adams.

While awaiting passage at Nantes, Adams received a friendly letter from the new minister which closed with the charming phrase "Remember me affectionately to master Johnny."<sup>32</sup> Adams' reply expressed his congratulations on Franklin's "reception at court in the new character," and agreed that his elder colleague's "opinion

<sup>27</sup> *Works*, I, 281.

<sup>28</sup> The Committee of Foreign Affairs to John Adams, Oct. 28, 1778, *ibid.*, VII, 61.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 284.

<sup>30</sup> Adams to M. de Sartine, Feb. 16, 1779, *ibid.*, VII, 82.

<sup>31</sup> Adams to Count de Vergennes, Feb. 16, 1779, *ibid.*, VII, 83.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 90.

of the good-will of this Court to the United States is just." He also closed on an intimate note: "Master Johnny, whom you have honored with an affectionate remembrance, and who acts at present in the quadruple capacity of interpreter, secretary, companion, and domestic to his papa, desires me to present you his dutiful respects."<sup>33</sup>

In light of these almost sugary exchanges, Adams' conversation with the French diplomats Marbois and Luzerne, "somewhere on the Atlantic," is exceedingly difficult to explain. Marbois began this exchange by observing

'All religions are tolerated in America . . . and the ambassadors have in all courts a right to a chapel in their own way; but Mr. Franklin never had any.' 'No,' said I, laughing, 'because Mr. Franklin had no—. . . .' I stopped short and laughed. 'No,' said M. Marbois; 'Mr. Franklin adores only great Nature, which has interested a great many people of both sexes in his favor.' 'Yes,' said I, laughing, 'all the atheists, deists, and libertines, as well as the philosophers and ladies, are in his train. . . .' 'Yes,' said M. Marbois, 'he is celebrated as the great philosopher and the great legislator of America.' 'He is,' said I, 'a great philosopher, but as a legislator of America he has done very little. It is universally believed in France, England, and all Europe, that his electric wand has accomplished all this revolution. But nothing is more groundless. He has done very little. It is believed that he made all the American constitutions and their confederations; but he made neither. He did not even make the constitution of Pennsylvania, bad as it is . . . .'

I said that Mr. Franklin had great merit as a philosopher. His discoveries in electricity were very grand, and he certainly was a great genius and had great merit in our American affairs. But he had no title to the 'legislator of America.' M. Marbois said he had wit and irony; but these were not the faculties of statesmen. . . .

M. Marbois asked, are natural children admitted in America to all privileges like children born in wedlock? . . . M. Marbois said this, no doubt, in allusion to Mr. F's natural son, and natural son of a natural son. I let myself thus freely into this conversation, being led on naturally by . . . M. Marbois on purpose, because I am sure it cannot be my duty, nor the interest of my country, that I should conceal any of my sentiments of this man, at the same time that I do justice to his merits. It would be worse than folly to conceal my opinion of his great faults.<sup>34</sup>

Adams then, while realizing he was being baited, did "justice" to his former bedfellow in the presence of complete strangers. His

<sup>33</sup> Adams to Franklin, Apr. 13, 1779, *ibid.*, VII, 92.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 220-221.

vanity had been adroitly stroked by the two French envoys and he must certainly have been purging himself of the strains induced by being so long in the shade of Franklin's large shadow. As Gilbert Chinard has delicately commented, if discretion "is the first virtue of a diplomat, Mr. Adams belonged to a new school of diplomacy."<sup>35</sup>

Besides his conversations with the two French envoys, Adams took advantage of his shipboard leisure to prepare two lengthy reports to Congress. One of these explained his reasons for not presenting himself in Philadelphia, and the other was a long, impressive analysis of the amount of political and commercial consideration which Congress should accord to each of the European countries.<sup>36</sup> During Adams' absence, Congress had divided into factions which were roughly similar to those in the foreign mission. The arrival of his letter at the time when Congress was considering the appointment of a commissioner to negotiate a peace—if and when the British showed a concrete desire for peace—eventually helped secure the position for him.<sup>37</sup>

In the meantime, after landing in Massachusetts Adams was elected to that state's constitutional convention. The document which emerged contained many of the checks and balances which he had advocated in opposition to Franklin's single-house plan. His doubts about Franklin, as expressed in his conversations with Marbois and Luzerne, continued to fester and drove him to disclose the same sentiments to an influential American. Thomas McKean, chosen for this purpose, soon learned from Adams that

Franklin is a wit and humorist, I know. He may be a philosopher, for what I know. But he is not a sufficient statesman for all the business he is in. . . . He is too old, too infirm, too indolent and dissipated, to be sufficient for the discharge of all the important duties of ambassador, board of war, board of treasury, commissary of prisoners, etc., etc., etc.<sup>38</sup>

He further suggested that Franklin be provided with consuls and a secretary, lest the work not be done at all.

