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JOHN ADAMS'S VIEWS OF SLAVERY

John Quincy Adams' distinguished role in the anti-slavery movement is well known. Less familiar is the attitude toward slavery of his father, John Adams. Slavery, of course, never figured prominently in the elder Adams' career. He left public life in 1801 and died in 1826, before slavery became a dominant political issue. John Adams lived long enough, however, to witness the beginnings of the slavery controversy and to develop serious apprehensions about it.

The repugnance of Negro slavery seemed to Adams so obvious as hardly to merit argument. The rural New England society from which he came, full of proud, independent farmers, and almost empty of Negroes, found nothing appealing about human bondage. And the principles for which Adams spoke so heatedly during the revolution, made the notion of American slavery seem all the more reprehensible.

During the greater part of his life, however, the matter seldom intruded upon his attention. In their personal lives, he and Abigail were careful to hire free, white help as household servants. And later in life, Adams recalled with considerable pride that he had never employed slaves on his farm, even when this was acceptable among the best circles of New England society, and in spite of the fact that it meant losses to him both of convenience and economy.¹ Yet throughout his long and eventful public career, slavery drew from him only passing and incidental comment. It offered, for example, one additional point of criticism against the "privileged" society of the South.

In the Continental Congress, Adams argued against the Southern position that Negroes should not be included in the population figures to be used as the basis of taxation. His disagreement was not, however, with the contention that Negroes were property. (During the negotiation of the peace treaty with England in 1782-83, Adams entered no objection either public or private to the American demand for the return of all "Negroes or other American Property").² Adams'

¹ John Adams to Robert J. Evans, 8 June 1819; Adams Papers Microfilm, Reel 123. All footnotes, unless otherwise cited, are from the Adams microfilm.

² Diary, 30 November 1782: *The Adams Papers*, L. H. Butterfield, ed., 6 vols. to date (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1961-) III, 82.

point was simply that Negroes contributed as much to public wealth as whites, and should be considered equally for purposes of taxation.³ In 1808, the end of the legal slave trade passed him by unnoticed.

Finally, around 1819, the eruption of the slavery issue brought about by Missouri's application for admission to the Union, elicited from Adams some significant observations. By 1819, Adams had become quite enthusiastic about the auspicious prospects of American society. After several decades of bitter party strife, political affairs had calmed remarkably. The American people, for the first time in years, seemed united. Slavery, Adams feared, would disrupt the calm by exacerbating long-standing sectional divisions and, even more importantly, by exciting civil commotion.

The slavery question, Adams wrote in words reminiscent of Jefferson's "fire-bell in the night," "hangs like a Cloud over my imagination."⁴ If the "gangrene" of slavery was not stopped, he foresaw violent racial conflict. You will think me mad if I describe to you "the Calamities which slavery is likely to produce in this Country," he wrote to his daughter-in-law in 1820. Unless something was done, there would inevitably be an "Insurrection of the Blacks against the whites." Military forces would be called in from neighboring states in which there were no Negroes to suppress the disorders. The struggle, Adams predicted, would continue until finally, "exasperated to Madness," the whites became "wicked enough to exterminate the Negroes."⁵ America's enemies, Adams warned, actively promoted the catastrophe. England had already twice attempted to rouse the slaves to revolt. And she was planning in Nova Scotia to train Negroes, already stolen from America, to infiltrate the South and incite the slaves to rebellion.⁶ Adams was "terrified" by the thought of a Negro uprising. His fears echoed like a refrain through every comment he made upon the slavery issue.

How to prevent the disaster, Adams was uncertain. I

³ Recounted in Jefferson's notes of the debates: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Julian Boyd ed., 16 vols. to date (Princeton, 1950-) I, 324-25.

⁴ John Adams to Louisa Catherine Adams, 23 December 1819: Reel 124.

⁵ John Adams to Louisa Catherine Adams, 13 January 1820: Reel 124.

⁶ John Adams to Rev. Henry Colman, 13 January 1817; Reel 123.

have always found it difficult to satisfy my mind, he wrote to Peter Ludlow in early 1819, what ought to be done with both Indians and Negroes.⁷ The infamy both of slavery and slave trade was manifest. And on principle, Adams' mind was clear. "Every measure of prudence," he declared, ought to be taken for their "eventual total extirpation" from the United States. "Humanity" demanded it.⁸ The practical dilemmas involved, however, were reflected in his words "prudence" and "eventual."

Adams favored no precipitate action; always he counselled restraint. If humanity required the end of slavery (more, it would seem, for the welfare of society than out of justice for the Negro), it also demanded due consideration of the effects, especially on Southern slave holders. "All possible humanity" should be shown the Negro, Adams explained more precisely, "consistent with public safety. . . ."⁹ The rest of the country should force no unwelcome course of action upon the South. "We should not by any rash and violent measures," he counselled, "expose the Lives and property of those of our fellow Citizens who are so unfortunate as to be surrounded with these fellow Creatures by Hereditary descent or by any other means" not of their own doing.¹⁰ (The misfortune of the vast majority of Southern slave holders, he apparently felt, was not of their own doing). The present slave holders, he repeated to another correspondent, can not be reproached; they have given ample proof of their disposition toward gradual abolition.¹¹ Emancipation, then, must come—but slowly and carefully. All nations, civil and savage, he repeated, have practiced slavery; time must be allowed to eradicate the evil.¹²

What would happen if Congress, by one act, should declare all Negroes in the United States free, he wondered to John Taylor? The results, he predicted, would be calamitous. The shiftless would perish from want. Ninety-nine out of a hundred would ultimately ask their old masters to care

⁷ John Adams to Peter Ludlow, Jr., 20 February 1819: Reel 123.

