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# John Adams' Classical Conception of the Executive

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## Abstract

*While contemporary students of the presidency generally ignore or deride John Adams, his conception of the presidency is intriguing and, in at least one respect, pertinent. Adams employed a classical vocabulary to depict a society torn by conflict between aristocrats and democrats. He envisioned the executive as the balancing force between the contending parties, responsible, in a disinterested fashion, for the maintenance of both order and justice. Adams' executive was a curious blend of power and passivity; his hallmark was not energy, but impartiality and integrity. As President, John Adams proved true to his theoretical prescriptions, using his executive weight against what he considered democratic excesses through the Alien and Sedition Acts, and then against what he considered aristocratic intrigues through his peace mission to France. Adams' version of the independent executive was infuriating to Alexander Hamilton, who became the first of a long line of critics condemning Adams' presidency for vanity and weakness. But Adams had wisely avoided a war and blocked Hamilton's imperial schemes; he had recognized the dangers in the Hamiltonian version of the energetic executive.*

The early presidents — especially Washington through Madison — remain fascinating for a number of reasons. These men became chief executives after earlier roles as founders of the republic, each was self-consciously trying to ensure the success of the uncertain political experiment in which he had played a signal part. They operated with an exalted conception of an executive who could surmount partisanship and self-interest; as Ralph Ketcham has recently shown, each attempted in his own fashion to be an American republican version of Bolingbroke's "patriot king." And they were (Washington excepted) men of theoretical vision, whose presidencies would take form in light of deeply-held conceptions of politics.<sup>1</sup>

Of these early presidents, perhaps the most intensely theoretical was John Adams. Adams' ideas about the executive were rooted in an extraordinarily wide reading of political theory and history, and in particular echoed the idealized vision of the British monarch found in Bolingbroke and De Lolme. His practice of presidential leadership, while affected of course by factors of personality, politics, and circumstance, can be understood in large part as an exemplification of his classical conception of the executive.<sup>2</sup>

Yet as theorist of the executive and as chief executive, John Adams has received little attention from contemporary students of the presidency. Compared especially to Washington, Hamilton, and Jefferson, he is given scant notice; when discussed

at all, it is ordinarily in derisive or distorted terms. Thus, Thomas Bailey, writing *Presidential Greatness*, dismisses Adams as “temperamentally unfitted to be President” and asserts that “in some respects he was a flat failure.” James David Barber suggests that among the first four presidents Adams most closely approximates the disastrous “active-negative” type; he describes Adams as “an impatient and irascible man” who was “far more partisan than Washington” and who “presided over the new nation’s first experiment in political repression . . .”<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this article is to reconstruct Adams’ conception of the executive, which is to be found scattered throughout his writings (and actions) rather than explicated at length in any single text. His conception, I contend, should neither be dismissed nor derided. In certain respects it does seem anachronistic, quite remote from the politics of the modern presidency. In other respects—particularly Adams’ rejection of the energetic and aggressive executive style championed by Alexander Hamilton, and his association of that style with militarism and imperial adventure—it is intriguing and still relevant.

The argument of the article proceeds through four stages. First, I briefly sketch some of Adams’ ideas about political psychology and social conflict, which establish the context for his conception of the executive. Second, I draw from Adams’ writings the elements reflecting his conception of the executive. Third, I turn to Adams’ presidency and examine several of its central incidents as commentary upon his conception of the executive. Fourth, I consider the revealing response to Adams’ presidency by a far more familiar architect of the executive, Alexander Hamilton.

## I

To understand Adams’ conception of the executive, we must first look at some of his basic assumptions about political life. Adams was a lifelong student of political motives. While some of his fascination with the springs of political action derived from his own brooding, Puritan introspection, Adams also believed that the development of psychological acuity was essential to the success of a “public man.” As he wrote to James Warren in 1775: “There is a discernment competent to mortals by which they can penetrate into the minds of men and discover their secret passions, prejudices, habits, hopes, fears, wishes and designs . . . A dexterity and facility of thus unravelling men’s thoughts and a faculty of governing them by means of the knowledge we have of them, constitutes the principal part of the art of a politician.”<sup>4</sup>

Among the politically-relevant motives, the most attractive for Adams was disinterestedness. Commitment to public ends even at the sacrifice of personal interests was the hallmark of “civic virtue” in the classical republican tradition. In 1776, Adams had rested American hopes for republicanism upon the widespread practice of disinterestedness. Yet while he continued to admire disinterestedness—and often asserted that his own actions had manifested this austere virtue—by the 1780s he had come to believe that it was a rare phenomenon. Most of those who claimed to be sacrificing their own welfare for that of the public would, he warned, be political dissemblers. “Nothing so infallibly gulls the people and nothing more universally deceives them in the end than this pretended disinterestedness.”<sup>5</sup>

While Adams thus believed that the “selfish passions” predominated, he was careful to differentiate between various forms of self-seeking. The form that held the greatest political potential was the love of fame. In his most extensive psychological analysis, the *Discourses on Davila*, Adams defined “the passion for distinction,” as the individual’s “desire to be observed, considered, esteemed, praised, believed, and admired by his fellows . . .” While most people sought to gratify this desire through wealth or other private accomplishments, a few aimed higher. “They aim at approbation as well as attention; at esteem as well as consideration; and at admiration and gratitude, as well as congratulation . . . This last description of persons is the tribe out of which proceed your patriots and heroes, and most of the great benefactors to mankind.”<sup>6</sup>

Having abandoned any expectation of widespread civic virtue, Adams looked to the political leadership of an elite driven by the love of fame. If the political order would reward actions productive of public advantages with resplendent honors and grateful applause, the energy derived from the love of fame would vitalize the republic. Adams is best known for advocating balanced institutions that check the passions, but for *this* passion his prescription was different. He wanted it to be “gratified, encouraged, and arranged on the side of virtue.”<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, other “selfish passions” were more prevalent than the love of fame. Uppermost, according to Adams, were ambition and avarice. Neither ambition nor avarice could be arranged on the side of virtue, for what they shared was self-aggrandizement at the expense of the common good. Ambition aimed at power or office without regard for the public welfare. Avarice corrupted political life by turning public business into the handmaiden of personal greed for wealth. The balanced institutions which Adams ceaselessly advocated were defenses against the powerful forces of ambition and avarice.

