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# OTHELLO SCORNED: THE RACIAL THOUGHT OF JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

William Jerry MacLean

New Year's Day, 1837, dawned clear and cold in the nation's capital; a strong gale blew in from the northwest. Congressman John Quincy Adams reminisced by the fire and thanked the Almighty for safe guidance through the previous year along a course "strewed with roses and beset with thorns."<sup>1</sup> Anticipating the difficult issues which Congress would face in the year ahead, the former president knew that no subject would be more controversial and none more potentially dangerous to his own career than slavery. Abolitionists had intensified their efforts dramatically during the 1830s. For these militant, humanitarian Americans, rumors sweeping out of the southern states regarding the cruel treatment and inhumane conditions suffered by black slaves had a greater chilling effect than January's cold northerly wind. The early months of 1837 became for John Quincy Adams the time when strongly held humanitarian concerns finally triumphed over deep-seated fears of miscegenation and allowed him to take a bold public stand against slavery.

Attending New Year's Day services at the Presbyterian church, Adams heard the minister read from the book of Jeremiah: "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." Reflecting upon the sermon as he wrote in his diary

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<sup>1</sup> John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of His Diary from 1795 to 1848*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (12 vols., Philadelphia 1874-1877), IX, 339.

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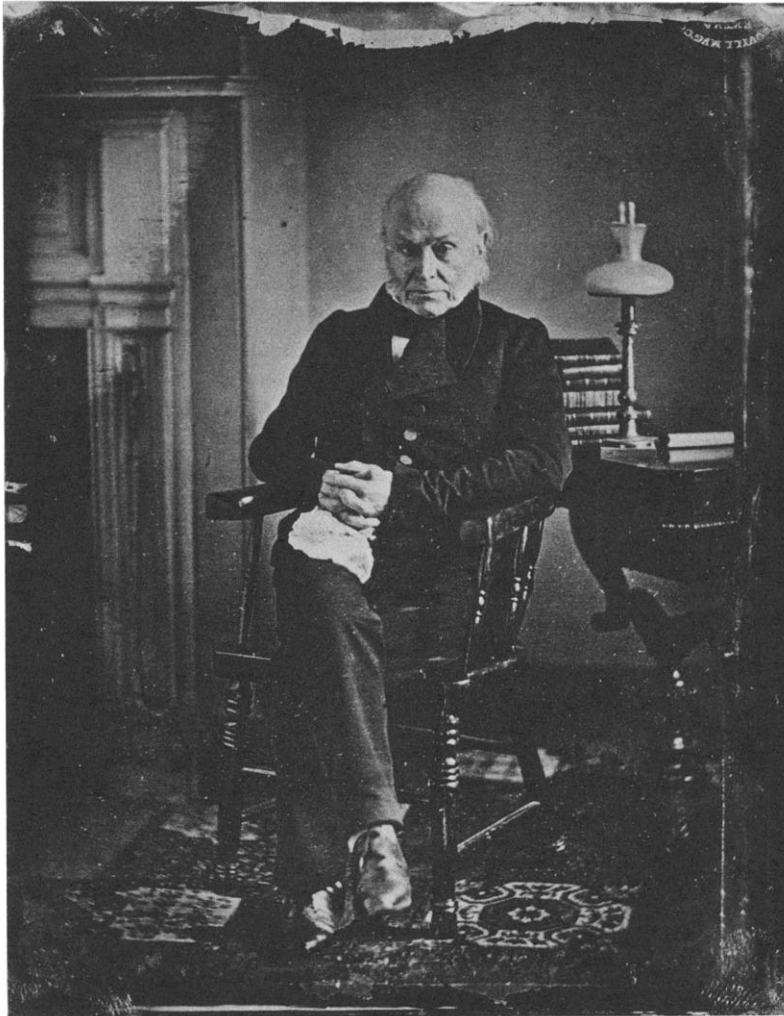
that evening, Adams confessed a deep conviction that his summer was ended, his harvest past, and he remained a sinner. By the spring of 1837, he had come to believe that his failure to make a firmer commitment to the antislavery movement might be the sin for which God would hold him accountable. While he continued to disappoint abolitionist friends by refusing to address their gatherings or endorse their goal of immediate emancipation, Adams gradually became more outspoken against slavery. He made what he considered his first antislavery speech in March 1837.<sup>2</sup>

During that year John Quincy Adams also observed his seventieth year and began his fourth term as a member of the House of Representatives. Adams' election to Congress in 1830 had represented something of a reprieve politically, and it afforded him yet another opportunity to serve his country following his failure to win a second presidential term in 1828. As a congressman, Adams' tenacious, often heroic, struggle on behalf of human rights ultimately brought him the widespread admiration and acclaim which had been desired but not received as president. The long and successful fight against the "gag rule" and the victorious defense of the *Amistad* Africans before the Supreme Court earned the congressman well deserved praise. Such triumphs, when added to the publicity attracted to the antislavery cause by Adams' speeches and the shocking suddenness of his death in the House at the height of his splendid, courageous struggle against the proslavery forces in Congress, brought the former president martyrdom—an enviable state for one as concerned with the judgment of history as an Adams.

