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Coming to Terms with Samuel Adams

PAULINE MAIER

WHEN JOHN ADAMS REFLECTED on how future historians would remember his cousin Samuel, he was filled with forebodings. Samuel Adams's character "will never be accurately known to posterity," he wrote, "as it was never sufficiently known to its own age." And on October 3, 1803, the day after Samuel Adams's death, a Salem clergyman confided very similar observations to his diary. Adams seemed to have "an impenetrable secrecy," the Reverend William Bentley claimed; he was "feared by his enemies" yet remained "too secret to be loved by his friends."¹

The accuracy of these statements is open to question. They are nonetheless arresting because both observers knew Samuel Adams in life, yet found in him an elusiveness that has evaded his biographers. As the nation moved further from Samuel Adams's lifetime, portraits of him became increasingly confident, even stereotypic, and hostile. There could be no better occasion than this Bicentennial year to re-examine the standard interpretation of Adams, to see how it evolved, to evaluate it against historical evidence, and to reflect on whatever dissonance emerges. The results are important because they open the way for a far different understanding of Adams and, beyond that, of the curious way Americans have recalled their revolutionary past.

ALL STUDIES OF SAMUEL ADAMS turn about one central observation—that his career climaxed in 1776. The son of a Boston maltster, Samuel followed his father into the politics of his town and province. He became a member and soon clerk of the Massachusetts assembly, a leader of the Boston town meeting, and an important person in the informal or extralegal local political groups of the late colonial period. A friend, if not a member, of the Loyal Nine, a club that became Boston's Sons of Liberty in the Stamp Act crisis, he

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¹ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Quincy, May 27, 1819, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon, vol. 2: 1812–1826 (Chapel Hill, 1959), 541; Bentley, diary, Oct. 3, 1803, in *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D.* (Salem, 1911), 3: 49.

was a leading supporter of the nonimportation effort that opposed the Townshend duties, a spokesman for the town in its effort to expel royal troops after the “massacre,” the organizer of Boston’s Committee of Correspondence, and an important participant in the province’s transition from regular to revolutionary government. He served as a delegate to the Continental Congress and signed the Declaration of Independence.

During these years, both in guiding Massachusetts through the decade before independence and in forging a durable intercolonial union, his importance was of the first rank. Thomas Jefferson called him “truly the *Man of the Revolution*”; John Adams said he was “born and tempered a wedge of steel to split the knot of *lignum vitae*” that tied North America to Great Britain. His exclusion, along with that of John Hancock, from General Thomas Gage’s proclamation of amnesty in 1774 established and heightened his fame, perhaps, as Mercy Warren suggested, beyond what was justified by his actual abilities and contributions. “Everybody in Europe knows he was one of the prime movers of the late Revolution,” the marquis de Chastellux noted in 1780. Little wonder, then, that upon his arrival in France John Adams had found himself constantly confounded with “le Fameux Adams”—cousin Samuel.²

Considering his age when independence was declared, Samuel Adams might well have played a less critical role in the Revolution thereafter. He was fifty-four in 1776, that is, ten years the senior of George Washington, thirteen of John Adams; he was twenty-one years older than Thomas Jefferson, twenty-nine than James Madison, thirty-three than Alexander Hamilton. Yet he served tirelessly on committees of the Continental Congress from its outset until 1781, a period in which the administrative as well as legislative burden of the new nation was borne by a handful of harried delegates. He then returned to Massachusetts, never to leave again. He was chosen president of the Massachusetts senate, lieutenant governor, then governor, an office to which he first succeeded on the death of John Hancock in 1793 and then was himself elected in 1794, 1795, and 1796. These latter offices were, however, granted him partly in recognition of earlier services, which were acknowledged by his current political opponents. Even those who refused to vote for Adams as governor, John Eliot testified in 1809, thought “he did worthily in those times, when instead of building up a government suited to the condition of a people, we had only to pull down a government becoming every day more tyrannical.” Yet “from his age, habits, and local prejudice,” Samuel Adams seemed to many unsuited “to mingle with politicians of a later period, whose views must necessarily be more comprehensive, and whose object was to restrain rather than give a loose to popular feelings.”³

² Jefferson quoted in John C. Miller, *Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda* (Boston, 1936), 343; John Adams to William Tudor, Quincy, June 5, 1817, and Adams, diary, Feb. 11, 1779, in *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles F. Adams (Boston, 1850–56), 10: 263; 3: 189–90; Mercy Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1805), 1: 211–12; François-Jean, marquis de Chastellux, *Travels in North America in the Years 1780, 1781 and 1782*, ed. Howard C. Rice, Jr. (Chapel Hill, 1963), 1: 142.

³ John Eliot, *A Biographical Dictionary* (Salem, 1807), 7.

Samuel Adams's image as a troublemaker, which later generations would develop—a master at pulling down government, at loosing the passions of the people—was already there when Eliot wrote. But another theme was equally, and perhaps more, persistent in the early nineteenth century: Adams was “austere . . . rigid . . . opinionated.” “His conversation was in praise of old times, his manners were austere, his remarks never favourable to the rising generation.” He belonged to another era, continuing to wear the tricorne hat of Revolutionary days, convinced that “the Puritans of New England were the men to set an example to the world.” Eliot's observations were seconded by William Tudor, who was born in 1779, fifty-seven years after Adams, and found that Revolutionary leader a man of “too much sternness and pious bigotry.” He was “a strict calvinist,” Tudor wrote, “and probably, no individual of his day had so much the feelings of the ancient puritans.”⁴ And so Samuel Adams was excluded from the pantheon of Revolutionary leaders around which Americans were asked to rally in the early nineteenth century. His first full biography, by William V. Wells, a descendant, was published only in 1865, more than a half century after John Marshall's *Life of George Washington* went to press and Mason Weems began producing his popular panegyrics to Washington and other Revolutionary heroes.⁵

John Adams noted this neglect with disapproval. “If the American Revolution was a blessing, and not a curse,” he wrote in 1819, “the name and character of Samuel Adams ought to be preserved. It will bear a strict and critical examination even by the inveterate malice of his enemies. A systematic course has been pursued for thirty years to run him down.” Constantly John defended Samuel, in conversations with the Englishman Richard Oswald against extravagant versions of “trouble-making”—“You may have been taught to believe . . . that he eats little children; but I assure you he is a man of humanity and candor”—and later against the more personal charges of William Tudor. If Samuel was stern, “a man in his situation and circumstances must possess a large fund of sternness of stuff, or he will soon be annihilated.” As for bigotry, “he certainly had not more than Governor Hutchinson and Secretary Oliver,” his old opponents, but “lived and conversed freely with all sectarians,” never seeking to proselytize. Samuel was of course a Calvinist; “a Calvinist he had been educated, and so had been all his ancestors for two hundred years.”⁶ Already, it seemed, interpretations of Samuel Adams were being distorted because a younger generation had lost touch with a world so soon gone and imposed upon the dead its own, more modern expectations. Yet John himself was responding to an issue that had only recently taken on importance: was, or was not, Samuel Adams a suitable

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6, 16; Stewart Beach, *Samuel Adams: The Fateful Years, 1764-1776* (New York, 1965), 310; John Adams to William Tudor, Quincy, June 5, 1817, in *Works of John Adams*, 10: 262; William Tudor, *The Life of James Otis* (Boston, 1823), 274-75.

⁵ William V. Wells, *The Life and Public Services of Samuel Adams* (Boston, 1865); John Marshall, *The Life of George Washington* (Philadelphia, 1804-07); Mason Weems, *The Life of Washington*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe (1808; rpt., Cambridge, Mass., 1962).

⁶ John Adams quoted in Wells, *Samuel Adams*, 1: v; John Adams, diary, Nov. 15, 1782, and Adams to Tudor, Quincy, June 5, 1817, in *Works of John Adams*, 3: 310; 10: 262.

national hero? To a large extent that problem remains central in writings about him, and so historians have had to consider not only the human reality of their subject, but also his appropriateness as a model for modern Americans.

When Wells finally wrote Samuel Adams's biography, he tried to undo the damage of neglect, to restore Adams's name as "a necessity to those who revere virtue and exalted patriotism." For Wells's generation, "the righteous principle of the Revolution" was assumed. It remained only to stress Adams's role. And so Wells accepted uncritically George Bancroft's assertion that Samuel was an early advocate of independence. Adams "knew no political creed but absolute, unconditional independence," Wells claimed. "He hungered and thirsted after it" as an object of priceless attainment, in comparison to which all else on earth was of secondary importance," and in this he was distinguished from his colleagues in the revolutionary movement who sought to avert separation on into the 1770s. For Wells this was the stuff of heroism, and so he readily conceded that Samuel Adams was the "Arch Manager" of the revolutionary movement, the "Chief Incendiary." But did "all contemporary evidence" show that Adams deserved those titles, as Wells suggested? Royal officials and loyalist writers had long ascribed the revolutionary movement to a faction of disaffected colonists, but Samuel Adams was only one of several Americans they cited for seditious activities. Adams's later reputation owed much to Gage's proclamation, to the explicit accusations of a few loyalists, and to his Federalist opponents of the 1790s who found his sympathy for the French Revolution and Jeffersonianism in keeping with an earlier identity as "grand mob-leader during the Revolution." Wells shared the Federalists' distaste for contemporary upheaval: despite his toleration of colonial insurgency, he was anxious to dissociate Samuel Adams from the Southern Confederate "revolutionaries" of the mid-nineteenth century, which he accomplished by stressing Adams's understanding of federalism.⁷

James I. Hosmer's *Samuel Adams* (1885) remained in the nineteenth-century tradition of filiopietistic biographies: the author noted that his great-great-grandfather had served with Samuel Adams in the revolutionary struggle. Adams remained a hero of sorts, but Hosmer was disturbed by the means

⁷ Wells, *Samuel Adams*, 2: 302-03; 1: vi; 3: 274-75, 351n. Cf. George Bancroft, *A History of the United States* (Boston, 1834-74), vol. 6 (10th ed.; Boston, 1859). For loyalist accusations of Samuel Adams, see particularly Peter Oliver's *Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion: A Tory View*, ed. Douglass Adair and John Schutz (Stanford, 1961), 39-41, and Joseph Galloway, *Historical and Political Reflections on the Rise and Progress of the American Rebellion* (London, 1780), 67-68. Professor Mary Beth Norton of Cornell University has suggested to me that loyalist writers cited Benjamin Franklin more often than Samuel Adams as arch conspirator of the American "rebellion." When in 1766 Thomas Hutchinson wrote of "our grand incendiary," he referred to James Otis, Jr., not Samuel Adams. So late as 1773 Adams appears in Hutchinson's correspondence only as a particularly influential member of a political faction allegedly disloyal to Britain. See Hutchinson to Richard Jackson, Boston, Nov. 16, 1766, and to Dartmouth, Oct. 9, 1773, Massachusetts Archives, State House, Boston, 26: 253; 27: 549-50. Historians also cite Hutchinson's statement that in 1765 Adams "owned, without reserve, in private discourse" that he sought independence "and from time to time made advances towards it in publick, so far as would serve the great purpose of attaining it." In context, however, it is clear Hutchinson meant that Adams sought an independence of Parliament's sovereignty, not of Britain more generally. See Hutchinson's *History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, ed. Lawrence S. Mayo (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), 3: 96-97.