For John Adams, the centerpiece of constitutional wisdom was the idea of balance. A republic could survive, he believed, only if it established an equilibrium between three social orders: the body of the people, the aristocracy, and the “monarchical” element. His three bulky volumes of *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* laboriously tracked down the guises under which balanced government had functioned.

Adams was especially concerned with the role of the aristocracy. He did not restrict the term to an hereditary order. To Jefferson, he wrote: “The five pillars of aristocracy are beauty, wealth, birth, genius, and virtues. Any one of the three first can at any time overbear any one or both of the two last.” To John Taylor, he explained: “By aristocracy, I understand all those men who can command, influence, or procure more than an average of votes . . .” Adams believed that regardless of the egalitarian dreams of his epoch, an aristocracy—or what we would call an elite—would be found in every society.<sup>8</sup>

His critics charged that Adams was a devotee of aristocracy, yet he could assail aristocrats with a ferocity that rivalled that of Thomas Paine. Haughty, imperious aristocrats were, he observed, usually able to get the better of the common people. They could trade upon the people’s sense of inferiority in their presence. And if a lofty demeanor was insufficient to obtain the aristocrats’ objectives, they were quite

capable of shifting to low tricks, for the “multitude have always been credulous, and the few are always artful.” Ordinarily more than a match for the people in any simple form of government, aristocracy would swiftly prove its oppressiveness once it had the opportunity. But it would also prove its instability, for aristocratic pride would engender rivalries among the leading families that would divide and torment a polity.<sup>9</sup>

If this elite was both dangerous and irrepressible, it was also potentially valuable. Adams argued that although ability and wisdom might originate in any part of society, the greatest concentration of learning and talent was to be found among the social and economic elite. The aristocracy “is the brightest ornament and glory of the nation, and may always be made the greatest blessing of society, if it be judiciously managed in the constitution.” The institutional home for the aristocracy, Adams urged, ought to be a senate. Set off by themselves in a senate, the aristocrats could no longer overawe or manipulate the common people. And they could offer valuable services to the republic. They would be the bulwark of property against unjust levelling schemes among the people; they would be a potent barrier against executive despotism, as aristocratic pride responded vigorously to any executive who grasped for dominion. Hedged in by the popular assembly on one side and the executive on the other, aristocratic passions would, in a properly-constructed senate, be able to promote only desirable public ends.<sup>10</sup>

Although Adams’ institutional prescriptions for the elite were out of kilter with the emerging American understanding of a constitutional order, his insights into the role that elites would play in American life remain impressive. The same cannot be said for his view of the American people. His voracious readings in classical and European history, and his erudition in political theory, proved to be a trap for Adams when he attempted to gauge the political impulses of the mass of Americans. Steeped in European categories, he was unable to grasp the moderation of the American people.

Adams held to a fearful view of the American people. Although his standpoint towards the people was neither hostile nor unsympathetic, he worried about their propensity to rush to political extremes. Like the aristocracy, the common people were prone to their own particular set of political vices. One popular vice was credulity. Without the capacity to discern who their true friends were, the people often invested their trust in demagogues. The popular vice that most terrified Adams, however, was envy. In a balanced constitution, where passions could only flow in demarcated channels, the people would learn to respect talent, virtue, birth, and wealth. Thrown together with the aristocrats in a singular and unbounded political arena, on the other hand, popular envy would flourish. The aristocracy still might succeed in overawing or tricking the multitude, but if they failed they were sure to be despoiled.

Warning repeatedly against the horrors of “simple democracy,” Adams advocated what he believed to be genuine democracy, by which he meant a popular assembly sharing power with an aristocratic senate and a monarchical executive. Just as a senate delimited and fructified aristocratic passions, so would a popular assembly bring out the best qualities of the people. The assembly would be the home for their legitimate political interests and activities.

## II

The executive was the linchpin in John Adams' theory of balanced government. Equilibrium between aristocracy and democracy was not, in his view, a mechanical arrangement, but rather a political achievement. It would demand the commitment and talent of the executive to maintain a balance in the face of contending forces that constantly threatened to upset it.

Adams' attempts to show the American people what kind of executive they required met with considerable incomprehension. His difficulties stemmed in part from his impolitic language, for he refused to cast aside the classical usages and to adapt his words to the current fashion. An equally serious impediment to understanding was the extent of Adams' deviation from both sides of the prevailing debate in the new United States about the character of a republican executive. If his proposed executive was far too powerful and regal to please the Anti-federalists and their successors, it was too nonpartisan and passive to impress those whose model of the executive derived from James Wilson and Alexander Hamilton.

Adams was impatient with the radical Whig animus against executive power. To deny the need for this power was to ignore the propensities of human nature and the regularities of human history. "There is a strong and continual effort, in every society of men, arising from the constitution of their minds, towards a kingly power . . ." He was further impatient with the prevailing obsession about shunning the vocabulary of monarchy, believing that it distracted political theorizing from the essence of the phenomenon which monarchy named.