Considering the length and importance of his public career, historians have written relatively little about John Quincy Adams. This neglect is rendered more remarkable by the fact that Adams was prominently on the scene (frequently at center stage) from the birth of the nation to the eve of the decade which brought dis-

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 340. See also John Quincy Adams to Charles Hammond, Mar. 31, 1837; Adams to Anthony Collamore, Apr. 3, 1837; Adams to the Inhabitants of the Twelfth Congressional District of Massachusetts, Mar. 3, 1837; Adams to Charles Francis Adams, Mar. 28, 1837; Adams to Minott Thayer, June 8, 1837, *The Adams Papers* (608 reels, Boston 1954-1959), reel 153. Quotations from the microfilm edition of *The Adams Papers* are used by permission of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.



**John Quincy Adams in 1843**

Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of I.N. Phelps Stokes, Edward S. Hawes, Alice  
Mary Hawes, Marion Augusta Hawes, 1937. (37.14.34)

union. Among reasons for the historian's aversion to Adams is the extremely complex and paradoxical nature of the man. For example, Adams' stand on antislavery, the very issue which made him appear heroic to many of his countrymen, confounded and confused men of his own day as well as the present. While Adams worked with and was widely praised by such leading abolitionists as Joshua Leavitt, Theodore Dwight Weld, Lewis Tappan, and Benjamin Lundy, others, including William Lloyd Garrison and James G. Birney, minimized Adams' role in the antislavery movement. In more recent years, works by Bennett Champ Clark, Robert E. Riegel, and Richard O. Boyer are generally complimentary of Adams' efforts on behalf of abolition while Dwight L. Dumond is a contemporary historian who contends that Adams' role in support of the right of petition gave him an undeserved prominence in the antislavery movement.<sup>3</sup>

John Quincy Adams' racial views, which might logically be expected to have influenced his position on issues concerning emancipation and civil rights for black Americans, were also paradoxical and controversial. Adams' attitudes regarding race and civil rights are important for a number of other reasons. He and his father were the only nonslaveholding presidents elected during the first half century of the nation's life; during much of that period, John Quincy Adams was the most visible spokesman for New England, the section which furnished a disproportionate share of the reform leadership of the era; and, beginning in the late 1830s and continuing for more than a decade, Adams was a

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<sup>3</sup> James M. McPherson, "The Fight Against the Gag Rule: Joshua Leavitt and Antislavery Insurgency in the Whig Party, 1839-1842," *Journal of Negro History*, 48 (July 1963), 177-195. Garrison ridiculed suggestions by Leavitt and John G. Whittier that Adams was a prominent figure in the abolition movement. Following Adams' death, Garrison caustically wrote, "In Mr. Adams, the slave never had a champion." Wendell Phillips Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of His Life Told by His Children* (4 vols., New York 1885), III, 97-98, 238. Birney wrote that Adams lacked the "prime elements for leadership in a great enterprise [*sic*] whose basis is Human Rights." Dwight L. Dumond, ed., *Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857* (2 vols., New York 1938), II, 671-672. Bennett Champ Clark, *John Quincy Adams, "Old Man Eloquent"* (Boston 1932), 9, 364-365; Robert E. Riegel, *Young America, 1830-1840* (Norman, Okla. 1949), 300; Richard O. Boyer, *The Legend of John Brown: A Biography and a History* (New York 1972), 290-301; Dwight L. Dumond, *Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America* (New York 1961), 243-244.

leading national figure in the crusade for freedom and civil rights for blacks.