<sup>35</sup> Gilbert Chinard, *Honest John Adams* (Boston, 1933), 128.

<sup>36</sup> Adams to the President of Congress, Aug. 3 and Aug. 4, 1779, *Works*, VII, 97–110.

<sup>37</sup> *Works*, I, 288. For the many factors that went into this decision, see *ibid.*, 288–296, and Chinard, 135–136.

<sup>38</sup> Adams to Thomas McKean, Sept. 20, 1779, *Works*, IX, 485–486.

Adams' commissions to negotiate treaties of peace and commerce with Britain soon arrived, and he sailed again for Europe, this time with two of his sons, arriving in Paris on February 9, 1780. Though his day and month of arrival in Paris were exactly the same as they had been two years earlier, Adams' opinion of Franklin, as has been seen, had undergone a change. Reasons for the change cannot be precisely stated, but they most probably included sincere doubts regarding Franklin's general ability; growing doubts regarding Franklin's qualities as a statesman; elements involving the baser emotions, such as envy, wounded pride, and deflated ego, and, finally, a tinge of moral indignation toward Franklin's "dissipation." Yet for all the severity and ill-will already noted, Adams still had a fair measure of respect for many of Franklin's talents, and he certainly had not hinted at any betrayal of the interests of the United States by Franklin. However, developing out of Adams' difficulties with the French Foreign Minister Vergennes, it came to this in the course of a few months.

Upon the occasion of his first departure from Paris, Adams had received a friendly, even flattering, letter from Vergennes, congratulating him on the "wise conduct" he had exhibited, and praising the zealous manner in which he had pursued his tasks.<sup>39</sup> Now, a year later, Adams, in company with Franklin, came away from his first audience with the French Minister convinced that he had never heard him "so frank, so explicit, so decided . . . in his declarations to pursue the war with vigor, and to afford effectual aid to the United States."<sup>40</sup> This initial understanding was shortly to disintegrate, partly because Adams, due to the nature of his commissions, actually had no definite functions to perform at this time.

Having been used to hard work, and ever desirous to give the taxpayers their money's worth (for all of which he expected proper recognition), Adams could not find it in himself to remain quiet, simply to enjoy Paris and await developments. In search of activity he contacted Edmé Jacques Genêt, editor of the Paris *Mercur*e, in an effort to arrange for publication of materials which might counteract various rumors spread by the British. Genêt thought it

<sup>39</sup> Vergennes to Adams, Feb. 21, 1779, as quoted in Chinard, 126.

<sup>40</sup> Adams to the President of Congress, Feb. 15, 1780, *Works*, VII, 121.

best that such correspondence should be cleared by Vergennes, and to this both Adams and Vergennes agreed.<sup>41</sup> For a time all went well, but when news arrived that Congress had devalued the Continental currency, Vergennes submitted a heated denunciation of that action to Adams, and demanded that Adams appeal to Congress for special treatment of French creditors. Adams replied that Congress had every right to regulate the currency, that special treatment of a foreign nation was not practical, and that in any case the French investors should be proud to serve such a glorious cause.<sup>42</sup>

The breach between Adams and Vergennes, thus opened, they both turned to Franklin for support.<sup>43</sup> He seems to have tried to work out a compromise, but when this proved impossible threw his support to Vergennes, assuring him that the opinions of most Americans differed “widely with those that seem to be expressed by Mr. Adams in his letter to your Excellency.”<sup>44</sup> The controversy was then submitted to Congress for consideration just as another more serious one took place.

At the end of March, Adams had expressed doubt regarding the wisdom of Vergennes’ decision to remain officially silent in the matter of Adams’ commissions. Adams would have preferred to “pursue a bolder policy,” to notify the British ministry of his powers, and thus score a possible propaganda coup.<sup>45</sup> After the currency wrangle, Adams again raised this point, and pressed it so far that Vergennes finally felt obliged to require Adams “in the name of the King, to communicate your letter and my answer to the United States, and to suspend, until you shall receive orders from them, all steps relating to the English ministry.”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Genêt to Adams, Feb. 20, 1780, *ibid.*, VII, 126–127. This Genêt was the “Citizen’s” father; he also had a famous daughter, Madame Campan. Young Genêt was a sometime playmate of John Quincy.