Everybody knows that the word monarchy has its etymology in the Greek . . . and signifies single rule or authority in one. This authority may be limited or unlimited, of temporary or perpetual duration . . . Nevertheless, as far as it extends, and as long as it lasts, it may be called a monarchical authority with great propriety, by any man who is not afraid of a popular clamor and a scurrilous abuse of words.<sup>11</sup>

Although Adams strongly opposed unlimited executive authority, he believed that in a balanced government a "monarchical" figure was indispensable, for it was this figure who would ultimately uphold the balance. Detached from the contending classes and parties, Adams' executive would prevent anyone from obtaining a dominant position. "[N]either the poor nor the rich should ever be suffered to be masters. They should have equal power to defend themselves; and that their power may be always equal, there should be an independent mediator between them, always ready, always able, and always interested to assist the weakest."<sup>12</sup>

Edward Handler has suggested that Adams set out two mutually inconsistent descriptions of the executive; in one, the executive served as mediator between the aristocracy and the people, while in the other, the executive championed the people's cause against the aristocracy. Both descriptions of the executive can be found in Adams, but their apparent inconsistency dissolves once his view of the political struggle between aristocrats and democrats is recalled. Because conflict between the few and the many jeopardized political equilibrium, the executive sometimes had to assume the

role of “a third party, whose interest and duty it [is] to do justice to the other two . . .” Because the aristocracy ordinarily brought to this conflict superior resources and wiles, the executive sometimes had to act as “the natural friend of the people, and the only defense which they or their representatives can have against the avarice and ambition of the rich and distinguished citizens . . .”<sup>13</sup>

What was most striking about Adams’ conception of the executive was not the shifting roles this figure would have to assume in order to maintain the political balance, but the unusual blend of power and passivity that would characterize his actions. Adams wanted to vest in an American president all of the essential prerogatives of the British monarch. The chief magistrate he favored would possess an unencumbered power in making appointments, treaties, and wars, and would be armed with an absolute veto over the products of legislative action. Yet Adams believed that this panoply of powers would be used sparingly and defensively, for the executive, unlike the senate or assembly, was not given to aggression.<sup>14</sup>

The defensiveness and passivity that characterized this conception become clearer when Adam’s executive figure is contrasted with the chief magistrates proposed by James Wilson and Alexander Hamilton. Wilson was the foremost architect of a strong and unitary executive in the Constitutional Convention, where he highlighted the “energy, dispatch, and responsibility” such an executive would provide. Hamilton, in his famous *Federalist* #70, further developed this notion by his demonstration that “all men of sense will agree in the necessity of an energetic executive.” Adams agreed with much of the case for a unitary executive. He wrote in the *Defence* that “the unity, the secrecy, the dispatch of one man has no equal.” He endorsed the idea, shared by Wilson and Hamilton, that unity ensured responsibility and that “the attention of the whole nation should be fixed upon one point . . .” What was lacking in Adams was the emphasis upon executive energy. The driving, dominating, committed executive whose lineaments were most visible in the ideas and actions of Hamilton was the opposite of what Adams wanted.<sup>15</sup>

When Adams spoke of the executive’s motives, he adopted different tones than those he employed to describe aristocratic or democratic motives. Ambition and avarice typically drove the few and the many; in the best of institutional arrangements, their desire for fame might come to play a significant part. Writing about the executive, however, Adams seemed to assume that either disinterestedness or the love of fame would be uppermost. Standing apart from the passions of the aristocratic and democratic parties, the executive as mediator was supposed to “calm and restrain the ardor of both . . .” Favoring neither the interests of the few nor the interests of the many, but seeking instead to do “justice to all sides,” the executive would become a rallying point for “the honest and virtuous of all sides . . .” Adams’ executive was thus to be a figure marked not by energy, but by impartiality and integrity.<sup>16</sup>

Serving as the balancing force between social classes, political parties, and legislative branches, the executive might have to move with decisiveness and firmness. Yet, since he lacked any interest or program of his own, his characteristic stance was to wait. His power would be held in abeyance until he had to defend the weaker party against the stronger, or until a line of action opened up that was independent of either

party and conducive to the national welfare. Adams' executive did not, therefore, search out opportunities for action or grasp at instruments for aggression.

In light of this conception, it was not surprising that Adams wanted to base American national defense on a strong navy, and that he was disturbed by Hamilton's dream of a professional American army. With a strong navy, the executive might assure the defense of the nation's territory and commerce against European depredations. But Adams was reluctant to see a large army recruited in America, regarding it as a seductive tool for executive and national aggression.

The emphasis on impartiality and integrity, and the fear of aggressive and partisan energy, were also evident in Adams' perspective on executive appointments. Adams adhered to the classical republican objective of attracting the most meritorious individuals to public service and rewarding them with lustrous public honors. What jeopardized this objective was class and factional animosity. If the people or the legislature were given the responsibility of awarding offices and distributing honors, factional rivalries would polarize the republic. In contrast, "when the emulation of all the citizens looks up to one point, like the rays of the circle from all parts of the circumference, meeting and uniting in the center, you may hope for uniformity, consistency, and subordination . . ."17

By proposing that the executive alone should dispense political offices and honors, Adams made it easy for his critics to assail him as the champion of a royal court in American garb. But his concern here was not, in fact, with patronage and influence. Rather, he wanted to draw upon the executive's impartial judgment of men's characters to select the most deserving for offices of public trust. Presidents of the United States, he insisted, "must look out for merit wherever they can find it; and talent and integrity must be a recommendation to office, wherever they are seen, though differing in sentiments from the president . . ."18

When Adams applied his theoretical conception of the executive—rooted in his classical commitment to a government that balanced social orders as well as institutions—within the context of American politics, he ran into a host of frustrations. He considered the executive he proposed for America as benign, especially towards the people, but he could never convince "old Whigs" of his perspective.