Very little is known about childhood experiences which might have influenced John Quincy Adams' attitudes about blacks, although it is known that both parents were relatively tolerant regarding racial issues. Despite the fact that the Quincy area included few Negroes, the Adams family hired black servants, and it is likely that young John Quincy had black playmates. Abigail Adams was an early, active supporter of civil rights, having taken a leading role in desegregating the neighborhood schools. She also taught young black servants to read and write in her home and devotedly cared for her sick domestics. But, while Abigail Adams was liberal in her advocacy of civil rights, she also proved herself a typical product of her times by expressing shock at the love scenes in *Othello*. After attending a performance of the play in London in 1785, she wrote, "My whole soul shuddered when I saw the sooty Moor touch the fair Desdemona." Disturbed by her reaction, Abigail reproached herself, "The liberal mind regards not what nation or climate it springs up in, nor what *color* or complexion the man is of." John Quincy's writings reveal that he shared both the deep aversion to slavery and the strong ethnocentric bias of his parents.<sup>4</sup>

Both parents had constantly stressed the importance of virtue to young John Quincy Adams. His resulting obsession with virtue frequently caused Adams to be extremely critical in his assessment of the morals of others, and provided an additional reason for his refusal to support some of the reform movements of his day. Indeed, virtue was more important than race in Adams' judgment of groups and individuals. In 1837, while struggling to introduce antislavery petitions (some of which bore the names of women and slaves) on the House floor, Adams informed his constituents that he would support the right to petition government "by virtuous women of any colour or complexion."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Page Smith, *John Adams* (Garden City, N.Y. 1962), II, 926, 1101. John R. Howe, Jr., has incorrectly stated that the Adams family hired only white servants. John R. Howe, Jr., "John Adams' Views of Slavery," *Journal of Negro History*, 49 (July 1964), 201-206. Abigail Adams was especially devoted to "Phebe," an elderly black servant of "high African blood." Smith, *John Adams*, II, 926, 1101.

<sup>5</sup> Adams to the Inhabitants of the Twelfth Congressional District of Massachusetts, Mar. 3, 1837, *Adams Papers*, reel 153. Wealthy Scot industrialist

Two of the nation's prominent newspapers publicly accused Congressman Adams of racism during the winter of 1835-1836. Both the *National Gazette* of Philadelphia and the Georgetown *Metropolitan* criticized the former president for using racist terms in a critique he had written of a Shakespearean drama. The controversy raised by the accusations contained in these editorials bothered John Quincy Adams and provides valuable insight into his attitudes concerning the matter of race. Although Adams' public and private papers are largely free of racist statements, there are infrequent derogatory passages concerning blacks. The fact that Adams' writings do not contain more racist remarks may be considered rather remarkable considering Adams' extensive travels, his meticulous habit of recording everything, and an association with blacks which had begun in his youth.

The editors charged that Adams had been unduly harsh in his criticism of Desdemona because of his aversion to her love affair with the black Othello. Pointing out that Adams had labeled the Venetian maid's passion for Othello "unnatural," both editors accused the congressman of reading a racist theme into the play which its author had not intended. The object of the criticism was an article written by Adams and submitted to the *New England Magazine* by his friend, Dr. George Parkman. Adams wrote that he had never had much sympathy for Desdemona because of the wanton nature of her character. He referred to Othello as "a rude, unbleached African soldier" and termed the scene involving "her fondling with Othello . . . disgusting."<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the two editors of the *Metropolitan*, S. D. Langtree and J. L. O'Sullivan, were critical of Adams' remarks, not because of the references to his disgust at the interracial affair, but because they contended that the former president confused Othello with a common "*African negro*," when he was actually "one of the

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Robert Owen tried unsuccessfully for years to gain Adams' support for his utopian communities, including New Harmony. Adams judged such projects guilty of promoting "promiscuous intercourse of the sexes." John Quincy Adams to Reverend Bernard Whitman, Dec. 25, 1833, *ibid.*, reel 151. See also Adams, *Memoirs*, XII, 117.

<sup>6</sup> John Quincy Adams, "Misconceptions of Shakspeare [*sic*] Upon the Stage," *The New England Magazine*, 9 (Dec. 1835), 435-440; Adams to Dr. George Parkman, Dec. 31, 1835, *Adams Papers*, reel 152; Georgetown *Metropolitan*, Dec. 28, 1835.

chivalrous race of *Moors* so memorable in Spanish history . . . as soldiers of fortune in Christian armies.”<sup>7</sup>

John Quincy Adams hastened to defend himself against the charges of racism leveled by the two newspapers. Writing to Dr. Parkman, whom he had authorized to publish his critique of *Othello*, the congressman argued, “If the colour of Othello is not as vital to the whole tragedy as the age of Juliet is to her character and destiny, then I have read Shakespeare in vain.” Noting several specific references to Othello’s race, including the author’s emphasis upon the Moor’s thick lips in Scene I, Adams wrote:

Who can sympathize with the love of Desdemona? The daughter of a Venitian [*sic*] nobleman, born and educated to a splendid and lofty station in the community—she falls in love and makes a runaway match with a Blackamoor. . . . The great moral lesson of the Tragedy of Othello, is that black and white blood cannot be intermingled in marriage without a gross outrage upon the laws of nature, and that in such violations nature will vindicate her laws.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Adams’ strong objections to Othello as a mate for Desdemona were based upon grounds of both social class and race. Apparently, during the period 1830-1831, he had first recorded his objections to the *Othello* love scene. In a conversation with James Kent, former Chancellor of New York, Adams mentioned virtue and race as major factors in causing his disdain for Desdemona: “I took little interest in the character of Desdemona, whose sensual passions I thought over-ardent, so as to reconcile her to a passion for a black man; and although faithful to him, I thought the poet had painted her as a lady of rather easy virtue.” Writing to Pennsylvania author Charles Jared Ingersoll in February 1831, Adams referred to Desdemona as a “wanton trollop” and “fair damsel of Venice,” who received her just dessert for “falling in love with a blackamoor.”<sup>9</sup>

Considering nineteenth century moral and social standards, these powerful Shakespearean love scenes presumably were no more appalling to John Quincy Adams than to Anglo-Saxons generally. Adams’ remarks reflected early Victorian standards which,

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<sup>7</sup> Georgetown *Metropolitan*, Dec. 28, 1835.

<sup>8</sup> Adams to Dr. George Parkman, Dec. 31, 1835, *Adams Papers*, reel 152.

<sup>9</sup> Adams, *Memoirs*, VIII, 423-424; Adams to Charles J. Ingersoll, Feb. 3, 1831, *Adams Papers*, reel 150.



as Winthrop Jordan and others have pointed out, equated whiteness with purity, cultural progress, and Christianity; blackness with sin, backwardness, and paganism. In the United States attitudes against mixing of the races hardened during the course of the nineteenth century, resulting in the usage of harsh new terms such as "miscegenation."<sup>10</sup>

Adams' attitude toward blacks can, perhaps, best be explained as stemming naturally from the Puritan mind. That is to say that, while being fully committed to such lofty American values as freedom and equality of opportunity, he was capable at the same time of believing in group superiority, a concept which contained vestiges of racism. Adams shared the view of his Puritan forebears that white New Englanders were the allies of God whose manifest destiny it was to spread their superior institutions across the North American continent.<sup>11</sup>

John Quincy Adams was deeply bothered by what he considered excessive sexual desire or conduct and by the idea of racial mixture. Making a sarcastic reference to rumors of slave breeding in the southern states in 1830, Adams raised the question of why, if Maryland and Virginia planters could breed Negro slaves for exportation to the cotton and sugar plantations of the lower South, they should not also "breed them for stage players and husbands to Desdemonas." This revealing statement, contained in a letter to his son, Charles Francis, underscores Adams' phobia regarding the idea of interracial sex. Twelve years later, writing to his old friend in Philadelphia, Richard Rush, Adams repeated these views. Denouncing slavery and slavemasters, he expressed revulsion at the idea of the southern planter "breeding his own children for sale fattening upon the sweat of the brow of his slaves; scourging their backs in grateful return for their toils;

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<sup>10</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill 1968), 3-43. The word "miscegenation" has no scientific base and was not used during Adams' day. "Amalgamation" was the term then used to refer to racial mixing. "Miscegenation" was introduced during the bitter years of the Civil War by two New York "Copperhead" journalists in an attempt to discredit President Lincoln by associating him with abolitionists who allegedly favored interracial sex. Alexander Thomas and Samuel Sillen, *Racism and Psychiatry* (New York 1972), 101-105, 111.

<sup>11</sup> Philip L. Berg, "Racism and the Puritan Mind," *Phylon*, 36 (Spring 1975), 1-7; Adams, *Memoirs*, VII, 90.

while proclaiming slavery the cornerstone of the edifice of freedom."<sup>12</sup>

An earlier conversation with John C. Calhoun, while both were members of President Monroe's cabinet, had triggered within Adams an interesting idea concerning the possible consequences of amalgamation. Contemplating how abolition might occur with a minimum of bloodshed, he wrote, in this instance at least, rather dispassionately on the subject of interracial sex. Adams predicted in his diary that arguments over slavery would bring about a civil war and forecast that such a conflict would be followed by "the universal emancipation of the slaves. A more remote but perhaps not less certain consequence would be the extirpation of the African race on this continent, by the gradually bleaching process of intermixture, where the white portion is already so predominant."<sup>13</sup>