Adams used to convert his countrymen to independence, which, Hosmer wrote, he had “begun to cherish” in the 1760s. James Rivington’s charge that Adams had a “Machiavellian streak in his character” seemed too strong, but like all New Englanders, Hosmer said, Adams “stooped now and then to a piece of sharp practice.” This was “never for himself, but always for what he believed the public good.” Still, it was a defect. The publication in 1773 of private letters by Governor Thomas Hutchinson, Lieutenant Governor Andrew Oliver, Charles Paxton, and others was particularly cited as “the least defensible proceeding in which the patriots of New England were concerned during the Revolutionary struggle.” “Nothing,” Hosmer claimed, “can be more sly than the manoeuvring throughout.” He in fact found it much easier to admire Hutchinson, whose biography he subsequently wrote.⁸

From Hosmer’s impatience with Yankee trickery, biographers became increasingly hostile toward Adams. His still unquestioned early commitment to independence rapidly lost heroic attributes. For Ralph Volney Harlow, whose *Samuel Adams: Promotor of the American Revolution* was published in 1923, all of Adams’s actions seemed irrational, the effusions of a psyche described as neurotic, even psychotic. Before 1764, Harlow claimed, Adams had failed in all he tried, which produced “a pronounced conviction of inadequacy, or an ‘inferiority complex.’” Then he drafted Boston’s instructions to her legislative representatives and suddenly found a cause in the Anglo-American controversy. His “extraordinary activity after 1765” was explained “as the result of his unconscious efforts to satisfy his hunger for compensation, and to bring about a better adjustment to his environment.” By implication, independence was attributed entirely to Adams’s derangement—no real problems lay behind that event. “It was something inside, rather than outside which drove him on, something in the field of the unconscious.” Adams turned to politics only to find “relief from his tiresome mental problems.” Often, Harlow suggested, followers see their leader “as a heroic patriot, when he may be only a neurotic crank,” one who, in this case, found it “easy . . . to manufacture public opinion with a pen.”⁹

The notion that Samuel Adams somehow “manufactured” the Revolution by manipulating people appeared again four years later in Vernon Parrington’s *Colonial Mind*. Parrington found Adams a “professional agitator,” “an intriguing rebel against every ambition of the regnant order,”

⁸ James I. Hosmer, *Samuel Adams* (Boston, 1885; rpt., 1896), viii–ix, 68, 368–69, 229. See also, Hosmer, *The Life of Thomas Hutchinson* (Boston, 1896). For a full account of the affair of the Hutchinson letters, see Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), 223–57. In short, the letters were received from Benjamin Franklin with the stipulation that they not be published. On June 2, 1773, Adams read them to the assembly, which condemned them as an effort to overthrow the colony’s constitution and introduce arbitrary rule. Exaggerated rumors of their contents circulated until even Andrew Oliver believed they should be published. Then on June 10 Adams reported to the legislature that a separate set of letters had appeared in Boston—clearly a ruse to bypass Franklin’s restriction and to permit the publication of the letters, which was finally ordered on June 15. The published letters distorted Hutchinson’s position, Bailyn suggests, because those letters that reached Boston had been selected in England several years earlier to buttress a political argument at odds with Hutchinson’s views.

⁹ Ralph Volney Harlow, *Samuel Adams: Promoter of the American Revolution* (New York, 1923), 36–38, 64, 65, 37.

but could condone those roles since he believed Adams sought not only independence but, beyond that, a democratic republic. Doubts that ends could justify means soon reappeared, however. Manipulation was a central theme of John C. Miller's *Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda* (1936), which remains the most scholarly of modern biographies. Miller wrote of Adams "transforming American discontent into revolutionary fervor." He was the puppeteer who "brought the people to approve his schemes and pulled the wires that set the Boston town meeting in motion against royal government," who created the convention of towns in 1768 "as a steppingstone to a later usurpation of governmental power," and then "deliberately set out to provoke crises that would lead to the separation of mother country and colonies." Finally, "by transplanting the caucus from Faneuil Hall to Philadelphia," Adams, working behind the scenes, "directed every step toward independence." This interpretation was reduced to stereotype in the portrait of Samuel Adams prepared for *Sibley's Harvard Graduates* (1958) by Clifford Shipton, who accepted uncritically the accounts by Harlow and Miller and produced forty-five pages of contempt. Adams, Shipton wrote, "preached hate to a degree without rival" among New Englanders of his generation: "He taught his dog Queue to bite every Red Coat he saw, and took little children to the Commons to teach them to hate British soldiers."¹⁰

The tide may have begun to turn. In an article of 1960, William Appleman Williams quickly dismissed earlier explanations of Adams's politics, then sketched out the elements of a new and far more sympathetic interpretation. Williams argued, in short, that Adams "became a revolutionary . . . because he was a Calvinist dedicated to the ideal and the reality of a Christian corporate commonwealth." Five years later Stewart Beach's *Samuel Adams: The Fateful Years* broke with the major assumptions of Adams's previous biographers. Beach questioned whether Adams sought independence before the mid-1770s. (Williams, by contrast, said Adams "clearly sought independence after 1769.") He acknowledged that Adams could not alone control Boston's Sons of Liberty and rejected outright the common notion that Adams was "a rabble-rousing demagogue who stood on street corners in Boston directing the mob." Beach, moreover, tried to depart from the entire framework of interpretation that was established in the early nineteenth century. "It is not necessary," he said, "to approach Samuel Adams as a hero to find him an intensely human and fascinating individual." Although on

¹⁰ Vernon Parrington, "Samuel Adams, The Mind of the American Democrat," in *The Colonial Mind, 1620-1800* (New York, 1927), 233-47, especially 233; Miller, *Sam Adams*, 144, 152, 276, 342; Clifford Shipton, "Samuel Adams," in *Sibley's Harvard Graduates* (Boston, 1958), 10: 420-65, especially 463, 434. Shipton probably founded one of his accusations upon an incident involving John Quincy Adams. See John to Samuel Adams, Auteuil, France, Apr. 27, 1785: "The child whom you used to lead out into the Commons to see with detestation the British troops, and with pleasure the Boston militia, will have the honor to deliver you this letter. He has since seen the troops of most nations in Europe, without any ambition, I hope, of becoming a military man. He thinks of the bar and peace and civil life." Samuel considered the episode a lesson in patriotism, not hate. He replied from Boston, April 13, 1786, that "the child whom I led by the hand, with a particular design, I find is now becoming a promising youth. . . . If I was instrumental at that time of enkindling the sparks of patriotism in his tender heart, it will add to my consolation in the latest hour." Letters quoted in Wells, *Samuel Adams*, 3: 220.

many issues Beach's arguments were founded upon a closer sifting of evidence than were those of his predecessors, the biography he produced, like Williams's essay, did not cite its sources and has had no scholarly impact.¹¹

By contrast, Richard D. Brown's study of the Boston Committee of Correspondence (1970) is a book to be contended with by any who continue to hold what Charles W. Akers recently called "the myth of Sam Adams as the Boston dictator who almost singlehandedly led his colony into rebellion." Boston politics, Brown demonstrated, were a "mixture of planning and spontaneity." Similarly, the capital's relationship with outlying towns was too reciprocal, the restrictions on central leadership were too pervasive to justify any simple interpretation of politics founded upon Adams's control. Clearly events look different when historians, as Akers urged, "attribute to Samuel Adams only those actions, influences, intentions, and writings for which there is reasonably direct and certain evidence."¹² Yet the older view persists—in books like Hiller Zobel's *Boston Massacre* (1970), which rejected in the person of Samuel Adams all who were concerned with "percolating public dissatisfaction with the established order"; in numerous books for children inspired by the Revolutionary Bicentennial; in the catalog for a special exhibition in Adams's home town on "Paul Revere's Boston," which identifies Adams as "a central figure in stirring up mob violence";¹³ in popular consciousness. Historians have, then, re-examined and questioned the so-called Adams myth, but have not yet abandoned or overturned it.

SAMUEL ADAMS WAS THE FIRST to seek American independence. He was a propagandist who manufactured the Revolution by techniques of mass manipulation. He was responsible for mobs and popular violence. These three propositions about Adams's political career have evolved slowly and powerfully to determine public views of him as a historic person. They have a particular fascination because his own writings and actions suggest more complex and, in some cases, directly contrary conclusions.

No revolutionary discovered independence. John Adams particularly laughed at the affectation of representing it as "a novel idea, . . . a late invention," since, he claimed, the idea of separation "sooner or later" was "always familiar to gentlemen of reflection." A recent study by J. M. Bumstead confirms that independence was discussed by both English and American writers long before the 1770s. The issue, then, is when colonists

¹¹ William Appleman Williams, "Samuel Adams: Calvinist, Mercantilist, Revolutionary," *Studies on the Left*, 1 (1960): 50, 52; Beach, *Samuel Adams*, 9, 78, viii, x.