During the revolution, Adams himself had shared, to some extent, in the Whigish mistrust of magisterial power and prominence. By the time of the *Defence* and the United States Constitution, however, Adams was unequivocal in his support for a strong executive. Flying in the face of revolutionary sensibilities, he incautiously argued that America should acknowledge its status, under the new Constitution, as a "monarchical republic." While Hamilton was employing all his cleverness, in *Federalist* #69, to demonstrate how the new president bore hardly any resemblance to the British king, Adams was insisting to Roger Sherman on their likeness. "The duration of our president is neither perpetual nor for life; it is only for four years; but his power during those four years is much greater than that of an avoyer, a consul, a doge, a stadtholder, nay, than a king of Poland; nay, than a king of Sparta. I know of no first magistrate in any republican government, excepting England and Neuchatel, who possesses a constitutional dignity, authority, and power comparable to his."19



Adams endorsed presidential power, and regretted that it had been compromised by admitting the aristocratic Senate to a share in such executive functions as appointments and treaty-making. Reacting to the new Constitution, he wrote to Jefferson in December, 1787: "You are afraid of the one—I, of the few . . . You are apprehensive of monarchy; I, of aristocracy. I would therefore have given more power to the President and less to the Senate." Criticizing the Senate's part in appointments, he predicted to Sherman that it would "weaken the hands of the executive, by lessening the obligation, gratitude, and attachment of the candidate to the president, by dividing his attachment between the executive and legislative, which are natural enemies . . . The president's own officers, in a thousand instances, will oppose his just and constitutional exertions, and screen themselves under the wings of their patrons and party in the legislature."<sup>20</sup>

Adams hoped for an independent president who would not be dragged into class and partisan strife. He tried repeatedly to impress upon the American people the necessity for executive independence. "The people cannot be too careful in the choice of their presidents; but when they have chosen them, they ought to expect that they will act their own independent judgments, and not be wheedled or intimidated by factious combinations of senators, representatives, heads of departments, or military officers."<sup>21</sup>

It was desirable, in Adams' estimation, that the choice of the executive be consensual, as it had been in the case of Washington. He dreaded partisan division over so preeminent a leader.

His person, countenance, character, and actions are made the daily contemplation and conversation of the whole people. Hence arises the danger of a division of this attention. Where there are rivals for the first place, the national attention and passions are divided, and thwart each other . . .

Once partisan strife emerged, and jeopardized his own succession to the presidential chair, Adams concealed his disappointment with the sardonic observation that this was only one more verification of his much-maligned theory of politics. Writing to his wife in February, 1796, he pointed out that "the first situation is the great object of contention—the center and main source of all emulation, as the learned Dr. Adams teaches in all his writings, and everybody believes him, though nobody will own it . . ."<sup>22</sup>

But he could never reconcile himself to the linkage between political parties and the presidency. Rather than understanding parties as a base of political support, and thus as an aid to a president's effectiveness, Adams continued to espouse the executive's independence and to regard parties as weakening him. He cited not only his own experience as president, but also that of his successors to bolster this view. Contemplating the state of the presidency under James Madison, he could find only a pathetic dependency. The president, he told Benjamin Rush, had become "a mere head of wood. A mere football, kicked and tossed by Frenchmen, Englishmen, or rather Scotchmen, and ignorant, mischievous boys."<sup>23</sup>

Adams' conception of the independent executive, with its echoes of the idealized British monarch advocated by Bolingbroke and described by De Lolme, was already somewhat anachronistic by the time of his own administration. In the era of Jefferson

and his heirs, its “monarchical” imagery would render it even more unfashionable. Yet Adams remained convinced that only this kind of executive would serve the public good. In a poignant but futile gesture, an elderly Adams exhorted the American people to rally behind the presidency and to liberate it from its captivity to the party system.

People of the United States! You know not half the solicitude of your presidents for your happiness and welfare, nor a hundredth part of the obstructions and embarrassments they endure from intrigues of individuals of both parties. You must support them in their independence, and turn a deaf ear to all the false charges against them.<sup>24</sup>

### III

For a commentary upon Adams' conception of the executive, one of the most instructive places to look is his own presidency. Assuming the presidency of a young republic caught between two warring giants abroad, with increasingly antagonistic domestic parties accusing each other of allegiance to one of those foreign giants, Adams stepped into a situation straight out of his earlier theoretical writings.

The parties of rich and poor, of gentlemen and simplemen, unbalanced by some third power, will always look out for foreign aid, and never be at a loss for names, pretexts, and distinctions. Whig and Tory, Constitutionalist and Republican, Anglomane and Francomane, Athenian and Spartan, will serve the purpose as well as Guelph and Ghibelline. The great desideratum in a government is a distinct executive power, of sufficient strength and weight to compel both these parties, in turn, to submit to the laws.<sup>25</sup>

Adams would attempt to act the part of the independent executive throughout his presidency. That part would prove an ordeal for him. Standing alone in his cherished independence, he would attract hostile fire from partisans on both sides. Yet, in his own terms at least, he could claim success on several counts. To examine Adams' independent executive in action, I will consider two of the major events of his presidency, the Alien and Sedition Acts and the peace mission to France in 1799, plus one minor but revealing incident, the Fries pardon.

The Alien and Sedition Acts are, of course, the chief stigma on the record of the Adams administration. This attempt, during the “quasi-war” with France, to proscribe and punish critics of the government has earned the near-universal condemnation of historians, political scientists, and civil libertarians. Adams' part in the repressive episode certainly merits criticism. Yet it is important to look carefully both at the specific role he played in the history of the Alien and Sedition Acts and at his understanding of that role.

The Alien and Sedition Acts were not shaped by John Adams. As John C. Miller observes, they were not “administration measures in the sense that they were recommended by the President . . .” The legislation was devised by Federalists in Congress. “These laws,” Miller writes, “were the work of the Federalist party, acting out of fear of ‘Jacobinism,’ admiration of the stern repressive measures taken by the British

government—and under the fervent conviction that the good of the country required the rooting out of all French sympathizers.”<sup>26</sup>

If the Alien and Sedition Acts were the fault of a whole party (the only prominent Federalist to oppose them was John Marshall, who doubted their expediency), Adams’ culpability was nonetheless substantial. As the proponent of executive independence, he should have steered clear of measures with such partisan implications. Instead, he shaped the climate in which the legislation was enacted by delivering his bellicose addresses after the XYZ affair. He signed the legislation willingly and he authorized the use of the Alien Act for deportations and the Sedition Act for prosecutions of his journalistic critics.