Adams could not rid himself of his revulsion for miscegenation, however, and sometimes used such derogatory expressions as "half-breed" and "mongrel" in referring to persons of mixed race. Writing to abolitionist leader Benjamin Lundy in 1836, Adams denounced what he believed to be a conspiracy between high officials in the United States, Mexico, and Texas to cede the latter to the United States. In this instance, he was especially critical of the "craven cowardice [*sic*] of the mongrel Mexican." Three years later, Adams used similar language in describing a confrontation with British antislavery advocate John Scoble. The congressman termed Scoble's proposal of immediate emancipation of West Indian slaves impractical. In his diary, Adams boasted that he had successfully pressed Scoble into admitting that if the Englishman's scheme was implemented, the islands would ultimately be taken over by "a mongrel half-breed of African and European blood" who would proceed to drive whites away.<sup>14</sup>

Adams was not always consistent in his statements concerning mulattoes. Early in 1837 he received a highly laudatory letter from a Thomas Gaillard, resident of Haiti, praising the congress-

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<sup>12</sup> Adams to Charles Francis Adams, May 13, 1830; Adams to Richard Rush, Dec. 30, 1842, *Adams Papers*, reels 150, 154.

<sup>13</sup> Adams, *Memoirs*, IV, 531.

<sup>14</sup> Adams to Benjamin Lundy, Dec. 30, 1836, *Adams Papers*, reel 152; Scoble was traveling in the United States and lecturing against slavery in 1839. Adams, *Memoirs*, X, 129-130.

man for his growing reputation as a defender of minority rights. The Haitian mechanic, son of a white father and black mother, sent Adams several pamphlets supporting the idea of racial equality. Obviously flattered by Gaillard's praise, Adams expressed pleasure that his speeches in Congress on behalf of "the natural and inalienable rights of your maternal race" had received publicity outside the boundaries of the United States. While carefully avoiding committing his own position on the issue, Adams referred to Gaillard's arguments in support of racial equality as "powerful." The congressman also expressed interest in the mechanic's thesis that the large and growing number of mulatto people in the American South and the West Indies was the result of "the frequent sexual union sought by the white man with the Negro woman."<sup>15</sup>

John Quincy Adams had always rejected the argument that slaves were mere articles of property and thus not entitled to the basic rights of man. Disagreeing with southerners John C. Calhoun and William H. Crawford in 1820, he indicated dissatisfaction with the Missouri Compromise. Writing in his diary following a discussion with Calhoun about the nature of black slavery, Adams labeled the proslavery position immoral and unchristian. "What," he asked rhetorically, "can be more false and heartless than this doctrine which makes the first and holiest rights of humanity to depend upon the color of the skin?" Years later, while trying to convince the House to accept petitions allegedly signed by black slaves, Adams scorned the idea that the principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence, which his father had helped to write, applied only to whites.<sup>16</sup>

John Quincy Adams had little patience with those who were ever ready to crusade for civil rights for whites only. Questioning politician-historian George Bancroft's definition of "democracy" in 1835, Adams demanded to know what the Jacksonians meant by the phrase "government of the people." He told Bancroft that years earlier, while listening to Calhoun propose a toast to "*universal education*," he had been tempted to suggest the qualifying words, "*skin deep*," to the South Carolinian. While he had man-

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<sup>15</sup> Adams to Thomas Gaillard, Feb. 21, 1837, *Adams Papers*, reel 153.

<sup>16</sup> Adams, *Memoirs*, V, 11; Adams to E. Wright, Jr., Apr. 16, 1837, *Adams Papers*, reel 153.

aged to resist that temptation, Adams had been captivated by the thought of what the results of a true policy of universal education would have upon the state of South Carolina.<sup>17</sup>

Adams considered southerners who proclaimed their support of liberty and the inalienable rights of man hypocrites, but he knew that north of Mason and Dixon's line civil rights also suffered. Writing to Pennsylvania abolitionist Arnold Buffum in 1838, he predicted that antislavery forces could expect very little success in their efforts to convince the slaveholders of the South to free their chattels as long as the laws of northern states continued to discriminate against free blacks by denying them such basic rights as the franchise or trial by jury. Yet, the congressman optimistically prophesied to a group of free blacks from Ohio in 1841 that the day would soon come when justice would be color-blind.<sup>18</sup>

John Quincy Adams frequently, in both diary and letters, recorded his keen displeasure regarding brutal treatment accorded blacks. In an open letter to his constituents in 1837, he ridiculed southern slavemasters who insisted upon classifying their chattels "with horses and dogs and cats." He was horrified that even educated southerners could sanction extremely cruel treatment of human beings, noting that Richmond editors wrote nonchalantly about the idea of completely exterminating the slaves.<sup>19</sup> "The condition of the African race in this Union has ever been to me a subject of deep concern," Adams wrote reformer Gerrit Smith in 1837. Evidence of such concern is recorded in Adams' diary of 1820, when, while serving as secretary of state, he was appalled at the cruelty meted blacks by the Washington police force. While he protested against this double standard of justice in his diary and recorded his belief that slavery was the greatest evil in Amer-

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<sup>17</sup> Adams to George Bancroft, Oct. 25, 1835, *Adams Papers*, reel 152.