¹² Richard D. Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts: The Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Towns, 1772-1774* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), 124n., *passim*; Charles W. Akers, "Sam Adams—And Much More," *New England Quarterly*, 47 (1974): 120-31, especially 120, 130. Akers demonstrates the persistence of the Adams myth in works that are, for the most part, other than the biographies considered here.

¹³ Hiller B. Zobel, *The Boston Massacre* (Boston, 1970), 57. On children's books, see, for example, Don Lawson, *The American Revolution* (New York, 1974); Milton Lomask, *The First American Revolution* (New York, 1974); and Isaac Asimov, *The Birth of the United States, 1763-1816* (Boston, 1974). See also *Paul Revere's Boston, 1735-1818* (Boston, 1975), 124, pl. 172.

decided upon independence as an immediate goal and began to work toward it. Biographers agree that Samuel Adams took those steps earlier than others but disagree upon just when he did so. Wells, like Bancroft, ascribed the event to 1768, when British troops arrived in Boston. Miller also accepted that date; Hosmer suggested Adams's conversion occurred somewhere between 1765 and 1768, while Harlow inclined toward 1765, and Shipton simply observed that "from the beginning of his political career he was accused of being for independence, and later he boasted that this was so."¹⁴ Adams's own writings suggest that his thinking on independence evolved more gradually and can best be described as occurring in three stages with relatively distinct chronological barriers: he moved from disavowal, to prediction or warning, to advocacy of American independence.

Nothing in Adams's writings before, during, or immediately after the Stamp Act crisis (1765–66) suggests a desire for independence. His earliest known political writings—from the 1740s—include fulsome praise of the British constitution. He admitted, however, a significant "prejudice" in favor of Massachusetts government, which was modeled on that of England, but with improvements; because New England's founders "had so severely felt the effects of tyranny," he wrote, they secured for their descendants not only all the standard English liberties but "some additional privileges which the common people there have not."¹⁵ The colonists' demand that they be taxed only by their own representatives, even their resistance to the Stamp Act, seemed to him in perfect accord with British tradition. There was no reason to doubt that colonists would continue "faithfull & loyal Subjects," he wrote in 1765—were they allowed the same governmental powers to which they had long been accustomed, powers he understood to be those not of a sovereign state but a "subordinate civil Governmt." Adams's disavowal of independence reached the height of explicitness in a letter he drafted for the Massachusetts assembly to Lord Rockingham, dated January 22, 1763: the House and its constituents were "so sensible . . . of their happiness and safety, in their union with, and dependence upon, the mother country, that they would by no means be inclined to accept an independency, if offered to them."¹⁶

Thereafter the situation rapidly became more serious. The arrival of British troops at Boston in the fall of 1768 was of particular importance; Adams was always a bitter foe of standing armies, whose use against civilians in time of peace he, like other Englishmen, considered a major sign of impending tyranny. Other measures also hastened his reassessment of the colonies' position. In promising to pay Crown appointees with customs revenues, the Townshend

¹⁴ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, Quincy, May 21 and 1, 1807, in *Works of John Adams*, 9: 596, 591; J. M. Bumstead, "'Things in the Womb of Time': Ideas of American Independence, 1633 to 1763," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 31 (1974): 533–64; Wells, *Samuel Adams*, 1: 207; George Bancroft, *History of the United States*, 6: 192; Miller, *Sam Adams*, 229; Hosmer, *Samuel Adams*, 68, 120; Harlow, *Samuel Adams*, 87–88; Shipton, "Samuel Adams," 427.

¹⁵ Adams, essay from the *Independent Advertiser*, in Wells, *Samuel Adams*, 1: 21–22.

¹⁶ Adams to Dennis DeBerdt, Boston, Dec. 16, 1766; to G—— W——, Boston, Nov. 13, 1765; and assembly letter, in *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, ed. Harry A. Cushing (Boston, 1904–08), 1: 113, 39, 170.

Act (1767) threatened both the colonial assemblies' exclusive right to tax their constituents and their traditional role as paymaster, by which the legislatures had exercised a crucial check on executive power. It was rumored, then confirmed, that the Crown would pay the Massachusetts governor and judges. Meanwhile the removal of the General Court from Boston to Cambridge by the acting governor, Thomas Hutchinson, and his surrender of the harbor garrison at Castle William to the Royal Army suggested that the colony's executive officer was no longer so independent an agent as his predecessors had been, but now acted on orders from London, even when they conflicted with the Massachusetts Charter.¹⁷ The danger of colonial government by "ministerial mandates" was equal to that of parliamentary taxes or standing armies, Samuel Adams warned; the dissolution of popular checks on the governor made him a tyrant, and the addition of judges to the Crown payroll completed the transformation of the free government of Massachusetts into a despotism. Nor was the problem confined to the Bay Colony: the Gaspée Commission's infringement of jury rights in Rhode Island (1772) showed that the menace of executive power surmounted provincial boundaries, while events abroad, particularly in Ireland and England—which Adams followed closely—seemed to prove that the threat of despotism permeated the empire. The effort to undermine democratic checks on executive power was not, Adams thought, new. It went back perhaps to the British administration of Sir Robert Walpole. But the spate of recent advances made the danger urgent. The entire British world seemed on a precipice; tyranny was at the door.¹⁸

Under the force of these unfolding events, Adams moved toward predicting independence, warning that it was an increasingly possible outcome of the Anglo-American conflict. In an article signed "Alfred," published in the *Boston Gazette* on October 2, 1769, for example, he expressed fears that the "Jealousy between the mother country and the colonies" first raised in the Stamp Act crisis might "finally end in the ruin of the most glorious Empire the sun ever shone upon." But hopes for a changed British policy became ever dimmer. By October 1771 Adams wrote his trusted friend Arthur Lee, then in London, "I have no great Expectations from thence, & have long been of Opinion that America herself under God must finally work out her own Salvation." Independence might, however, be far off. To the Rhode Island radical Henry Marchant, Adams wrote of it in 1772 only as a probability for "some hereafter." He saw no reason either side should hasten the crisis. "I am a friend to both," he wrote, "but I confess my friendship to [the colonies] is the most ardent."¹⁹

¹⁷ For an account of these events, see Bailyn, *Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, 169–75.

¹⁸ Adams as "A Chatterer," in *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 3, 1770; Adams to Darius Sessions, Boston, Dec. 28, 1772; to Arthur Lee, Boston, Sept. 27, 1771; and as "Candidus," in *Boston Gazette*, Oct. 14, 1771, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 2: 70–71, 389–92, 231–32, 252. On the importance of events abroad in American disillusionment with Britain, see Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765–1776* (New York, 1972).

¹⁹ Adams as "Alfred," in *Boston Gazette*, Oct. 2, 1769; to Lee, Oct. 31, 1771; to Henry Marchant, Jan. 7, 1772, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 1: 387; 2: 267, 309.

Prediction, therefore, fell short of advocacy. Always Adams's forecasts of independence were contingent. As he said in a letter to Arthur Lee of April 1774, separation would come only "if the British administration and government do not return to the principles of moderation and equity." During the early 1770s this seemed possible as the colonists' confidence in the mother country was not yet "in too great a Degree lost." Adams's disillusionment did not yet extend beyond the Parliament and ministry to the king or nation at large. And so his position was reformist, for "a Change of Ministers & Measures," not for so revolutionary a transformation as independence implied.²⁰ He worked actively, moreover, for reform. Even his predictions were phrased as warnings to Britain, designed to awaken the mother country to the serious consequences her actions portended, and so to inspire political change. The publication in 1773 of private letters by Hutchinson and other royal officials, which so disturbed Hosmer, was itself an effort to facilitate reconciliation. Adams, like others of his colleagues, believed the current campaign against American freedom had been inspired by "a few men born & educated amongst us, & governd by Avarice & a Lust of power" and later "adopted" by Britain. If these men—now so fully exposed and condemned by their own words—could be removed from office on the demand of outraged Massachusetts freemen, "effectual measures might then be taken to restore 'placidam sub Libertate Quietam,' " a peace consonant with liberty. It might be necessary, however, that some in England also be "impeached & brot to condign punishment."²¹

Adams's interest in cooperation between English and American opponents of Crown policy also argues strongly—more so perhaps than his explicit disavowals of independence—that he wanted reform within the context of empire in the early 1770s. He personally wrote to the English radical John Wilkes in December 1770 and subsequently carried on an active correspondence with the American Wilkesite, Arthur Lee. "The Grievances of Britain & the Colonies . . . are of the same pernicious Growth," he wrote Lee in September 1771, and so the cooperation of patriots in both countries should "by all means . . . be cultivated." His earliest proposal for a correspondence union was designed to facilitate just such a coordination of patriotic activities throughout the empire. Three years later he continued to emphasize the importance of coordinating American and British efforts against the growth of Crown power. In 1774 he also discussed with Lee the terms of a possible American bill of rights, which might have made possible the Americans' continued participation in the British governmental system.²² Within two years, however, the lack of such a document "fixing" Americans' rights under

²⁰ Adams to Lee, Boston, Apr. 4, 1774, and to Marchant, Jan. 7, 1772, in *ibid.*, 3: 100; 2: 309. For other contingent predictions of independence, see *ibid.*, 3: 101, 66.

²¹ Adams to Lee, June 19 and 21, 1773, in *ibid.*, 3: 42, 44. The purpose behind the letters' publication, then, was essentially the same as that of Benjamin Franklin in sending the letters to Massachusetts. Only subsequently did Franklin and Adams lose faith in the empire. See Bailyn, *Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, 233–38.

²² Adams to Lee, Sept. 27, 1771, and Apr. 4, 1774, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 2: 234; 3: 101.

the British constitution, and the apparent impossibility of achieving one, had become a major pillar of his case for colonial separation from Britain.