But he held back from a policy of sweeping repression. The zealot of repression was Timothy Pickering, Secretary of State, and the most forceful of the “High Federalists” in Adams’ Cabinet. It was Pickering who searched through Republican newspapers for evidence of sedition and pressed for prompt prosecutions. Although Adams sometimes concurred with Pickering’s choice of victims, at other times he restrained the Secretary of State.

Adams approved the enforcement of the Alien Act in a handful of cases. But no one was actually deported under this statute. As James Morton Smith concludes, “The chief reason for the record of nonenforcement was the determination of John Adams to give the law a much stricter interpretation than the Federalist extremists desired. Refusing to become a rubber stamp to the zealots in his Cabinet, . . . he preferred to retain the power of final decision rather than to sign blank warrants which Pickering and his colleagues might use as they pleased.” Adams was also resistant to the most blatantly partisan uses of the Sedition law. He would not countenance any effort to ensnare Vice-President Jefferson in the machinery of repression. John C. Miller argues that Adams “was better than his party: although he approved of both the Alien and Sedition Acts, he never advocated the prostitution of these laws to party purposes.”<sup>27</sup>

From Adams’ perspective, the Alien and Sedition Acts were not supposed to be the tools of a party. They were instruments of self-preservation for a republic threatened by a foreign power and its domestic adherents. They aimed not at legitimate public discourse, but at the licentious and false rhetoric with which democratic extremists stirred up popular passions. When the Republican Journalist Thomas Cooper interpreted the policies of the Adams Administration as signalling a plan of executive usurpation, the President’s response was that “a meaner, a more artful, or a more malicious libel has not appeared. As far as it alludes to me, I despise it; but I have no doubt it is a libel against the whole government, and as such ought to be prosecuted.” The independent executive could, in Adams’ conception, become a repressive—though not a partisan—figure, employing his “strength and weight to compel” the democratic party “to submit to the laws.”<sup>28</sup>

The aristocratic party too would, in its turn, be compelled “to submit to the laws.” The ascendancy of the High Federalists, premised upon the likelihood of a war with France, would be fatally undermined by Adams’ decision to send a peace mission to France in 1799. Their plans for military power, imperial adventure, and political supremacy would be confounded by Adams’ unexpected move. Having collaborated

with the aristocratic party in repressing democratic licentiousness, the independent executive would shift his stance and set about to thwart aristocratic intrigue.

Initially, Adams' view of the French threat largely coincided with the position of the High Federalists (who looked to Alexander Hamilton for leadership). After the brazen insult to the United States of the XYZ affair, Adams appeared to rule out further efforts at negotiation and to rally the American people for a confrontation with France. Indeed, on several occasions he considered asking Congress for a declaration of war. Yet, for a number of reasons, he hesitated. Instead of all-out war, there would be the Alien and Sedition Acts, a rapid build-up of the army and navy, and a state of "quasi-war" on the seas between the United States and France.

But the agreement between Adams and the High Federalists was fragile. Whereas Adams had wanted to impress the French with American naval preparedness, Federalists in Congress presented him with a large army. Adams' unhappiness with this army was then exacerbated by a lengthy intrigue over the chain of command. George Washington, appointed by Adams to head the "new army," stipulated that he would not begin active duty until actual hostilities impended; in the meantime, Alexander Hamilton must be second-in-command. When Adams resisted placing Hamilton above officers who had previously outranked him, Hamilton's partisans in the Cabinet (Pickering, McHenry, and Wolcott) schemed behind his back and eventually prevailed upon Washington to face down the President.<sup>29</sup>

Adams was forced to accept an army dominated by a man he regarded as the arch aristocratic intriguer in the United States and the ambitious leader of a "British faction." And he was progressively made aware of the army's dangerous potential. For Hamilton and his associates were nurturing imperial dreams. Hamilton's letters during this period reveal his belief that with the decisive rupture between the United States and France "tempting objects will be within our grasp." As well as employing "the land force" to guard against a possible French invasion, the United States "ought certainly to look to the possession of the Floridas and Louisiana—and we ought to squint at South America." For an expedition southward, Hamilton proposed a British fleet and an American army, and made plain who would be its guiding presence. "The command in this case would very naturally fall upon me . . ." <sup>30</sup>

Hamilton's army also had possible domestic uses. Richard H. Kohn has argued that, contrary to the assumption of most historians, there is no evidence that the High Federalists planned to crush their Republican adversaries with armed force. Yet Hamilton and his colleagues were certainly aware of the power of intimidation that a large and exclusively Federalist army offered. Responding to the Kentucky and Virginia resolutions, Hamilton proposed a military reassertion of national authority. "When a clever force has been collected, let them be drawn towards Virginia, for which there is an obvious pretext—and then let measures be taken to act upon the laws and put Virginia to the test of resistance. This plan will give time for the fervor of the moment to subside, for reason to resume the reins, and by dividing its enemies will enable the government to triumph with ease."<sup>31</sup>

Although Hamilton had gained effective control of the army, the appointment of officers and recruitment of troops still required presidential action. Adams seems

to have chosen deliberately to dally with the measures necessary for the army build-up. While proceeding expeditiously with the construction of naval vessels, the President dragged his feet on army matters. Secretary of War McHenry reported a typical instance of Adams' delaying tactics in a letter to Hamilton: "Your instructions are and have been some days with the President . . . I spoke to him yesterday, on the subject: he had not considered them, and seemed to insinuate the affair need not be hurried."<sup>32</sup>

But it was not enough for Adams to impede the formation of Hamilton's army; as long as war with France remained a distinct possibility, events might still play into Hamilton's hands. Fearful, as he would later claim, of a possible civil war, and increasingly persuaded, from the reports of his diplomats in Europe as well as the recently returned Elbridge Gerry, that the French were now interested in resuming negotiations, Adams decided to make the most dramatic move of his presidency. On February 18, 1799, he nominated William Vans Murray as a peace envoy to France. Adams had come to this decision by himself, without consulting his Cabinet. He saw no reason to seek the counsel of men whose opposition he anticipated and whose loyalty he distrusted.