<sup>42</sup> Adams and Vergennes exchanged letters on June 20 and 21, 1780, *ibid.*, VII, 188, 190–192. Congress later voted him their official approval for this stand.

<sup>43</sup> Adams to Franklin, June 23 and 29, 1780, *ibid.*, VII, 203, 211–212; Vergennes to Franklin, June 30, 1780, John Bigelow, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1904), VIII, 269.

<sup>44</sup> Franklin to Vergennes, July 10, 1780, *ibid.*, VIII, 273.

<sup>45</sup> Adams to the President of Congress, Mar. 30, 1780, *Works*, VII, 138.

<sup>46</sup> Adams to Vergennes July 17, 1780, and Vergennes to Adams, July 25, 1780, *ibid.*, VII, 228–230, 235.

During this exchange Adams provided a counterpoint to the main theme by questioning the sincerity of French support, and by repeatedly stating his conviction that the quickest and easiest way to win the war would be the stationing of a permanent French fleet in American waters.<sup>47</sup> While the question of transmittal *vs.* non-transmittal of his powers may well have been a proper subject of discussion for Adams under his commissions, this assumed role of “gadfly” regarding Franco-American military matters was an encroachment on Franklin’s sphere. Vergennes bluntly informed Adams that “Mr. Franklin being the sole person who has letters of credence to the King from the United States, it is with him only that I ought and can treat of matters which concern them.”<sup>48</sup>

Even before receiving this rebuke, Adams had decided that his presence in Paris was no longer either desired or required, and had removed himself to Holland to try, as he told Franklin, “to render [the United States] less dependent on France.”<sup>49</sup> Franklin saw no other course but to make it clear to Vergennes that

it was from his [Adams] particular indiscretion alone, and not from any instructions received by him, that has given such just cause of displeasure, and that it is impossible that his conduct therein should be approved by his constituents. I am glad he has not admitted me to any participation of those writings, and that he has taken the resolution he expresses, of not communicating with me, or making use of my intervention in his future correspondence; a resolution that I believe he will keep, as he has never yet communicated to me more of his business in Europe than I have seen in the newspapers. I live upon terms of civility with him, not of intimacy.<sup>50</sup>

That the two did not live on terms of intimacy was unfortunate, for perhaps the gulf between them could have been spanned by a few felicitous experiences and conversations such as the one at New Brunswick in 1776. During his first stay in France, Adams had shared the Doctor’s lodgings at Passy, but in 1780 he resided in a hotel in Paris, another factor which, though not in itself important, helped break down communications between the two men. More significant was a basic difference of opinion on Franco-American

<sup>47</sup> Adams to Vergennes, July 13 and 27, 1780, *ibid.*, VII, 218–219, 241.

<sup>48</sup> Vergennes to Adams, July 29, 1780, *ibid.*, VII, 243.

<sup>49</sup> Franklin to the President of Congress, Aug. 9, 1780, *Franklin’s Works*, VIII, 282.

<sup>50</sup> Franklin to Vergennes, Aug. 3, 1780, *ibid.*, VIII, 277.

relations, a difference which perhaps could not have been reconciled by any amount of social intercourse.

In 1778, Adams had dramatically recorded: "I will be buried in the ocean, or in any other manner sacrificed, before I will voluntarily put on the chains of France, when I am struggling to throw off those of Great Britain."<sup>51</sup> This feeling had obviously been strengthened in the interim; Franklin recognized it when he commented upon the "Vergennes affair": "Mr. Adams . . . means our welfare and interest as much as I, or any man, can do [but] seems to think a little apparent stoutness, and a greater air of independence and boldness in our demands, will procure us more ample assistance." Further, Adams felt that "America has been too free in expressions of gratitude to France, for that she is more obliged to us than we to her," and it was to correct this trend that Adams "seems to have endeavored to supply what he may suppose my negotiations defective in."<sup>52</sup>

A few weeks later Franklin expressed his regrets to Adams that he—Franklin—had had to send the entire Adams–Vergennes correspondence to Congress and wondered whether the offensive passages had not been "the effects merely of inadvertence"; whether Adams, after mature reflection, might not "think it proper to write something for effacing the impressions made by them."<sup>53</sup> Nearly two months passed before Adams replied that he had, "in the season of it," transmitted the whole of his correspondence with Vergennes to Congress "without any comments."<sup>54</sup> A number of other letters passed between Franklin and Adams in the later months of 1780, "civil" but not "intimate," and Adams continued to insist that his fellow countrymen must "bend the whole force of their minds to augment their navy, to find out their own strength and resources, and to depend upon themselves."<sup>55</sup>

Adams still retained some respect and friendship for Franklin up to the time he received extracts of Franklin's letters to Vergennes and to Congress. After that, and after he had also learned that

<sup>51</sup> *Works*, III, 147.