When, then, did Samuel Adams become an advocate of independence? In November 1775, well after the war had begun, he finally wrote James Bowdoin that he could no longer “conceive that there is any room to hope from the virtuous efforts of the people of Britain” against a “tyrant . . . flushed with expectations from his fleets & armies” and possessed of an “unalterable determination, to *compel* the colonists to *absolute* obedience.” America, he wrote James Warren, must send her very best men to Congress, those “fit to be employed in *founding Empires*.” By January 1776 he was acutely distressed by evidence that Portsmouth, New Hampshire, was opposed to separation, and wrote John Adams of his efforts in Congress to prevent further disavowals of independence. The next month he published a newspaper essay forthrightly arguing for separation: the lack of any “Britannico-American Magna Charta” stating precisely the terms of America’s limited dependence meant the colonies faced “an indefinite dependence upon an undetermined power,” currently exercised by “a combination of usurping innovators” who had “established an absolute tyranny in Great Britain and Ireland, and openly declared themselves competent to bind the Colonies in all cases whatsoever.” America was in fact independent; the administration had “dissevered the dangerous tie.”²³

This chronology is not extraordinary. Thomas Jefferson, Elbridge Gerry, and others of their generation went through much the same progression, and their disillusionment with Britain was inspired by many of the same events. Indeed, Adams was less anxious for a declaration of independence than several of his fellows home in Massachusetts. “Let us not be impatient,” he counseled Joseph Hawley. “It requires Time to convince the doubting and inspire the timid.”²⁴ And on July 9, 1776, he wrote Hawley that had independence been declared nine months earlier “we might have been justified in the Sight of God and Man”—then altered the sentence so it read three months instead of nine! Thereafter in letters to his most trusted friends, Adams continued to rethink this question of when independence should have been declared, even though the question was by then academic. He would have been more satisfied, he suggested in December 1776, had the declaration immediately followed Lexington and Concord. But on the whole, he was inclined to think that the course actually taken was best. He had once believed an earlier declaration would have invigorated the American Northern Army and so brought Canada into the Union, “but probably I was mistaken. The Colonies were not then all ripe for so momentous a Change.”²⁵

²³ Adams to James Bowdoin, Philadelphia, Nov. 16, 1775; to James Warren, Philadelphia, Nov. 4, 1775; to John Adams, Philadelphia, Jan. 15, 1776; and article signed “Candidus,” in *Boston Gazette*, Feb. 3, 1776, in *ibid.*, 3: 241, 234–35, 258–59, 261–66.

²⁴ Adams to Joseph Hawley, Apr. 15, 1776, in *ibid.*, 3: 281. See also Adams to Benjamin Kent, Philadelphia, July 27, 1776, in *ibid.*, 3: 305: “Perhaps if our Friends had considered how much was to be previously done they wd not have been, as you tell me some of them were, ‘impatient under our Delay’” in declaring independence. On the colonial leaders’ conversion to independence, see Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 228–70.

²⁵ Adams to Hawley, Philadelphia, July 9, 1776; to Warren, Baltimore, Dec. 21, 1776; to Kent, Philadel-

When weighed against the testimony of Adams's collected writings of nearly three decades, evidence that he was long dedicated to independence is notably weak. The fullest case for that position was made by George Bancroft in the sixth volume of his *History of the United States*, which, through its influence on Wells, has shaped all subsequent discussion of the issue. Bancroft, however, misread Adams's writings, inferring an avowal of independence even from letters that explicitly assert the contrary,²⁶ and he depended heavily—like subsequent biographers—upon the testimony of a Boston innkeeper, Richard Silvester, which was taken under circumstances that severely limit its credibility.²⁷ In short, no evidence that Samuel Adams passionately repudiated Britain before late 1775 compares with an entry in John Adams's diary for December 21, 1772, when John held a heated discussion of the Gaspée Commission with an Englishman. "I said there was no more justice left in Britain than there was in hell," he recalled; "that I wished for war, and that the whole Bourbon family was upon the back of Great Britain; avowed a thorough disaffection to that country; wished that any thing might happen to them, and, as the clergy prayed of our enemies in time of war, that they might be brought to reason or ruin."²⁸ Yet posterity remembers John Adams as conservative, dignified, and safe, in part, no doubt, because he has never been accused of effecting his anti-British feelings by pulling down the standing order. He was, moreover, a Federalist, particularly immune to the taint of "Jacobinism" during years critical in defining how Americans would recall their Revolution.

The biographers' second argument, that Samuel Adams manipulated colonists into independence, depends upon their assumption that he was long dedicated to separation from Britain. Adams could not consciously maneuver the population toward a goal he did not yet espouse. There is no doubt, on the other hand, that Adams sometimes explained the function of public leaders in

phia, July 27, 1776; see also letters from Philadelphia to R. H. Lee, July 15, 1776; to Warren, July 16, 1776; to John Pitts, July 17, 1776; and from Baltimore to Arthur Lee, Jan. 2, 1777, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 3: 295, 338, 304–05, 297–98, 299, 300–01, 339–40. The last statement is consonant with a tendency of Adams to consider his own position as mistaken if it was rejected by a democratic legislature.

²⁶ Compare the original text of a letter from Adams to John Wilkes, Boston, Dec. 28, 1770—available in the British Museum Additional Manuscripts 30871 and in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 2: 100–01—with Bancroft's use of it in his *History of the United States*, 6: 385. (Bancroft also incorrectly dated the letter December 27; see p. 358 n.5.) Bancroft again inferred a dedication to independence from Adams's letter to Arthur Lee of April 4, 1774, although Adams explicitly wished for "a permanent union with the mother country," if that were possible "on the principles of liberty and truth." See *ibid.*, 6: 524, and the text of the original letter in Richard Henry Lee, *Life of Arthur Lee, LL.D.* (Boston, 1859), 2: 215–20.

²⁷ For citations of Silvester, see Bancroft, *History of the United States*, 6: 194, and biographies of Adams by Wells, 1: 209–11; Hosmer, 117–19; Harlow (who distrusted the testimony), 123; Miller, 144–45; and Shipton, 432–33. Silvester swore, in short, that in 1768 he personally heard Samuel Adams avow his desire for independence and a republic. Similar statements were attributed to Dr. Benjamin Church and Thomas Chase, both popular leaders in Boston. The deposition was taken by Thomas Hutchinson in January 1769 during a campaign by Governor Francis Bernard to prove that Boston's disorders were the work of a small disaffected faction: see Bailyn, *Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, 128 n.23. Harlow, although one of Adams's most extreme critics, noted there is no corroboration of Silvester's statement, which "probably . . . simply represents in rather compact form the suspicions and fears of the conservatives" (p. 123). And Beach, on page 17 of his *Samuel Adams*, recalled that not even Hutchinson used the document in his *History of Massachusetts Bay*. This was perhaps because Hutchinson understood that "small dependence . . . can be placed upon ex-parte witnesses, examined by men engaged in political contests." See Hutchinson, *History of Massachusetts Bay*, 3: 199.

²⁸ John Adams, diary, Dec. 21, 1772, in *Works of John Adams*, 2: 308–09.

terms that resemble modern behaviorism: a politician, he wrote in 1778, carefully tries to make men's "Humours and Prejudices, their Passions and Feelings, as well as their Reason and Understandings subservient to his Views of publick Liberty and Happiness." He consistently held that men were ruled more by their feelings than by reason, that the people could in the short run be deluded or mistaken, that when their passions were aroused, the masses were capable of great "tumults," comparable to the ragings of the sea, and they were then as open to reason as "the foaming billows . . . to a lecture of morality and . . . quiet." Still, he saw profound limitations upon the masses' malleability and irrationality. He denied that the people were an "unthinking herd." Calm would succeed disorder; and prudent patriots could help recall the people from prejudice and passion to the exercise of reason. Adams consistently emphasized the people's ability to make valid political judgments, particularly when they acted as a body and had sufficient time for reflection. "The inhabitants of this continent are not to be dup'd," he wrote; "They can judge, as well as their betters, when there is a danger of *slavery*."²⁹

The "true patriot," then, did not—indeed, could not—create disaffection. The task of a popular leader, as Adams explained it, was to explore the causes of popular discontent and then, if he found his country's "*fears and jealousies*" were well grounded, to encourage them "by all proper means in his power." He would "keep the attention of his fellow citizens awake to their grievances; and not suffer them to be at rest, till the causes of their just complaints are removed." Resistance demanded a concerned populace, ready to defend its freedom, and, above all, an abundance of provocation. Indeed, America's enemies seemed far more effective than her friends in hastening colonial union: the Boston Port Act, Adams wrote, like the cannonading of Norfolk, Virginia, "wrought a Union of the Colonies which could not be brot about by the Industry of years in reasoning on the necessity of it for the Common Safety." The Boston Committee of Correspondence, which Adams founded, embodied this attitude. The stated purpose of the committee was to survey public opinion upon British actions, of which the committee took pains to inform its rural correspondents. Since the towns' responses strongly suggested they shared Boston's viewpoint, the committee simply reinforced local patriotism by a sophisticated system of flattery: quotations from a town's previous letter were, for example, often incorporated in Boston's reply along with fulsome statements of approval.³⁰

If Samuel Adams cannot be called the first for independence, if his beliefs and techniques as a popular leader belie the modern notion that he "manufactured" the Revolution by manipulating a mindless people toward

²⁹ Adams to Samuel Cooper, Philadelphia, Dec. 25, 1778, and Apr. 30, 1776; to Elbridge Gerry, Boston, Mar. 25, 1774; as "Candidus," in *Boston Gazette*, Apr. 12, 1773; Boston Committee of Correspondence to Marblehead Committee, Boston, Apr. 12, 1774; as "Vindex," in *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1771, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 107; 3: 284, 83, 29, 96; 2: 148–50.