Adams' decision stunned and outraged the High Federalists. A committee of Federalist Senators soon called upon the President and asked him to withdraw the nomination. Adams bridled at their approach, protesting that these Senators were interfering with the executive's duties. As one of the Senators, Theodore Sedgwick, reported, "During the conversation he declared, repeatedly, that to defend the executive against oligarchic influence, it was indispensable, that he should insist, on a decision on the nomination . . ." At one point, Adams went so far as to threaten his own resignation if the Senate balked him—which would have made Jefferson the President! Eventually, it was agreed that the peace mission would be enlarged by adding two more envoys.<sup>33</sup>

It was to be another eight months before two envoys would sail for France (Vans Murray was already in the Netherlands). Some commentators blame Adams for this delay, criticizing him for vacillation and an inability to follow through after a "statesmanlike gesture." Others contend that the delay was deliberate, that Adams waited on a clarification of the murky political situation in France and the completion of naval construction. In any case, Adams did finally dispatch the mission, in the face of a last, desperate effort by the High Federalists to forestall it. And with its dispatch, the hopes of the High Federalists were irrevocably blasted.<sup>34</sup>

Public opinion embraced the turn toward peace. The "new army" was disbanded; Hamilton was returned to civilian life. As Richard H. Kohn observes: "To save himself and the nation from . . . a dangerous course, Adams had exploded Hamilton's dreams." The United States made peace with France, and thus weathered a crisis that could have destroyed the republic. But the cost, to Adams, was high. One wing of the Federalist party became fiercely hostile to him. His Republican adversaries were vindicated by the collapse of the High Federalist program. Adams thus went down to defeat in the election of 1800 (albeit narrowly), with the bitter satisfaction of a great but unrewarded service to his country.<sup>35</sup>

Before that defeat there was a coda, in which Adams once more acted the part of the independent executive. The taxes levied by the Federalists in Congress to pay

for the military build-up had produced a minor rebellion in eastern Pennsylvania. The most prominent character in this rebellion, John Fries, was arrested for leading a party of armed men to free two tax evaders from prison. Charged with treason, Fries was tried (twice), convicted, and sentenced as an example of judicial rigor useful for cowing disorderly elements in the population. Linking this rebellion to the earlier Whiskey Rebellion in western Pennsylvania, they were not disposed to be merciful. As Hamilton later put it: "Two insurrections in the same state . . . demonstrated a spirit of insubordination or disaffection which required a strong corrective."<sup>36</sup>

Adams, however, refused to use Fries' death as an emblem of order. He concluded that Fries was guilty of riotous behavior, but that his crime did not warrant so grave a charge as treason—or so severe a punishment. Hence Adams overrode the unanimous advice of his cabinet in May, 1800, and pardoned Fries. He had chosen, he informed Charles Lee, to "take on myself alone the responsibility of one more appeal to the humane and generous natures of the American people."<sup>37</sup>

True to his theoretical prescriptions, Adams employed his presidential power as an instrument of balance. In the first half of his term, he directed most of his efforts against what he took to be the excesses of the democratic or "French" party. Facing what he considered familiar democratic vices—demagoguery, licentiousness, turbulence—he was ready to utilize the heavy hand of repression. Halfway through the term, having become persuaded of the dangers attendant on a war with France, upon which all of the Hamiltonians' plans hinged, he carried out a dramatic reversal which thwarted the aristocratic or "British" party. Facing familiar aristocratic vices—intrigue, manipulation, grandiose ambition—he was ready to circumvent the intriguers, to overcome their manipulations, and to puncture their imperious visions. Adams hardly conducted these shifts in policy flawlessly. Yet their character was not an indication of weakness or vacillation, but a reflection of his commitment to fulfill the responsibilities of the independent executive.

#### IV

Adams' conduct as the independent executive was infuriating and incomprehensible to the champion of the energetic executive, Alexander Hamilton. As Hamilton found his own energies bottled up by Adams' actions, his criticisms became increasingly scathing. While these criticisms were fueled by personal frustration, they also served to measure the distance between the two men's respective conceptions of the executive. Many modern commentators have judged Adams' presidency by the Hamiltonian desideratum of energy, and have pronounced it weak. The first commentator to offer that pronouncement was Alexander Hamilton.

Hamilton had not wanted Adams to be president, and had made efforts in 1796 to supplant him with Thomas Pinckney. But for the first year and a half of the Adams administration he was not dissatisfied. After delineating the features of the energetic executive in the *Federalist Papers*, and personally infusing energy into the executive handling of financial, diplomatic, and military affairs under President Washington, Hamilton was now officially on the sidelines, a New York lawyer at last making money

for his family. But his protégés and adherents held the cabinet posts of State, War, and Treasury, and the leading Federalist legislators turned to him for guidance. The one actor he could not directly counsel was the President—but John Adams, during this period, seemed of a like mind with Hamilton. Thus, Hamilton wrote to Rufus King: “I believe there is no danger of want of firmness in the Executive. If he is not ill-advised he will not want prudence.”<sup>38</sup>

In the period of national excitement and war fever following the public disclosure of the XYZ affair, Hamilton approved of Adams’ spirited posture, but feared that he might become carried away with martial ardor. Complaining to Secretary of the Treasury Wolcott that one of Adams’ addresses contained a statement that was “intemperate and revolutionary,” Hamilton worried that the President “may run into indiscretion. This will do harm to the Government, to the cause, and to himself. Some hint must be given, for we must make no mistakes.” Hamilton regarded himself as far more cool and controlled than Adams, and more cognizant of the need for care in directing public opinion toward firmness and vigor.<sup>39</sup>