<sup>52</sup> Franklin to the President of Congress, Aug. 9, 1780, *Franklin's Works*, VIII, 282.

<sup>53</sup> Franklin to Adams, Oct. 8, 1780, *Works*, VII, 314.

<sup>54</sup> Adams to Franklin, Nov. 30, 1780, *ibid.*, VII, 337.

<sup>55</sup> Adams to Franklin, Aug. 17 and Oct. 14, 1780, *ibid.*, VII, 247, 316.



Vergennes was taking steps to have his commissions revoked,<sup>56</sup> Adams seems to have no longer harbored much regard for Franklin. In fact, from this time on the general pattern of his correspondence about Franklin mirrored enmity rather than admiration and respect.

Adams remained in Holland until he was called back to Paris to participate in the peace negotiations nearly two years later. In the interim, Congress revoked his commission to negotiate a treaty of commerce, and added four other persons—Franklin, Jay, Laurens and Jefferson—to the peace commission.<sup>57</sup> This, no doubt, was a blow to Adams' pride, but he seems to have borne it fairly well, and he took some consolation from the fact that his name stood at the head of the list of commissioners.<sup>58</sup>

He was finally able to convince the Dutch that it would be in their best interests to sign a commercial treaty and make a substantial loan to the United States. When he returned to France in October, 1782, his success in Holland was referred to when, on a number of occasions, he was flattered with the greeting "*Monsieur, vous êtes le Washington de la Négotiation.*" In France, this kind of attention was a novelty to Adams, and he believed that "A few of these compliments would kill Franklin, if they should come to his ears."<sup>59</sup>

During the peace negotiations, Adams received unexpected support from Jay in his policy of relying upon the French as little as possible. Jay and Adams were able to exert pressure upon Franklin to the extent that he agreed to proceed without notifying the French court of every new development. Pleased, Adams went so far as to concede that Franklin was "able and useful, both by his sagacity and his reputation, in the whole negotiation."<sup>60</sup>

In 1783, while the final treaty terms were being worked out, Franklin reported to Livingston that Adams still persisted in his conviction "that to think of gratitude to France is the greatest of follies, and that to be influenced by it would ruin us. He makes no

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 318. For Adams' version of the whole affair, as told thirty-five years later, see *ibid.*, I, Appendix B, 649–664.

<sup>57</sup> Committee of Foreign Affairs to Adams, July 21, 1781, *ibid.*, VII, 453. Congress also mildly reprimanded him for his indiscretions toward Vergennes, Jan. 10, 1781, VII, 353.

<sup>58</sup> Adams to Francis Dana, Dec. 14, 1781, *ibid.*, VII, 493.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 309.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 336.

secret of having these opinions, expresses them publicly, sometimes in presence of the English Ministers.” Franklin continued:

As such doubts may hereafter have a bad effect, I think we cannot take too much care to remove them, and it is therefore I write this, to put you on your guard (believing it my duty, though I know that I hazard by it a mortal enmity), and to caution you respecting the insinuations of this gentleman against this court, and the instances he supposes of their ill-will to us, which I take to be as imaginary as I know his fancies to be, that Count de Vergennes and myself are continually plotting against him, and employing the news-writers of Europe to depreciate his character, etc. . . . I am persuaded, however, that 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.<sup>61</sup>

With this, the last of his utterances regarding Adams’ impetuosity and suspiciousness, Franklin did in fact intensify Adams’ enmity, for Adams subsequently saw the letter. The two men worked on together in the new commission, but all traces of friendship had vanished. Adams had become convinced that Franklin nurtured a deep hatred of him, and to this he later added the thoughts that Franklin’s hatred stemmed from “jealousy and envy”; “Franklin found that John Adams possessed more of the confidence of his country than himself.”<sup>62</sup>

Franklin came home in 1785, Adams three years later. In 1790, Franklin contracted his final sickness, and died on April 17. The occasion of this sickness and death drew no eulogies from Vice-President Adams. On April 4, he flippantly wrote:

The history of our Revolution will be one continued lie from one end to the other. The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin’s electrical rod smote the earth and out sprang General Washington. That Franklin electrified him with his rod—and thence forward those two conducted all the policy, negotiations, legislatures, and war.<sup>63</sup>

A week after Franklin was gone, Adams, not content with wishing “peace to his shade,” felt he owed it “to truth” to mention that Franklin, in “The last letter of abuse to Congress in which he men-

<sup>61</sup> Franklin to Robert R. Livingston, July 22, 1783, *Franklin’s Works*, X, 133–134.