<sup>18</sup> Adams, *Memoirs*, IX, 180; Adams to Arnold Buffum, Apr. 18, 1838; Adams to D. Jenkins and Others, Committee of the People of Colour of Columbus, Ohio, Apr. 15, 1841, *Adams Papers*, reels 153, 154. As late as 1860, blacks held the franchise in but four northern states. Eugene H. Berwanger, "Negro Phobia in Northern Proslavery and Antislavery Thought," *Phylon*, 33 (Fall 1972), 272.

<sup>19</sup> Adams to the Inhabitants of the Twelfth Congressional District of Massachusetts, Mar. 3, 1837; Adams to Ambrose Spencer, Sept. 14, 1831, *Adams Papers*, reels 153, 150.

ica, Adams took no action to help remedy the situation at that time.<sup>20</sup>

His opposition to the infamous “gag rule,” which Congress had adopted in 1836, and the promptings of his conscience finally brought Adams to take a stand on the controversial anti-slavery issue in 1837. Using the popular cause of freedom of petition to persuade his constituents to support his efforts to prevent southerners from continuing to treat blacks brutally, Adams also demonstrated his increasing impatience with racism within the House of Representatives:

How the House could disregard its dignity by receiving a petition is beyond my comprehension. The only reason assigned for it is the condition of the Petitioners, because they are *Slaves*. The sentiment in the bosom of any free American that one sixth part of its countrymen, are by the accident of their birth deprived even of the natural right of prayer is degrading enough to human nature, but that because in one portion of this Union the Native American, becomes by descent from African Ancestry an outcast of human nature, classed with the brute creation, within the boundaries of the State in which he was born, therefore it is beneath the *dignity* of the general Legislative Assembly of a Nation founding its existence upon the natural and inalienable rights of man to listen to his prayer or even to receive his petitions is an opinion to which I trust your judgments will never assent, and a Sentiment which your heart will reject with disgust.

The powerful wording in this speech, which Adams considered his first genuine antislavery address, reveals deep-seated principles which previously had been carefully confined to private letters and the pages of his diary. Now that he considered himself committed to the abolition movement, Adams used more forceful terms in condemning slave masters and their vile system. He would not, the congressman stated emphatically, accept the irrational argument that black Americans and their descendants were to continue to be deprived of the basic rights of man unless they became “bleached into Anglo-Saxons.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Adams to Gerrit Smith, Apr. 5, 1837; Adams to Charles Francis Adams, Dec. 19, 1835; Adams to William L. Stone, Oct. 20, 1832, *ibid.*, reels 151-153; Adams, *Memoirs*, V, 191; Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison*, III, 97-98, 238.

<sup>21</sup> Adams to the Inhabitants of the Twelfth Congressional District of Massachusetts, Mar. 3, 1837, Adams to E. Wright, Jr., Apr. 16, 1837, *Adams*

By 1841, four years after delivering his first public abolitionist remarks, Adams had become very vocal in his attacks upon slavery and much more tolerant of abolitionists. Two decades earlier, he had privately contemplated what life as an antislavery advocate might be like. Writing in his diary in 1820, Adams praised abolitionism as “vast in its compass, awful in its prospects, sublime and beautiful in its issue. A life devoted to it would be nobly spent or sacrificed.”<sup>22</sup> Then in the midst of his tenure as secretary of state, however, and with future designs upon the presidency, Adams remained years away from being either noble or sacrificial enough to join publicly the abolitionist cause. Before such a union would occur, the proslavery forces would have to discredit themselves further, partly with the aid of Adams, and abolitionists would have to become more respectable—especially in the Twelfth Congressional District of Massachusetts.

Historians who insist that John Quincy Adams tempered his aid to abolitionism because of future political considerations are, thus, correct. Adams was a much more adept politician, especially during his tenure in the House, than either he or his biographers tended to admit. Had the congressman been solely concerned with political consequences, however, he would have hedged on the issue for several more years. Throughout this period, anti-Negro prejudice was rampant among northern whites, convinced as they were that blacks were an innately inferior race which should remain distinct from, and servants to, Caucasians. Few northern communities welcomed an influx of blacks, fearing that significant increase in the Negro population would lead to miscegenation. Paradoxically, many active, fervent abolitionists also were racists; their colonization schemes sought to relocate blacks outside the United States.<sup>23</sup>

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*Papers*, reel 153. Adopted as a rule of the House in May 1836, upon the recommendation of Henry Laurens Pinckney of South Carolina, the “gag rule” contained three resolutions: (1) Congress had no constitutional power to interfere with slavery in any state; (2) Congress ought not to interfere with slavery in the District of Columbia; and (3) all petitions or resolutions concerning slavery or abolition would be tabled without being referred to the House. The rule was finally rescinded upon a motion by Adams in March 1844. For an excellent account of Adams’ role in the “gag rule” episode, see Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union* (New York 1956), 326-351.