As we have seen, the conflict between Hamilton and Adams first took shape over Hamilton’s rank in the “new army.” Hamilton’s frustration with Adams slowly mounted as he began to put together this army. The successful selection of officers for a large force, he observed, “depends on the President—and on that success the alternative of some or no energy.” But Hamilton was coming to doubt the President’s competency for executive duties. Adams, he thought, was a theorist rather than a man of action. To Rufus King, he observed: “You know . . . how widely different the business of government is from the speculation of it, and the energy of the imagination, dealing in general propositions, from that of execution in detail.”<sup>40</sup>

The President’s delaying tactics continued to dog Hamilton’s indefatigable efforts to bring his army into existence. Hamilton looked to his friends in the cabinet for assistance. He wrote to Secretary of War McHenry: “If the Chief is too desultory, his Ministers ought to be more united and steady and well settled in some reasonable system of measures.” But his appeals were unavailing; hobbled by administrative failures in addition to Adams’ resistance, the “new army” never attained its mandated size. “Less than half the authorized number of men ever enlisted, so each regiment limped along, . . . perpetually understrength.”<sup>41</sup>

Hamilton’s criticism of Adams for lacking executive energy extended beyond army matters to the Alien and Sedition Acts. While Hamilton had not played a part in the genesis of the repressive legislation, he was more eager than the President to see it vigorously enforced. Complaining of Adams’ performance to Senator Jonathan Dayton, he proclaimed:

But what avail laws which are not executed? Renegade aliens conduct more than one of the most incendiary presses in the United States—and yet in open contempt and defiance of the laws they are permitted to continue their destructive labors. Why are they not sent away? . . . Vigor in the Executive is at least as necessary as in the legislative branch. If the President requires to be stimulated, those who can approach him ought to do it.<sup>42</sup>

When the “desultory” Adams made an unexpected move to announce a new peace mission to France, imperilling Hamilton’s military plans and imperial visions, the General was hardly more pleased with him. Adams was not credited with energy, but castigated for passion; his decision was attributed to vanity and petulance. “Our measures, from the first cause, are too much the effect of momentary impulse. Vanity and jealousy exclude all counsel. Passion wrests the helm from reason.”<sup>43</sup>

The final straw for Hamilton was Adams’ dismissal of McHenry and Pickering from the cabinet. Unable any longer to control his anger at the intrigues that had swirled around him, Adams lashed out at McHenry in a personal interview. Among the accusations he hurled at the Secretary of War was subservience to Hamilton, whom he called “the greatest intrigant in the world . . .” When McHenry sent Hamilton an account of the interview, Hamilton replied that Adams “is more mad than I ever thought him and, I shall soon be led to say, as wicked as he is mad.”<sup>44</sup>

Even before receiving accounts of the cabinet purge, Hamilton concluded that he could not support Adams for reelection. Along with some of his associates, he developed a strategy whereby the Federalist Vice-Presidential candidate, Charles C. Pinckney, might gain more electoral votes than Adams and become President. Once Adams’ supporters learned of this plan and began to denounce it as the work of a “British faction,” Hamilton decided to vindicate his own actions and to expose Adams’ defects in a detailed letter. Facing the possibility that this letter might irreparably split the Federalists, Hamilton insisted that Adams had “already disorganized and in a great measure prostrated the Federal Party.”<sup>45</sup>

Hamilton’s letter—which did more to diminish his own reputation than that of Adams—restated his prior complaints and added some new ones. “Not denying to Mr. Adams patriotism and integrity, and even talents of a certain kind, I should be deficient in candor, were I to conceal the conviction, that he does not possess the talents adapted to the administration of government, and that there are great and intrinsic defects in his character, which unfit him for the office of Chief Magistrate.” Adams’ personal flaws were repeatedly underscored. He was proclaimed to be “a man of an imagination sublimated and eccentric . . .,” possessing “a vanity without bounds, and a jealousy capable of discoloring every object.”<sup>46</sup>

In a lengthy critique of Adams’ peace mission, Hamilton set out to demonstrate that the President’s diplomacy was “wrong, both as to mode and substance.” A nation animated by a spirit of patriotic enthusiasm had been plunged from its “proud eminence” by an impulsive decision. Refusing to take counsel from his own constitutional ministers, the President had reversed his own prior stance and waved the chief point of national honor by sending a mission to France. He had compounded his original error—the nomination of Vans Murray—by later ordering the envoys to sail without proper assurances from the French Directory. “Thus, on every just calculation, whatever may be the issue, the measure, in reference either to our internal or foreign affairs, even to our concerns with France, was alike impolitic.”<sup>47</sup>

After reviewing other alleged misdeeds of the President—e.g., the firings of McHenry and Pickering and the pardon of Fries—Hamilton concluded that Adams



had gravely weakened the young American republic. “[L]et it be added, as the necessary effect of such conduct, that he has made great progress undermining the ground which was gained for the government by his predecessor, and that there is real cause to apprehend, it might totter, if not fall, under his future auspices.” Hamilton interpreted Adams’ Presidency as a disastrous mixture of lassitude and caprice. But the majority of contemporary historians have—in my view, correctly—regarded Hamilton’s plans in this period for high-toned authority, military power, and imperial expansion as the real danger to the republic’s survival. Adams was, as Hamilton charged, vain and jealous at times. But he kept his eye always on the paramount duty of the independent executive: preserving the republic from the external and internal forces that threatened to corrupt or destroy it.<sup>48</sup>

## V

John Adams’ conception of the independent executive was classical, derived chiefly from Roman republicanism and Bolingbroke’s idea of a patriot king. It was also premodern, lacking both a sense of executive initiative and of executive partisanship. While deserving to be understood and respected in its own terms, it rests on conceptions of society and government that American political thought long ago discarded. The partisanship against which Adams repeatedly warned has been a fixture of presidential politics since at least the time of Andrew Jackson. One can sympathize with Adams’ search for a position above parties, given the intemperance of partisan conflict in the 1790s, but it was a futile quest. With few active supporters and numerous enemies, his independent stance left Adams the vulnerable target of more partisan leaders.