³⁰ Adams as "Vindex," in *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 21, 1771; to Cooper, Philadelphia, Apr. 30, 1776; and to Warren, Philadelphia, Jan. 7, 1776, in *ibid.*, 2: 148–50; 3: 284, 253–54; Brown, *Revolutionary Politics*, 126–31, 244–45.

an independence without cause, was he at least responsible for popular violence—a man who, as Miller wrote, scored “triumphs” like the Boston Massacre and Tea Party? There were within the revolutionary movement men prone to the use of direct force. But to these Adams preached restraint: patience, he reminded the fiery Thomas Young, marks a patriot. His famous Master of Arts declaration in 1743 affirmed only that it was “Lawful to resist the Supreme Magistrate, if the Commonwealth cannot otherwise be preserved”—not so unacceptable a proposition even in more submissive times. Although Samuel Adams was “staunch and stiff and strict and rigid and inflexible in the cause,” he was always for “softness and delicacy, and prudence,” John Adams testified, “where they will do.” Where they would not, he justified forcible resistance, but only if it fitted defined criteria of acceptability. He was as ready to condemn “a lawless attack upon property in a case where if there had been right there was remedy” as he was to defend “the people’s rising in the necessary defence of their liberties, and deliberately, . . . rationally destroying property, after trying every method to preserve it, and when the men in power had rendered the destruction of that property the only means of securing the property of *all*.” As such he approved the Stamp Act uprising of August 14, 1765, since the cause was important, resistance had widespread support—the “whole People” thought their essential rights invaded by Parliament—and all legal means of redress had been tried to no effect. But he condemned the attack on the homes of Thomas Hutchinson and others on August 26, 1765, as a transaction of “a truly *mobbish* Nature.” There is no evidence that he prompted the Boston Massacre riot, although he served thereafter as spokesman for the town in demanding that troops be removed from Boston. Adams is said to have signaled the Boston Tea Party, and, although his precise role on December 6, 1773, is disputable, the words attributed to him in the final “Tea Meeting” are in perfect accord with his philosophy: “This meeting can do nothing further to save this country.” In effect, all peaceful means of preventing payment of the tea duty, and accepting all it implied, had been exhausted. Only then was the destruction of property justified.³¹

But violence was not his cause. Samuel Adams was above all a master politician, an organizer and coordinator who believed in constitutional government. Already in 1748 he affirmed that “the true object of loyalty is a good legal constitution,” an opinion he sustained through old age. He advised moderation and prudence because these were instruments of political

³¹ Adams to Thomas Young, Philadelphia, Oct. [17], 1774, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 3: 163; John Adams, diary, Dec. 23, 1765, in *Works of John Adams*, 2: 163; Samuel Adams to Elbridge Gerry, Mar. 24, 1774, and to John Smith, “20th 1765,” in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 3: 83–84; 1: 59–60. For a traditional account of Adams’s role in precipitating the Tea Party, see, for example, Miller, *Sam Adams*, 294. It conflicts with a narrative in the Sewell Papers, Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa—“Proceedings of Ye Body Respecting the Tea”—which suggests that violence was detonated by an announcement that Governor Hutchinson had refused to issue a pass for the tea ships to leave Boston Harbor, and that Adams and his colleagues “called out to the People to stay” in the meeting despite the call of “hideous Yelling in the Street” because “they said they had not quite done.” The document, edited by L. F. S. Upton, is in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 22 (1965): 297–98.

effectiveness. Redress, he understood, depended upon American strength, which depended upon internal unity, which was itself best achieved in what the people “easily see to be a constitutional opposition to tyranny.” Violence, by contrast, was divisive, and so Adams stressed not only the limits of its theoretical justifiability but also its political disutility. His advice to Rhode Islanders in 1773, that they prevent the Gaspée Commission from becoming the occasion of bloodshed, continued the following year in letters from Philadelphia to his besieged Boston colleagues. “Violence & Submission would at this time be equally fatal,” he wrote; and again, “Nothing can ruin us but our Violence.” He urged Joseph Warren “to implore every Friend in Boston by every thing dear and sacred to Men of Sense and Virtue to avoid Blood and Tumult” so as to “*give the other Provinces opportunity to think and resolve.*” When independence was finally declared, he was delighted that so important a revolution had been achieved “without great internal Tumults & violent Convulsions.”³²

His medium was not the mob but the press, the public celebration—like the Sons of Liberty dinner at Dorchester in August 1769, where some 350 patriots ate, saw a mimic show, and sang the “Liberty Song”—and, above all, the committee or association. This was true in 1772, when Adams believed tyranny was at hand in Massachusetts: “Let us . . . act like wise Men,” he counseled, and “calmly look around us and consider what is best to be done. Let us converse together. . . . Let every Town assemble. Let Associations & Combinations be everywhere set up to consult and recover our just Rights.” It remained true in 1776, when Adams complained that his compatriots were not doing enough to encourage enlistments in the American army. “Your Presses have been too long silent,” he scolded from Congress. “What are your Committees of Correspondence about? I hear nothing of circular Letters—of joynt Committees, &c. Such Methods have in times past raised [the] Spirits of the people—drawn off their Attention from *picking up Pins*, & directed their Views to great objects—.” Even his loyalist detractors testified to Adams’s skill as a writer, whether of legislative documents or for the press, and as an organizer. Joseph Galloway stressed his incredible energy as the leader of political factions both in Massachusetts and in Philadelphia; Peter Oliver mentioned that Adams had organized a singing society for Boston mechanics and somehow “embraced such Opportunities,” as Oliver saw it, “to ye inculcating Sedition.”³³

³² Adams in the *Independent Advertiser*, quoted in Wells, *Samuel Adams*, 1: 17; to Joseph Warren, Philadelphia, Sept. 1774; to Darius Sessions, Boston, Jan. 2, 1773; to Charles Thomson, Boston, May 30, 1774; and, on independence, to Benjamin Kent, Philadelphia, July 27, 1776, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 3: 157; 2: 398–99; 3: 124, 304; Adams to Joseph Warren, Philadelphia, misdated as May 21, 1774, in *The Warren-Adams Letters* (Boston, 1917–25), 1: 26.

³³ Adams as “Valerius Poplicola,” in *Boston Gazette*, Oct. 5, 1772, and to Joseph Warren, Philadelphia, May 12, 1776, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 2: 337; 3: 289–90; Hutchinson, *History of Massachusetts Bay*, 3: 212; Galloway, *Historical and Political Reflections*, 67–68; *Oliver’s Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion*, 41. See also, John Adams’s diary for Aug. 14, 1769, in *Works of John Adams*, 2: 218, on the Sons’ dinner: “This is cultivating the sensations of freedom. There was a large collection of good company. Otis and Adams are politic in promoting these festivals; for they tinge the minds of the people; they impregnate them with the sentiments of liberty; they render the people fond of their leaders in the cause, and averse and bitter against

All of this was radical enough for an age that could not yet accept nongovernmental political groups—parties, for example—as legitimate. Conventions and committees were often condemned as “extra-legal,” and so seditious, undistinguishable from common “mobs.” Within a few years the popular organizations of the resistance movement seemed of questionable acceptability even to Samuel Adams. He never regretted his participation in those of earlier days; indeed, they had served “an excellent purpose” then in facilitating public watchfulness over those in authority. But with the establishment of regular, constitutional, republican government, under which all men in authority depended upon free, annual elections, committees and conventions were “not only useless, but dangerous.” Decency and respect were due constitutional authority; bodies of men who convened to deliberate and adopt measures cognizable by legislatures might bring legislatures into contempt and “lessen the Weight of Government lawfully exercised.”³⁴ And so he opposed all popular threats to republican government. He served in 1782 on a legislative committee to visit Hampshire County and “inquire into the grounds of disaffection,” to quiet any “misinformations” and “groundless jealousies” that lay behind local insurrections. Four years later he acquiesced fully in measures to suppress Shays’ Rebellion, which he considered a Tory effort to undermine the Revolution. He may even have argued, as one memorialist claimed, that “in monarchies the crime of treason and rebellion may admit of being pardoned or lightly punished; but the man who dares to rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death.” He was no less definite in condemning Pennsylvania’s “Whisky Rebels,” who rose against the federal excise tax in 1794. “No people can be more free [than] under a Constitution established by their own voluntary compact, and exercised by men appointed by their own frequent suffrages,” Governor Adams told the Massachusetts legislature. “What excuse then can there be for forcible opposition to the laws? If any law shall prove oppressive in its operation, the future deliberations of a freely elected Representative, will prove a constitutional remedy.”³⁵

To James Warren, an old revolutionary who opposed the suppression of Shays’ Rebellion, Samuel Adams seemed to have forsaken his old principles, “to have become the most arbitrary and despotic Man in the Commonwealth.”³⁶ There were, however, deep continuities in Adams’s attitudes. Always he fought as the defender of the free constitutional government of Massachusetts, whether against Hutchinson, Britain, or western insurgents. Before 1776 he justified the resort to popular meetings and direct

all opposers.” See also entry for Sept. 3, 1769, in *ibid.*, 219: “supped with Mr. Otis, in company with Mr. Adams, Mr. William Davis, and Mr. John Gill. The Evening spent in preparing the next day’s newspaper,—a curious employment, cooking up paragraphs, articles, occurrence, &c., working the political engine!”

³⁴ Samuel to John Adams, Apr. 16, 1784, and to Noah Webster, Apr. 30, 1784, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 296, 305–06.

³⁵ Wells, *Samuel Adams*, 3: 162, 246; Adams to legislature, Jan. 16, 1795, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 373.

³⁶ James Warren to John Adams, Milton, May 18, 1787, in *Warren-Adams Letters*, 2: 292–93.

force only on rare occasions when all alternatives failed. With the foundation of the republic such occasions evaporated altogether. Henceforth even the most severe threats of power to freedom and constitutional rule, such as had prompted the English Revolution of 1688 and the American Revolution of 1776, could be brought down through established, lawful procedures, as would be done in the “Revolution of 1800” and that of 1974. Only in countries like France, where the republic had yet to be established, could the older type of revolution, with its popular associations and mass uprisings, be justly continued.

ALL OF THIS IS AT SUCH ODDS with the stereotypic Samuel Adams that it raises a final question: why should written history and historical evidence be so contradictory? At least three explanations are possible. One is concerned with historians’ use of documentation, another more generally with the way Americans have related to their Revolutionary tradition. A third centers on Samuel Adams as a historic person.