<sup>62</sup> Adams to Mercy Warren, Aug. 3, 1807, “Adams-Warren Letters,” 414.

<sup>63</sup> Adams to Benjamin Rush, Apr. 4, 1790, *Papers*, Reel 115.

tioned me . . . said I 'was always an honest man'—I wish my conscience would allow me to say as much of him. But from the first to the last of my acquaintance with him, I can reconcile his conduct in public affairs neither to the character of an honest man, nor to that of a man of sense."<sup>64</sup>

There might have been a possibility of Adams' extreme antagonism toward Franklin mellowing with time, as it did later in the cases of Jefferson, Mercy Warren, and Thomas McKean, but his enmity was re-enforced toward the end of the century by the fact that one of the most outspoken of President Adams' critics was Benjamin Franklin Bache, Franklin's grandson, the publisher of the *Aurora*.<sup>65</sup>

Fifteen years after his defeat for a second presidential term, Adams submitted a lengthy article concerning his relations with Franklin to the *Boston Patriot* from which the following extracts are taken:

While he [Franklin] had the singular felicity to enjoy the entire esteem and affection of all the philosophers of every denomination, he was not less regarded by all the sects and denominations of Christians. . . . Indeed, all sects considered him, and I believe justly, a friend to unlimited toleration in matters of religion. . . . I must acknowledge, after all, that nothing in life has mortified or grieved me more than the necessity which compelled me to oppose him so often as I have. He was a man with whom I always wished to live in friendship, and for that purpose omitted no demonstration of respect, esteem and veneration in my power, until I had unequivocal proofs of his hatred, for no other reason under the sun, but because I gave my judgment in opposition to his, in many points which materially affected the interests of our country, and in many more which essentially concerned our happiness, safety, and well-being. I could not and would not sacrifice the clearest dictates of my understanding and the purest principles of morals and policy in compliance to Dr. Franklin.<sup>66</sup>

Though the foregoing lines were written for public consumption, and were, therefore, less harsh than others written to private persons on the same subject, they seem to represent Adams' feelings toward Franklin in a measured, unhurried, unagitated manner, which carries with it an air of conviction.

<sup>64</sup> Adams to J. Trumbull, Apr. 25, 1790, *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Adams to Benjamin Rush, Apr. 12, 1809, *Works*, IX, 619.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 661, 664.

The evidence leaves little doubt that it was the difference of opinion over the extent to which the United States should depend upon France which provided the basis for Adams' antagonism and which also produced the unusual revelations of Franklin's anger. This is not to overlook the display of spite and vanity which came out during Adams' shipboard conversation with Marbois. Adams' vanity was of major proportions<sup>67</sup> and played a large part in his interpretation of Franklin's desire to treat the French alliance with delicacy as hatred and jealousy of Adams, and as an indication of a certain "moral" weakness on the part of Franklin. This very fact—that Adams attributed to Franklin's policy the characteristics of truculence, envy, and jealousy, while Franklin merely represented Adams' "indiscretions" as overzealous patriotism and sincere mistrust of French intentions—suggests that Adams' opinions had become overwrought. Having drawn the picture of himself as a crusader in Europe, Adams, in trying to live up to his self-portrait, was prone to interpret any opposition to his policies as bad faith, or jealousy, or nonpursuit of America's interests. And again, regardless of how or why Adams arrived at his opinions of Franklin, he held them sincerely, and acted upon them doggedly.

Such, then, were the reasons for Adams' outbursts against Franklin in the Warren correspondence. Though it was unfortunate that he developed such an unfavorable opinion of the "American philosopher"—the only man, perhaps, who through constant social intercourse might have helped Adams bring his crusading zeal into perspective by instilling in him the fine art of taking himself less seriously—the fact remains that Franklin did arouse the New Englander's wrath.

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<sup>67</sup> Adams himself realized this, and on one occasion revealed a bit of usually well-hidden humility when, in answer to Rush's request that he write a major autobiography, he declared, "I have made several attempts, but it is so dull an employment that I can not endure it. I look so much like a small boy in my own eyes, that, with all my vanity, I cannot endure the sight of the picture." Adams to Benjamin Rush, Apr. 12, 1809, *ibid.*, IX, 616.