What I have called Adams’ unusual blend of power and passivity also seems antique. The unencumbered powers he wished to grant to the president hardly appear benign in light of memorable presidential aggrandizements. While the history of the presidency has been marked by occasional acts of disinterestedness and numerous examples of the love of fame, ambition and even avarice have been too prominent to permit us the trust in executive intentions that Adams possessed. The passivity of Adams’ executive is more ambiguous in its historical resonance. It can point to a healthy sense of restraint in presidential decision-making yet it also entails the loss of opportunities for constructive and progressive action.

Where Adams’ conception and practice of executive leadership are most pertinent is in the questioning of the uses of energy. Adams’ deepest commitment was to the preservation of the republic and its central values. He thus feared energy turned to the purposes of militarism and imperial adventure. Stifling his own bellicose feelings, he blocked an aggressive and powerful elite by insisting upon peace. At a time when militarist and imperial impulses again run strong, contemporary students of American politics can find an unexpected wisdom in John Adams’ view of the executive. Generally enamored of Hamiltonian energy, they can find a salutary corrective in the ideas and the example of a man who recognized its dangers.

## Notes

The following abbreviations are used in the notes:

WJA Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851–1856)

PAH Harold C. Syrett, ed., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961–1979)

1. Ralph Ketcham, *Presidents Above Party: The First American Presidency, 1789–1829* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984).
2. On Adams' debts to Bolingbroke and De Lolme, see Zoltan Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1952), pp. 49–79; Manning Dauer, *The Adams Federalists* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1953), p. 44; Joyce Appleby, "The New Republican Synthesis and the Changing Political Ideas of John Adams," *American Quarterly*, XXV (1973), pp. 578–595; Ketcham, *Presidents Above Party*, pp. 94–95.
3. Thomas A. Bailey, *Presidential Greatness* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966), p. 269; James David Barber, *The Presidential Character* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 14.
4. Robert J. Taylor, ed., *Papers of John Adams* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), III, p. 238. For a discussion of how Adams linked his political psychology to a republican politics centering around meritorious action, see Bruce Miroff, "John Adams: Merit, Fame and Political Leadership," *The Journal of Politics*, XLVIII (1986), pp. 116–132.
5. Quoted in Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*, p. 207.
6. WJA, VI, pp. 232, 248.
7. WJA, VI, p. 246.
8. Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 371; WJA, VI, p. 451.
9. WJA, IV, p. 292.
10. WJA, IV, p. 397.
11. WJA, VI, pp. 165, 473.
12. WJA, IX, p. 570.
13. Edward Handler, *America and Europe in the Political Thought of John Adams* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 66–67; WJA, VI, p. 340, WJA, IV, p. 585.
14. For Adams' description of appropriate executive powers, see WJA, VI, pp. 430–431.
15. Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), I, p. 65; Clinton Rossiter, ed., *The Federalist Papers* (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 423; WJA, IV, pp. 585, 586.
16. WJA, VI, pp. 533, 340–341.
17. WJA, VI, p. 256.
18. WJA, VI, p. 539.
19. WJA, VI, p. 430.
20. Cappon ed., *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, p. 213; WJA, VI, p. 435.
21. WJA, IX, p. 302.
22. WJA, VI, pp. 255–256; Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, microfilm reel 381.
23. John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair, eds., *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805–1813* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1966), p. 232.
24. WJA, VI, p. 539.
25. WJA, V, p. 473.
26. John C. Miller, *Crisis in Freedom: The Alien and Sedition Acts* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951), pp. 71, 72–73.
27. James Morton Smith, *Freedom's Fetters: The Alien and Sedition Laws and American Civil Liberties* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956), p. 175; Miller, *Crisis in Freedom*, p. 134.
28. WJA, IX, pp. 13–14. For a sympathetic treatment of Adams' role with respect to the Alien and Sedition Acts, see Page Smith, *John Adams* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), II, pp. 975–78.

29. For accounts of how the issue of the army alienated Adams from the High Federalists, see Dauer, *The Adams Federalists*, pp. 145–149; Stephen G. Kurtz, *The Presidency of John Adams* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), pp. 307–331; Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783–1802* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), pp. 219–238.
30. PAH, XXII, p. 389; PAH, XXIII, p. 227; PAH, XXII, p. 154.
31. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, pp. 249–252; PAH, XXII, p. 453.
32. PAH, XXII, p. 472.
33. PAH, XXII, p. 503.
34. For an argument that the delay reflected Adams' personal weaknesses, see Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1976), pp. 260–265. For an argument that the delay was deliberate and justifiable, see Stephen G. Kurtz, "The French Mission of 1799–1800: Concluding Chapter in the Statecraft of John Adams," *Political Science Quarterly*, LXXX (1965), pp. 543–557.
35. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, p. 272.
36. PAH, XXV, p. 225.
37. WJA, IX, p. 60.
38. PAH, XXI, p. 26.
39. PAH, XXI, p. 485.
40. PAH, XXII, pp. 168, 192.
41. PAH, XXIII, p. 227; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, p. 248.
42. PAH, XXIII, p. 604.
43. PAH, XXIV, p. 168.
44. PAH, XXIV, pp. 557, 573.
45. PAH, XXV, p. 60.
46. PAH, XXV, pp. 186, 190.
47. PAH, XXV, pp. 207–221.
48. PAH, XXV, p. 233; for a vigorous defense of Hamilton's conduct during the Adams Administration, see Forest McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), pp. 329–353.