Biographers have, in the first place, consciously dismissed Adams’s writings as an unreliable historical source. His papers, Shipton charged, were censored both by Adams and, after his death, by John Avery. John Adams did leave a graphic picture of Samuel in Philadelphia destroying whole bundles of his papers lest they fall into the hands of the British and be used against his correspondents. The substantial collection of writings Samuel nonetheless left at his death was diminished, it seems, largely through neglect, although a hint of conscious censorship remains in William V. Wells’s remark that “. . . reason to believe that letters were abstracted early in the present century by persons interested in their Suppression.”³⁷ Historians can, however, work with incomplete manuscripts, balancing biases and supplementing lapses with other sources of evidence—unless the whole must be dismissed as deceitful in character, the work of a man whose consistent technique, as Shipton claimed, was that of “the lie reiterated.” That charge echoes through modern biographies: Hosmer first agreed with those loyalists who found “great duplicity” in Adams’s conduct; Miller found his “sincerity open to question”; for Harlow, Adams’s writings were but the “psychopathic effusions” of a man who “evaded the truth, and mishandled the facts so glaringly that almost everything he wrote is a demand for refutation.” This conclusion stems most often from a conflict between the biographers’ unquestioned assumption that Adams was long dedicated to independence and the testimony of his writings, which authors resolve by rejecting the latter. As Harlow put it, Adams “pretended to be a peace-loving colonist, desiring nothing so much as peace and quiet” only to “veil his real aggressions upon British authority.”³⁸

³⁷ Shipton, “Samuel Adams,” 444; John Adams to William Tudor, Quincy, June 5, 1817, in *Works of John Adams*, 10: 264; Wells, *Samuel Adams*, 1: x, xi.

³⁸ Shipton, “Samuel Adams,” 444; Hosmer, *Samuel Adams*, 120–21; Miller, *Sam Adams*, 228–29; Harlow, *Samuel Adams*, 190, 357, 87–88. The charge of dishonesty is particularly complex. By modern lights many of

The modern image of Samuel Adams stems, however, not only from historians' suspicions of Adams in particular, but also from a broader ambivalence toward the earliest days of the Revolution. With the establishment of the republic came a rejection of extralegal opposition to authority. As Adams himself fully understood, a continuation of resistance as established before 1776 imperiled the successful conclusion of America's experiment in popular self-government. Yet the Revolution remained the one common, identifying experience of Americans; if cleansed of its anarchistic implications, it could serve as a powerful symbol to counteract the forces of disintegration and help establish the new nation. And so the Revolution was subtly transformed into the war for independence, a more suitable heroic rallying point than the fundamental reformation that revolution implies. Meanwhile, the "old revolutionaries," leaders of the resistance to Britain, were gradually confounded with the Founding Fathers of later years, who were then sanctified—as by Mason Weems, whose superhuman Washington symbolized the Revolution for generations of American school children. Persons whose importance was confined to the period before 1776—not "secondary figures of the Revolution" but primary figures of a first stage of the Revolution such as Christopher Gadsden, Isaac Sears, and Cornelius Harnett—were forgotten or, where their prominence precluded obfuscation, mythologized over time into symbols of all that had to be rejected in the Revolution.

The Adams myth had its roots, then, in the earliest decades of the new nation. But it appropriately took modern form during the 1880s in the hands of James Hosmer who, like other historians of his time, regretted the division of English peoples that 1776 had entailed. Sympathy then, as now, went naturally toward the loyalists who found more to fear in "the breaking down of the old system" than in submission to Parliament, "honest men" who, as Shipton said, were forced to flee from "the unreasoning rage of people among whom their families had lived as friends and public servants for generations." Behind these sympathies there remains a rejection in American life of what the Federalists called "Jacobinism." Harlow asked the critical question:

the issues that inspired fears in the eighteenth century seem benign, and so, unless biographers consider the revolutionaries' distinctive ideological assumptions, Adams's treatment of events, his "persistence in attributing evil motives to those men he fought," seems not just mistaken but dishonest. See biographies by Harlow, pp. 357–58, and Shipton, p. 444. Shipton also claimed that "a comparison of the letters which Adams wrote to those of his friends who knew what was going on in Boston with those written to friends who were not in a position to know the truth will show that he was not simply the victim of blind prejudice" (p. 426). No specific letters were cited, however, and Adams's printed letters are not contradictory. On independence, for example, Adams's position was remarkably consistent in any one time period, regardless of his correspondent. Perhaps his most revealing letters were in fact to his Boston colleagues from Philadelphia. The original loyalist charge that Adams would stoop to anything to serve his cause stemmed, I suspect, from his political maneuvers—from the ruse he used to allow the publication of Hutchinson's letters, for example, or the deceptions he practiced so as to exclude the loyalist Daniel Leonard from certain critical legislative deliberations. On the latter, see Robert Treat Paine's "Account of Stratagem . . ." in Paine Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. I am grateful to Jack N. Rakove for the last reference. The loyalists' charges of Adams's fallaciousness came also from their disagreement with his political stands. See Hutchinson, *History of Massachusetts Bay*, 3: 212. To a considerable extent, then, the charge of dishonesty is incapable of direct, "objective" refutation or verification. It reflects the observer's politics more than the subject's morality.

“How many of the vociferously ‘loyal’ Americans of today, those staunch enemies of twentieth century radicalism, would have looked with favor upon rebellion against established authority in 1775. The latter-day patriots profess great admiration for the ‘fathers’ of the Revolution, but the real test is to be found . . . in the attitude toward the *spirit* of revolution today.” As that attitude became increasingly negative, Samuel Adams was rejected with increasing vehemence.³⁹

There remains, however, a more complex explanation for the discrepancy between modern biographers’ interpretations of Samuel Adams and historical evidence. Behind all the rejections of Adams, all the accusations of deceit, lies a profound problem of relating not just to the Revolution as a tradition, but to the revolutionary as a type, and so to Adams as a historic person. For the characteristics that distinguish him from most other men include an ascetic civil commitment that at once accounts for his democratic inclinations, confounds modern observers, and links him with revolutionaries of other times and places.

At first destined for the clergy, politics instead became Adams’s ministry. He was one of the first Americans willing to identify himself as a politician⁴⁰—which made him distinctly modern—but only because he understood that role as akin to a religious vocation: there was great moral content in the cause of “Liberty and Truth,” as he once called it. Virtue was the most emphatic theme of his writings and of his life. It implied austerity, a “sobriety of manners, . . . Temperance, Frugality, Fortitude,” but above all a willingness to sacrifice private advantage for the cause of the community, to subject the self to a greater cause. Only a “virtuous people” could “deserve and enjoy” freedom. Should they become “universally vicious and debauched” they would, whatever the form of their institutions, become “the most abject slaves.”⁴¹ A man who held such a creed so emphatically was less suited for the role of Founding Father than of moral reformer. Just as he had condemned the corruption and dissipation of Englishmen, Adams railed at the “Luxury and Extravagance” of Boston in 1778, fearing it would be “totally destructive of those Virtues which are necessary for the Preservation of the Liberty and Happiness of the People.” He called for reformation and labored to keep the theater, that cauldron of dissipation, out of Boston. The patriot was of course a virtuous man: he worked for the cause selflessly. “It would be the glory of this Age, to find Men having no ruling Passion but the Love of their Country, and ready to render her the most arduous and important Services with the Hope of no other Reward in this Life than the Esteem of their virtuous Fellow

³⁹ Shipton, “Samuel Adams,” 428; Harlow, *Samuel Adams*, 265–66. On the simultaneous rejection of the Revolution and revival of loyalist studies in the late nineteenth century, see Bailyn, *Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, 393–403. The contemporary political basis of this historical view is often clearer in popular histories. See, for example, Stewart H. Holbrook’s *Lost Men of American History* (New York, 1946), 11–32, especially 22–23, where he dismisses local resistance leaders as “all left-wingers in their respective regions” who circulated “the Adams brand of poison.”

⁴⁰ As, for example, in a letter to Samuel Cooper, Philadelphia, Dec. 25, 1778, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 107.

⁴¹ Adams to Samuel P. Savage, Philadelphia, Oct. 6, 1778, in *ibid.*, 4: 67–68; essay in *Independent Advertiser*, 1749, in Wells, *Samuel Adams*, 1: 23.

Citizens," he wrote in 1778. "But this, some tell me, is expecting more than it is in the Power of human Nature to give."⁴²

Yet he himself lived this unlikely creed, privately as well as publicly, becoming the embodiment of republicanism, a man who contained, as Brissot de Warville observed, "the excess of Republican virtues, untainted probity, simplicity, modesty, and, above all, firmness." He eschewed wealth. Eliot described him as "a poor man, who despised riches, and possessed as proud a spirit as those who roll in affluence or command armies." When he first went to the Continental Congress, his friends felt compelled to buy him proper clothes, that he might be outfitted respectably. On his retirement from the governorship and public office at the age of seventy-four, Adams justly proclaimed that he had not been enriched in the public service. His main support in old age came, it seems, from his only son, who died in 1788, leaving to his father a set of claims upon the United States for services as a surgeon during the Revolutionary War.⁴³

Samuel Adams also eschewed personal glory. Here, as in the character of his talents and his later politics, he contrasted dramatically with John Adams, who early in the Anglo-American conflict reflected upon the opportunity his times afforded a young man aspiring for fame like that of the Hampdens and Sidneys of ages past, and who scrupulously preserved his own papers, dogging Samuel to do the same. But Samuel was less concerned about his manuscripts or his place in history: "I do not keep copies of all my letters," he once wrote, "—they are trifles."⁴⁴ In this life, too, he was less ambitious than John. He never sought prominent executive office until his later years, contenting himself with positions in representative bodies or committees, with those behind-the-scenes tasks that brought political effectiveness, and suspicion, but not necessarily prominence. Nor was power a consolation; Adams did not always determine the arguments or programs of the patriots but instead was "exclusively entitled to the merit of connecting them into one system, and infusing into the scattered efforts of many, all the life and energy which belongs to a single will." Inner rectitude was what he sought. "If my mind has ever been tinctured with Envy," he wrote his wife, "the Rich and the Great have not been its objects. . . . He who gains the Approbation of the Virtuous Citizens . . . may feel himself happy; but he is in Reality much more so, *who knows he deserves it*. Such a Man, if he cannot retreat with Splendor, he may with dignity."⁴⁵

⁴² Adams to Savage, Philadelphia, Oct. 6, 1778, and to James Warren, Philadelphia, July 1778, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 67–68, 46. On the theater controversy, see Wells, *Samuel Adams*, 3: 290–91, and S. E. Morison, "Two 'Signers' on Salaries and the Stage, 1789," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 62 (Boston, 1930): 55–63.