<sup>22</sup> Adams, *Memoirs*, IV, 531.

<sup>23</sup> Berwanger, “Negro Phobia in Northern Proslavery and Antislavery Thought,” 266-275; George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White*

In a letter to an abolitionist editor in Cincinnati, written in March 1837, Adams explained his earlier reluctance to aid the antislavery movement and his more recent decision to support that cause. Calling the growing controversy over slavery a “conflict for Life and Death,” Adams contended that he had been willing to accept the compromise between the free and slave states as set forth in the Constitution because of his conviction that slavery would gradually end. Great Britain’s efforts to end slavery and the willingness exhibited by southern presidents to work toward compromise had encouraged this optimistic viewpoint. Now, however, as he informed editor Charles Hammond, Adams no longer believed that peaceful emancipation was possible. In support of his change in opinion, Adams pointed to the growing fear within the slaveholding states concerning the emancipation of slaves in the West Indies and South America. These fears had increased with the news of Nat Turner’s bloody insurrection in Virginia. Because of this changing situation, Adams wrote sarcastically, “Slavery, driven from her strong holds of power, has changed her tone and becomes a Reasoner.”<sup>24</sup>

The congressman referred, of course, to the newly adopted position among some southern spokesmen which attempted to defend slavery as a positive, civilizing force. Specifically, Adams named William and Mary College professor Thomas Dew and South Carolina politicians George McDuffie and William Harper as the founders of this new defense of slavery, and he caustically charged:

Their first principle is that the negro is an inferior race, neither professing nor entitled to the rights of man, but born for servitude and destined to it as long as this Globe shall last. That this degradation of the African black was intended by the Creator, for the express benefit of the white *Anglo-Saxon*, for his temporal and Spiritual improvement, in wisdom, virtue, and especially free-

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*Mind* (New York 1971), 3-12, 121-124. Adams always opposed the colonization movement because he believed such a plan both impractical and cruel to blacks. He considered colonization a conspiracy by slaveholders to inflate the price of slaves. Adams also contended that the removal of the talent and industry of the colonized blacks would be a loss to the United States. Adams, *Memoirs*, IV, 292-294, 354-356.

<sup>24</sup> Adams to Charles Hammond, Mar. 31, 1837, *Adams Papers*, reel 153.

dom—and that your negro driver is the only man upon Earth who understands and practices the true principle of Liberty.

Adams rejected this new southern position as a sham and frankly confessed to Hammond that his decision not to take a firmer public stand against slavery was prompted by the political realities of the times. Noting that in his own congressional district “the abolition cause is in special disfavour,” Adams indicated despair at finding himself virtually alone in challenging the proslavery delegates in debate upon the floor of the House.<sup>25</sup>

Adams observed that the antislavery quarrel had placed a tremendous strain upon the various religious denominations in Massachusetts by the late 1830s and noted that forces on both sides of the question attempted to use the Bible to support their positions. In a letter to abolitionist Gerrit Smith, he also remarked upon the trend among southern clergymen, including the Reverend James Smylie, a Mississippi Presbyterian, to argue that Noah’s curse upon Ham had resulted in the beginning of the Negro race and thus served as justification for black slavery. Even if the Negro’s existence and condition of servitude had originated from such a curse, Adams argued that the sacrifice of Christ would have absolved his sins along with the others of mankind.<sup>26</sup>

During the last years of his life, Adams’ own writings are filled with biblical phrases regarding slavery. He contended, in a letter to New York antislavery men William H. Seward and Christopher Morgan in 1844, that the “Hellborn spirit of *Slavery*” was upon the nation like the Philistines had plagued Samson. He had come to view abolition as an “Angel of light,” which would triumph over the evil institution. Adams had earlier prophesied that a merciful God would ultimately send his destroying Angel to exterminate slavery. Vigorously opposing the annexation of Texas, Adams again associated virtue with freedom. The congressman condemned attempts to restore slavery in “a land where once that curse of God has been extinguished.” Slavery was a “painted Harlot usurping the name of freedom.” The reference to slavery