⁸ John Adams to Robert J. Evans, 8 June 1819: Reel 123.

⁹ John Adams to Peter Ludlow, Jr., 20 February 1819: Reel 123.

¹⁰ John Adams to Robert J. Evans, 8 June 1819: Reel 123.

¹¹ John Adams to Rev. Henry Colman, 13 January 1817: Reel 123.

¹² John Adams to Rev. Henry Colman, 13 January 1817: Reel 123.

for them again. Many would gather into criminal bands, roaming the countryside and terrorizing society. Only a few "of the most thinking and philosophical" among them would seek subsistence by their own labor.¹³ Adams gave the most forceful expression of his philosophy of caution in a letter of 1821 to Thomas Jefferson. Throughout my life, he declared, I have constantly said to Southern gentlemen, "I cannot comprehend this Object; I must leave it to you . . . I will vote for forcing [sic.] no measure against your judgements."¹⁴ Only in time, and with the full concurrence of the South, could American slavery safely be ended.

Even emancipation would not end the problem, however, for as his letter to John Taylor indicated, Adams believed that free Negroes would create as many difficulties as slaves. If humanity dictated the duty of adopting measures for accomplishing so excellent a purpose as abolition, Adams observed, care must be taken that "severer Calamities . . . than they presently suffer" not be inflicted upon the Negroes "by reducing them to despair, or the necessity of robbery, plunder, and massacre to preserve their lives." To protect both races, provision would have to be made for furnishing Negroes with the necessities of life.¹⁵ How this might be done, Adams did not know.

Adams considered the feasibility of colonization, and almost certainly wished that it would work. Upon consideration, however, he concluded that it would not. Too "ingenious" and "humane" were the arguments raised against it by Rev. Henry Colman: 1) that the intention was to expel the lazy, the unskilled, and the criminal, precisely the Negroes least suited to support themselves in a free state upon the exposed coast of Africa, 2) that it was a delusion to think such a settlement could be provisioned as promised from America 6000 miles away, or even that Americans would be interested in trying once the Negroes were removed, and 3) that the Negroes would have to be sent back to Africa by

¹³ John Adams to John Taylor, 1814: *The Works of John Adams*, C.F. Adams, ed., 10 vols. (Boston, 1850-56) VI, 511-12.

¹⁴ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 3 February 1821: *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, L. J. Cappon ed., 2 vols. (Chapel Hill, 1959) II, 571.

¹⁵ John Adams to Robert J. Evans, 8 June 1819: Reel 123.

force, as cruel a prospect as the initial crime of enslavement. The problems arising from the Negroes' presence, Adams concluded, were "vast and ominous." He remained at a loss what should be done about them.¹⁶

Of one thing, Adams was certain: that slavery should not be allowed to expand. He was, from the first, "utterly averse" to the admission of slavery into Missouri or the western territories; and he heartily wished that "every constitutional Measure" be taken to prevent it.¹⁷ Rufus King's impassioned speech in Congress in opposition to slavery's extension, Adams thought magnificent. You have demonstrated unmistakably that Congress has the power to require the exclusion of slavery from Missouri, Adams wrote King.¹⁸ Surely a majority of the people of Missouri wished it, Adams thought—at least if they recognized their own interest. For only if slavery was excluded would free labor and the "middling classes," both essential to a prosperous society, move in.¹⁹ Whatever the outcome, Adams feared it would "stamp our National Character and lay a foundation for Calamities, if not disunion."²⁰ Upon the final outcome of the controversy, Adams for some reason did "not think it prudent to comment." Yet the decision to exclude slavery from the territories, he applauded. And he hoped that the Missouri convention would have the wisdom to prohibit slavery there.²¹ Above all, he wished that all sides would acquiesce in the compromise willingly.²²

What role Adams would have played in the anti-slavery crusade had he lived twenty years longer, of course, is impossible to say. It is not at all unlikely, however, that he would have ended up quite close to John Quincy Adams, for the arguments John Quincy advanced during the 1840's were very similar to the ones his father sketched out earlier: a moral condemnation of slavery, belief in the necessity of its

¹⁶ Rev. Henry Colman to John Adams, 1 January 1817: Reel 436; John Adams to Henry Colman, 13 January 1817: Reel 123.

¹⁷ John Adams to William Tudor, 20 November 1819: Reel 124.

¹⁸ John Adams to Rufus King, 1 December 1819: Reel 124.

¹⁹ John Adams to Louisa Catherine Adams, 23 December 1819: Reel 124.

²⁰ John Adams to Robert Walsh, 19 January 1820: Reel 124.

²¹ John Adams to Rev. Joshua Cushman, 16 March 1820: Reel 124.

²² John Adams to James Monroe, 8 March 1820: Reel 124.

ultimate extinction, yet sensitivity to the problems of immediate abolition. (Curiously enough, John Adams placed relatively little emphasis upon respect for personal property rights or established consitutional processes, both central items of his political faith, in arguing against forced abolition. While John Quincy depended quite heavily upon these points, John Adams seemed to think the prospect of social conflict was of preeminent importance). In the end, of course, John never had to face the dilemma created for his son by the slavery issue. His life was too soon over. He had time only to anticipate the problems that lay ahead, not act upon them.

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