⁴³ J. P. Brissot de Warville, *New Travels in the United States of America* (Boston, 1797), 65; Eliot, *Biographical Dictionary*, 16; Adams to legislature, Jan. 27, 1797, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 404; Wells, *Samuel Adams*, 2: 207–09; 3: 332–33.

⁴⁴ John Adams, "Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law" (1765), in *Works of John Adams*, 3: 463; John to Samuel Adams, Paris, Apr. 5, 1783, Samuel Adams Papers, New York Public Library, microfilm roll 5; Adams to Savage, Philadelphia, Nov. 1, 1778, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 87.

⁴⁵ Charles Francis Adams, "Life of John Adams," in *The Works of John Adams*, 1: 124; Adams to Elizabeth Adams, Philadelphia, Nov. 24, 1780, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 226. Hutchinson noted how much more ambitious John Adams was than Samuel. See his *History of Massachusetts Bay*, 3: 214. On Adams's contribution, see also Brown, *Revolutionary Politics*, 54n.

Such statements suggest Adams, like Benjamin Franklin, may have mastered whole catalogs of virtues only to stumble on the sin of pride. Yet humility suffused his life. He came from a respectable family. In a period when Harvard students were numbered according to social position, Samuel was sixth in the class of 1740 and, as Shipton notes, had the ordinary rules been followed that year, he would have been second. But, as John Eliot recalled, "Every kind of genealogy he affected to despise, as a thing which gives birth to family pride." He had, moreover, the rare ability to recognize, as did others, that he was "not a man of ready powers," that his strengths were limited. And so he recruited others for roles he could not fulfill.⁴⁶ Nor did Samuel cherish notions either of his own peculiar importance or of the public's obligation to him. John Adams left office in 1801 with great bitterness, but Samuel, in similar circumstances twenty years earlier, reminded his indignant friends "that in a free Republic, the People have an uncontrollable right of chusing whom they please" for public offices. No man, he said, had a claim on his country for having served it, for that was simply a citizen's duty. Again on his final retirement from politics, Adams affirmed a long-standing conviction that others more able could take his place.⁴⁷ This refusal to cultivate or elevate the self shaped his personality. He watched himself as closely as he counseled the people to observe their rulers and learned to control a natural passion and temper much as he led his countrymen to eschew violence in the name of a larger good. "If Otis was Martin Luther . . . [who was] rough, hasty and loved good cheer," John Adams remarked, Samuel Adams was John Calvin, "cool, abstemious, polished, refined, though more inflexible, uniform, consistent."⁴⁸

Having denied himself special significance, he naturally respected others who had still fewer traditional claims to status. "No man ever despised more those fools of fortune, whom the multitude admire" than did Adams; "and yet," Eliot noted, "he thought the opinion of the common people in most cases to be very correct." He was "well acquainted with every shipwright, and substantial mechanick, and they were his firm friends through all the scenes of the revolution, believing that to him more than any other man in the community we owed our independence." His writings often took on the guise of speaking for the people; and, though he emphasized the theme of equality mainly in the 1790s when inspired by the French Revolution, he saw it as a major purpose of civil society already in 1771. Yet he was not, as he once put it, of levelling principles. Subordination was necessary for government; public rank was to be respected, and rigidly.⁴⁹ Status must, however, be earned.

⁴⁶ Shipton, "Samuel Adams," 420; Eliot, *Biographical Dictionary*, 5-7; Bentley, diary, Oct. 3, 1803, in *Diary of William Bentley*, 3: 49; John Adams to William Tudor, Quincy, Feb. 9, 1819, in *Works of John Adams*, 10:364-65.

⁴⁷ Adams to Elizabeth Adams, Philadelphia, Nov. 24, 1780; to Caleb Davis, Philadelphia, Apr. 3, 1781; and to the legislature, Jan. 27, 1797, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 226, 254-55, 404.

⁴⁸ John Adams to J. Morse, Quincy, Dec. 5, 1815, in *Works of John Adams*, 10: 190.

⁴⁹ Eliot, *Biographical Dictionary*, 5-7; Adams to legislature, Jan. 17, 1794, and as "Vindex," in *Boston Gazette*, Jan. 21, 1771, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 357-59; 2: 151-52. For the rigidity with which he came to believe elective public office should be respected, see James T. Austin, *Life of Elbridge Gerry* (Boston, 1828-29), 1: 474.

Samuel Adams's politics, Bentley claimed, came from "two maxims, rulers should have little, the people much. The rank of rulers is from the good they do, & the difference among the people only from personal virtue. No entailments, no privileges. An open world for genius & industry." Even wealth was an inappropriate, and indeed dangerous, criterion for public office. It would be better, Adams once argued, to prefer men in want over those with riches, for while the former could be done "from the feelings of humanity, . . . the other argues a base, degenerate, servile temper of mind." Ability and virtue were alone appropriate qualifications.⁵⁰

This unease with preordained rank permeated even his marriage. Not that his theory of familial relationships was anything but traditional, even Biblical: "It is acknowledged," he wrote his future son-in-law, "that the Superiority is & ought to be in the Man." But since "the Management of a Family in many Instances necessarily devolves on the Woman, it is difficult always to determine the Line between the Authority of the one & the Subordination of the other." Standard notions of the proper concerns of the sexes he found equally difficult to maintain. His letters to his wife from Philadelphia are filled with public affairs, to the point of humoriness. Tell Samuel Cooper, who wanted political news, "that I can scarce find time to write you even a Love Letter," he once wrote her. "I will however for once give you a political Anecdote." Occasionally this practice made him uneasy: "I forget that I am writing [to] a female upon the Subject of War," he once apologized, and, again, explained that he sent along so much political news because his letters to her were also meant for his male colleagues in Boston. But ultimately no apologies were necessary for, he recalled, her "whole Soul" was "engagd in the great Cause." It seemed appropriate to him that, with the Revolution, Boston should consider improvements in the education of female children. And as for the family, it seemed best "not to govern too much." His private inclinations had, moreover, public implications, for there was great uniformity, he suggested, in the practices that promoted stability for states, cities, and families.⁵¹

Adams's personal achievement of virtue shaped his writings, which explains in part why one of the most prolific of Revolutionary authors has been the least understood. By the dominant canons of the Revolutionary period not only politics but even literature was to be selfless: authors must not be themselves revealed or advanced, but only their causes. Samuel Adams's public writings are within this tradition. Even his family correspondence is remarkably impersonal. He found it difficult to lay aside a rhetorical stance: "Why do I write in this Stile," he once wondered to his cousin John. Occasional letters to his daughter resemble nothing so much as replies from the Boston Committee of Correspondence. On September 8, 1778, for

⁵⁰ Bentley, diary, Oct. 3, 1803, in *Diary of William Bentley*, 3: 49; Adams to Elbridge Gerry, Philadelphia, Jan. 2, 1776, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 3: 247.

⁵¹ Adams to Thomas Wells, Philadelphia, Nov. 22, 1780; to Elizabeth Adams, Philadelphia, Feb. 26, 1776, Nov. 14, 1776, Apr. 1, 1777, and Aug. 8, 1777; to John Adams, Boston, Dec. 8 and 19, 1781; and to John Scollay, Philadelphia, Dec. 30, 1780, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 224; 3: 267, 319, 367, 403-04; 4: 270, 237.

example, he quoted back passages from the girl's own previous letter, which informed him of his wife's illness, drawing inferences, approving proper sentiments: "I am satisfied 'you do all in your power for so excellent a mother.' You are under great obligations to her, and I am sure you are of a grateful disposition. I hope her life will be spared, and that you will have the opportunity of presenting to her my warmest respects." Always the cause, or lesson, is primary, whether filial duty or, as in a letter of 1780, religiosity. At most he adds personal assurances "that I have all the feelings of a father," then signs—"S. Adams." Ultimately, of course, these letters are revealing of their author. They confirm an observation by the marquis de Chastellux, so like that of Brissot, that in Samuel Adams one could experience "the satisfaction one rarely has in society, or even at the theatre, of finding the person of the actor corresponding to the role he plays." His "simple and frugal exterior" and his conversation—like his writings—were all of a piece.⁵²

An eighteenth-century Frenchman could, then, understand Samuel Adams. It seems unlikely, moreover, that Adams was so enigmatic to his Revolutionary colleagues as William Bentley claimed. His confidences were limited to a handful of men,⁵³ but with these he found it painful to keep secrets even when communications were by post and longed for those private conversations where like-minded men could "disclose each others Hearts." Among these friends Adams won—his correspondence occasionally reveals—affection even for his idiosyncracies. In December 1777 he visited Plymouth to help celebrate the anniversary of the Pilgrims' landing and sent James Lovell a report that stressed above all the merits of the day's sermon. "An Epicure would have said something about the clams," Lovell replied, "but you turn me to the prophet Isaiah."⁵⁴ By the early nineteenth century, however, Samuel Adams seemed a remote figure, "one of Plutarch's men. Modern times have produced no character like his that I can call to mind," one clergyman commented. For John Adams, an analogy with Calvin was apt. But for a still more distant, less religious age, one more concerned with the "inner springs" of conduct, more insistent that writers produce advertisements of themselves, not of their causes, Samuel Adams awoke only suspicion. "He was working for liberty," Harlow wrote, "but why does anybody devote a life to an abstract cause? Conscious motives will no more explain Samuel Adams than they will explain Mohammed, Peter the Hermit, Savonarola, or Joan of Arc."⁵⁵

The consistent citation of religious analogues is appropriate, for Adams was, in short, a saint, "the last of the Puritans" as Edward Everett called him. His Puritanism was internalized, in the formation of his character, and sec-

⁵² Samuel to John Adams, Boston, Sept. 16, 1776, in *ibid.*, 3: 313; letters to his daughter Hannah, in Wells, *Samuel Adams*, 3: 53–54; de Chastellux, *Travels in North America*, 1: 142.

⁵³ Cf. Adams to Darius Sessions, Boston, Dec. 28, 1772, and to John Adams, Feb. or Mar. 1773, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 2: 289, 430.

⁵⁴ Adams to Joseph Warren, Philadelphia, Nov. 4, 1775, and to Samuel Cooper, Philadelphia, Apr. 23, 1781, in *ibid.*, 3: 234; 4: 259; Lovell to Adams, Jan. 20, 1778, *Samuel Adams Papers*, microfilm roll 5.