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* After reading Dew’s proslavery arguments in 1833, Adams declared them “intellectual perversion” and was more convinced than ever that the slavery issue would bring disunion. Adams, *Memoirs*, IX, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Adams to Gerrit Smith, Apr. 5, 1837, *Adams Papers*, reel 153; Adams, *Memoirs*, IX, 344, 544.



in March 1837 as “that curse of God” reflects Adams’ continuing inner struggle to solve his own dilemma regarding race, at the very time that he made his commitment to the abolition movement.<sup>27</sup>

Abolitionists reading Adams’ pronouncements on behalf of human rights during the 1830s were understandably perturbed by the inconsistency between what the congressman said that he believed and his meager efforts against slavery. Adams’ stubborn refusal even to support an end to slavery in the District of Columbia, while simultaneously leading the fight against the odious “gag rule,” quite naturally exasperated those who had supported the abolition movement for years. In Adams, they saw a politician eager to reap a harvest not rightfully his. Yet moderate anti-slavery men, such as Lewis Tappan, Benjamin Lundy, and Joshua Leavitt, recognized Adams’ worth to their cause. He brought to the abolition movement a respectability it had never attained, as well as a brilliant mind, an eloquent voice, a national reputation, and a career of public service which extended to the revolutionary era. Abolitionists were well aware of the fact that Adams had become, by the late 1830s, virtually an American institution.

The numerous, fervent exclamations of sympathy for enslaved black Americans present throughout Adams’ private papers prove that both the evils of the peculiar institution and his own vacillation on the abolition question bothered the congressman greatly. His natural inclination to support emancipation was undoubtedly tempered by a conviction that abolition was certain to bring about increased amalgamation of the races, a condition which Adams considered sinful and immoral—a violation of the laws of nature and of God. Visions of future Othellos in American society disturbed John Quincy Adams and caused him to weigh the question of which sin was greater: Negro slavery or increased intermixture of the races.<sup>28</sup>

Another striking revelation which emerges from a study of Adams’ reactions to the problems posed by racism and slavery is

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<sup>27</sup> Adams to William H. Seward and Christopher Morgan, Aug. 8, 1844; Adams to Gerrit Smith, Apr. 5, 1837; Adams to William Slade, Aug. 1847; Adams to the Inhabitants of the Twelfth Congressional District of Massachusetts, Mar. 3, 1837, *Adams Papers*, reels 153-155.

<sup>28</sup> Adams, *Memoirs*, X, 129-130.

that of John Quincy Adams as seasoned politician. As a congressman, he finally mastered the political skills which his presidency had noticeably lacked. Adams' brilliant timing in joining forces with the abolitionists, in addition to a move dictated by conscience, deserves recognition as being a pragmatic step which helped to achieve the greatest successes which, prior to emancipation, the antislavery forces would win. In leading the fight in Congress to rescind the "gag rule" and convincing the Supreme Court to free the captured *Amistad* Africans, Adams won two of the most important victories for civil rights in the nation's history, triumphs which abolitionists throughout America applauded.<sup>29</sup>

Adams' tardiness in attacking slavery publicly may also be attributed to a keener insight into the true nature of mid-nineteenth century American society than most of his contemporaries possessed. Few perceived, as he did, that anti-Negro racism on the part of white citizens presented the nation a dilemma which would prove even more difficult to solve than slavery. Consistent evidence of this deep-seated racism among his colleagues in the House, as well as among his political constituents, served as a constant reminder to Adams that the racism which undergirded slavery was not confined to the South but was nationwide.

John Quincy Adams' early insight into the magnitude of white racism in America, although virtually unnoticed during his lifetime, preceded Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* by more than a century. Adams, however, was not afforded the luxury of being a detached social critic. As a prominent statesman-politician, he was forced to wrestle with the problems posed by the dilemma in the nation's highest legal and legislative arenas. During the decade and a half between the Missouri debates and congressional adoption of the "gag rule," Adams had successfully suppressed bothersome ideas concerning human slavery to the subconscious levels of his mind. When, as happened from time to time, guilt feelings surfaced, Adams found release through silent protests penned into his diary. By early 1837, however, the guilt would no longer remain suppressed. Deep, humanitarian concerns enabled Adams to overcome some of his fears that emancipation would produce the ultimate *bête noire*—American Othellos. But he also realized that the struggle for human

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<sup>29</sup> Bemis' biography includes a good description of Adams' role in the *Amistad* case. Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, 384-415.

freedom, a noble cause which his heart had long supported, required his complete dedication. The choice was a difficult one for John Quincy Adams to make. His decision ensured a future of uncertainty, along a course "strewed with roses and beset with thorns."