⁵⁵ Clergyman quoted in Wells, *Samuel Adams*, 2: 185; Harlow, *Samuel Adams*, 64.

ularized into political doctrine. As such, although he remained a devout congregationalist, Adams was less a religious sectarian than, in a term he once used, a “political Enthusiast.” His politics were consciously modeled upon those of New England’s founders. Few men have been so conscious of their place in time, so capable of deriving meaning from it. Ancestors and posterity rank only with virtue as key concepts in his writings, and all were linked in a conception that cited past and future to define the duties of the present. In short, for Adams the past was a property that gave him identity, direction. The freedom of Massachusetts was inherited from ancestors who left England “to settle a plan of govt upon the true principles of Liberty.” New England’s fathers left to their children not just the institutions, but the habits of freedom: “Our Bradfords, Winslows & Winthrops would have revolted at the Idea of . . . Dissipation & Folly,” Adams wrote, “knowing them to be inconsistent with their great Design, in transplanting themselves into what they called this ‘Outside of the World.’” There was, then, an obligation upon the living to make “every laudable Effort” to continue the ways of the fathers, to secure for posterity “the free & full Enjoyment of those precious Rights and privileges for which our renowned forefathers expended so much Treasure and Blood.”⁵⁶

Thus Adams’s role was that of an intermediary, passing the achievements of the past on to the future. He was not breaking new paths, discovering new worlds, but traveling a well-marked highway, which accounts for his confidence and rectitude, the “sternness of stuff” upon which John Adams commented. It was simply his duty “to oppose to the utmost of my Ability the Designs of those who would enslave my Country; and with Gods Assistance I am resolved to oppose them till their Designs are defeated or I am called to quit the Stage of Life.”⁵⁷ Because of this self-conception, Adams’s conflict with Thomas Hutchinson was critical in his development as a revolutionary. Hutchinson was to Adams a son of New England—“bone of our Bone, & flesh of our flesh”—who turned on his native land, a man who would “aid the Designs of despotick power” in his willingness to compromise the colony’s charter, even to recommend an abridgment of English liberties in America, all to satisfy his ambition for power and wealth.⁵⁸ And because he was so successful in attaining positions of influence, Hutchinson threatened the continuity of past and future to which Adams was so dedicated.

⁵⁶ Everett, “The Battle of Lexington,” Apr. 19, 1835, in his *Orations and Speeches* (Boston, 1850–68), 1: 545; Adams to Arthur Lee, Boston, Apr. 9, 1773, and Sept. 27, 1771; Committee of Correspondence to Thomas Mighill, Boston, Oct. 7, 1773; Adams to John Scollay, Philadelphia, Dec. 30, 1780; and to Joseph Warren, Philadelphia, Feb. 12, 1779, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 3: 21; 2: 236; 3: 18; 4: 238, 124–25. For an earlier and different effort to link Adams’s politics with his Calvinism, see Williams, “Samuel Adams,” especially 48–50. Williams emphasizes above all Adams’s dedication to “a corporate Christian commonwealth supported by the political economy of mercantilism” (p. 57). W. E. H. Lecky was more moved by Adams’s character in his very brief description of the Massachusetts leader as a “seventeenth-century Covenanter.” See *The American Revolution, 1763–1783* (New York, 1922), 120.

⁵⁷ Adams to Elizabeth Adams, Baltimore, Jan. 29, 1777, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 3: 349.

⁵⁸ Adams to Stephen Sayre, Boston, Nov. 23, 1770; to John Scollay, Philadelphia, Dec. 30, 1780; to Elizabeth Adams, Philadelphia, Mar. 23, 1779; and as “Valerius Poplicola” and “Candidus,” in *Boston Gazette*, Oct. 28 and Nov. 25, 1771, in *ibid.*, 2: 67–68; 4: 237–38; 4: 138; 2: 256–64, 268–76. See also Bailyn, *Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, 183–84.

From these local origins, Adams's radicalism spread until he opposed not only England, whose politics shaped and sustained Hutchinson, but also the old order throughout Europe. In his effort to preserve his vision of a pure and virtuous past, Adams was, like other revolutionaries, pushed increasingly toward innovation.⁵⁹ His earlier equalitarian inclinations evolved into an articulate republicanism, until by 1785 Adams found all hereditary rule, indeed all institutions save those of a republic, "unnatural," tending "more or less to distress human Societies." Since the American Republic threatened all traditional establishments, Adams thought it would naturally evoke efforts at repression. "Will the Lion ever associate with the Lamb or the Leopard with the Kid," he asked Richard Henry Lee, "till our favorite principles shall be universally established?"⁶⁰ Yet even revolutionary republicanism constituted only a revival of his ancestors' ways. Was the unpretentiousness of those early delegates to the Continental Congress—who, Adams recalled with approval, ate simple lunches of bread and cheese under a tree—so different from that of early New Englanders who were "contented with Clams and Muscles [*sic*]"? It was, he claimed, the "Principles and Manners of N[ew] Eng[lan]d" which "produced that Spirit which finally has established the Independence of America." And "the genuine Principles of New England," he suggested, were quite simply "Republican Principles."⁶¹

In the end, however, Adams is more usefully compared with England's seventeenth-century revolutionary saints than with New England's founders, who retreated to a wilderness to found their commonwealth. Like Adams, Britain's revolutionary Puritans were engaged, as Michael Walzer notes, in a lay ministry within a corrupted world; like him, they cited a purer past against the sinful present. More fundamentally, Adams followed his English political ancestors in his espousal of godly vigilance, playing the role of "watchman on the wall," alerting his city of new threats to its freedom; in his exercise of magistracy—creating popular associations, which marked a break with the more feudal past in America as in England, opening the way toward modern politics; devoting endless hours to committee work both in Boston and at the Continental Congress—and, ultimately, in his endorsement of revolution. His severe asceticism, moreover, links Adams not only with earlier Puritan revolutionaries but with Jacobins of the Republic of Virtue, Bolsheviks of the early days of the Russian Revolution, and the Chinese in Yen-an.⁶² The myth of Samuel Adams may then be wrong not just in misconceiving his personal identity, but also in its more fundamental

⁵⁹ On the conservative beginnings of revolutionary movements, see Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1965), 34–40, 153.

⁶⁰ Adams to R. H. Lee, Boston, Apr. 14, 1785, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 238, 408–11.

⁶¹ Adams to James Warren, Yorktown, May 25, 1778, in *Warren-Adams Letters*, 2: 13; to William Checkley, Boston, June 1, 1774; to James Warren, Philadelphia, Feb. 12, 1779; and to Samuel Cooper, Philadelphia, Apr. 23, 1781, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 3: 128; 4: 124, 259–60.

⁶² Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), 3–4, 12–13, 28–29, 204–10, 267, 306, 310–20. For a further example of revolutionary asceticism, among Vietcong revolutionaries in the Mekong Delta, see David Hunt, "Villagers at War: The National Liberation Front in My Tho Province, 1965–1967," *Radical America*, 8 (1974): 22–24, *passim*.

assumptions about the character of a revolutionary. Successful revolutionary leaders are not violent and irresponsible anarchists but persons of intense discipline and policy for whom the public cause purges mundane considerations of self.

Men such as these are destined to be misunderstood by later generations, for they play transitional roles in their revolutions. “They . . . helped carry men through a time of change” but “had no place in a time of stability.” With the consolidation of the new order their acute Spartanism becomes uncomfortable, outmoded. The experience of several American “old revolutionaries” was here strikingly like that of an old Red Army man portrayed in a poem of 1924 by Sergei Esenin: “What a misfit I’ve become,” he says after nostalgically recalling victories of the Russian Revolution; “I feel a foreigner in my land.”⁶³ Similarly, James Warren made a sentimental pilgrimage to Concord in 1792 but found “few of the old hands, and little of that noble spirit, and as little of those comprehensive views and sentiments which dignified the early days of the revolution. Thus,” he concluded, “I have lived long enough to feel pains too great for me to describe.” And by March 1801 South Carolina’s Christopher Gadsden found the new world for which he had helped prepare the way a “mere bedlam.”⁶⁴

Samuel Adams never succumbed to such acute disillusionment. He questioned whether Boston, much less America, would ever become a “*Christian Sparta*” as he once hoped, but he never lost his deeper faith in the people, never despaired of the Revolution. The nation’s rejection of John Adams in 1800, which so disturbed Gadsden, was for Samuel Adams the end of a brief nightmare of armies and repression. “The storm is now over,” he wrote Thomas Jefferson in 1801, “and we are in port,” with peace and harmony in store. The principles of democratic republicanism were better understood than ever before, and, “by the continued efforts of Men of Science and Virtue,” there was reason to believe they would “extend more and more till the turbulent and destructive Spirit of War shall cease,” and “principles of Liberty and virtue, truth and justice” might “pervade the whole Earth.”⁶⁵

For younger Americans, Adams appeared nonetheless intolerant, austere, inflexible, a man buried in his Puritan past. At best he was a person “born for the revolutionary epoch,” one who “belonged to the revolution.”⁶⁶ In either case, Adams seemed out of place in later times, an alien. Discomfort contributed to the growth of myth, which further separated future generations from the historic man. It also testified to Samuel Adams’s quintessentially revolutionary character, and so to the genuinely revolutionary character of the American Revolution.

⁶³ Walzer, *Revolution of the Saints*, 320; Esenin, “Soviet Russia,” in *ibid.*

⁶⁴ James Warren to Gerry, Plymouth, Mass., Dec. 18, 1792, in *A Study of Dissent: The Warren-Gerry Correspondence*, ed. C. Harvey Gardiner (Carbondale, Ill., 1968), 251; Gadsden, *The Writings of Christopher Gadsden, 1746–1805*, ed. Richard Walsh (Columbia, 1966), 306–07.

⁶⁵ Adams to John Scollay, Philadelphia, Dec. 30, 1780, and to Jefferson, Apr. 24 and Nov. 18, 1801, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, 4: 238, 408–11.

⁶⁶ Tudor, *The Life of James Otis*, 275.