

Independence Forever: An Appreciation of John Adams

By ROBERT M. THORNTON

"I am persuaded . . . that [John Adams] means well for his country, is always an honest man, often a wise man, but sometimes and in some things absolutely out of his senses."

— Benjamin Franklin

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"[Adams] is as disinterested as the Being which made him; he is profound in his views, and accurate in his judgment . . . He is so amiable, that I pronounce you will love him if ever you become acquainted with him. He would be, as he was, a great man in Congress."

— Thomas Jefferson,
Letter to James Madison (1787)

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"What was the source of John Adams's greatness? It lay in his long, tireless service, undertaken at enormous personal sacrifice, and in his steadfast commitment to liberty."

— John Ferling

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John Adams, declared Edmund S. Morgan, was one of the vainest men who ever lived. As a young man, he was intrigued by the idea of achieving instant fame and success, but later realized that this was not what he wanted. Ambition reached for more enduring goods, as vanity proved to be a weaker force than ambition. He learned to work hard and to work for more than money. He took the advice to "pursue the study of the law rather than the gain of it," and therefore chose to take interesting cases rather than lucrative ones. He found those people obnoxious who satisfied their ambition and avarice by obtaining appointments from the crown.

Adams would not trim his views to achieve popularity, and seemed impervious to the feelings of others, but he did long for approval from his fellow citizens. Traveling south from Quincy to Philadelphia, President Adams and his lady were warmly greeted by the inhabitants of the towns they passed through. They remembered "Adams's

long services to the Revolution and his reputation for standing solid as a block of New England granite for what he believed to be right and just." "They were confident," declared Page Smith, "that this was not a man to quail before the rabid French or the imperious English." They loved him as one of their own, and "John and Abigail were touched to tears."

When Adams returned home after Jefferson became President of the United States in 1801, members of the Massachusetts legislature visited him to express appreciation of his long years of public service. He wept openly; it was the first time a public body had honored him, and, unfortunately, it would also be his last.

Behind his bilious, churlish façade, Adams could be a kind, loyal, warm individual. His customary demeanor was one of irascibility, but he formed deep, long-standing, close relationships with other people.

John Adams was chosen one of the men to represent Massachusetts in the Continental Congress when it was formed in 1774. He already had his heart set on the country's independence, being far ahead of most delegates who were not ready to think of it.

In June 1776, Adams, along with Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, was named to the committee charged with drawing up a declaration of independence. On July 1, the Continental Congress met to decide on the issue of separating from Great Britain. John Dickinson denounced the motion in a long emotional speech, arguing that "there were no advantages to separation, whereas independence was fraught with potential trouble."

A long silence followed Dickinson's address, and finally John Adams arose and talked extemporaneously. Concerning this speech, delegates spoke of "the magic of his eloquence," his "genuine eloquence," his "resistless eloquence." Contrary to Dickinson,

Adams argued that separation would be beneficial to America and that "peace and prosperity would be great rewards to independence." It was, wrote John Ferling, "the greatest speech Adams ever delivered." He was "our Colossus of the floor," Jefferson said later, adding that Adams had spoken "with a power of thought and expression, that moved us from our seats." Another delegate declared that the force of Adams's reasoning made it clear there was no choice but independence. "The man to whom the country is most indebted for the great measure of independence," he continued, "is Mr. Adams of Boston. I call him the Atlas of American Independence."

Also, as a member of the Continental Congress, Adams, a New Englander, proposed that George Washington, a Virginian, be named Commander-in-Chief of the colonial army. Not only did this bind the two sections together in a common cause, but put in charge the one man indispensable to the success of the War for Independence and the birth of a new nation.

Jonathan Sewall commented on how out of place Adams was as a diplomat in the French court, with its emphasis on a man's finesse. He was impatient and saw the heart of matters very keenly. He couldn't "dance, drink, game, flatter, promise, dress, swear with the gentlemen, and talk small talk and flirt with the ladies . . ." He was not qualified to shine in courts as did men "with a tenth part of his understanding and without a spark of his honesty."

But despite his blunt lack of grace, Adams had two characteristics that served him better than nicety of manner. "He was fiercely independent, his own man from first to last. Second, he had an extraordinary tenacity to hold out for a point, a factor that offset his impatience." He kept his eyes clearly fixed on what seemed to him to be the interests of his country.

Adams insisted on the importance of America avoiding any foreign

entanglements and not getting involved in European wars. The way to accomplish this was to sign only treaties of commerce and not to enter into a military alliance with either France or England.

When a convention was called in 1787 to revise the Articles of Confederation, the delegates decided to ignore the charge and write a new constitution. John Adams was then the American ambassador in London where he wrote the first volume of his *Defense of the Constitution of Government of the United States* to argue in favor of a bicameral legislative branch. His book was used as a reference by many speakers, who found in it a confirmation of their views. So while physically absent from Philadelphia in 1787, Adams, nevertheless, exerted his influence on the framing of the new Constitution.

John Adams's one-term presidency (1797-1801) "does not reveal great administrative skill, far-reaching reforms, shrewd and effective management of Congress, or . . . a gift for binding his subordinates to him with ties of loyalty and affection." However, if the urgencies of the hour are the standard of successful leadership, Adams's policy (or character) served his country well.

John Adams, then, was one of the most prominent of the Founding Fathers before, during, and after The War for Independence. Albert Jay Nock called Adams "the most profound student of government we have ever produced."

Yet, he has been pretty much ignored over the years. This would not have surprised Adams, who in 1807 predicted correctly that "mausoleums, statues, monuments will never be erected to me." In the words of Hendrik Willem van Loon, Adams was "a person of tremendous usefulness during a period of unrest, a rock-ribbed, humorless and aloof personage, as indifferent to royal displeasure or popular approval as a chunk of Vermont marble." We have never given John Adams his due, wrote James Street, and he "died an unpopular man. But we owe him much: this John Adams who had respect for justice and

who, like Franklin, really shoved in his blue chips when the revolutionary game got going."

Why, until recent years, has not John Adams, despite his prominence as a leader during the Revolutionary War period and the early days of the Republic, received the acclaim accorded to the other Founding Fathers? The reason is that he spoke the truth with the bark on it, never sugar-coating his beliefs to make them palatable. However vain and ambitious, he would not violate his strict code of character to achieve the favorable opinion of posterity. He wanted universal admiration but actually courted unpopularity as a mark of distinction. He had a "disdain for worldly measures of success, an attraction to adversity, an urge, indeed a determination, to stand alone." He was only comfortable when he was the "irreverent dissenter delivering jeremiads to naïve optimists, lectures on perseverance to the faint of heart, warnings about mob violence to defenders of popular rule."

John Adams spoke out too often and too plainly. "He was too intellectual for most politicians who could not fathom his disinterested, non-partisan spirit." Adams's "mind ranged too deep, too far backward into history, too far forward into the future for most men."

Another reason why Adams has never been given much attention over the years is that, like all true conservatives, he held to "an essentially pessimistic world view, a tragic vision even . . ." He knew that man is a flawed creature and that there never could be heaven on earth. Human nature, studied as it really is and not as it ought to be, was the cornerstone of Adams's political science. Government must be placed on the real constitution of human nature, not upon any wild visions of its perfectibility.

Adams was not unsympathetic to the call for reform of French institutions and policies but warned that any kind of revolution guided by "utopian speculations" would not bode well for Europe and America. Two years before the French Revolution, he saw the unintended consequences of the

Revolution, which had to end in despotism.

Because men would never be perfect, said Adams, "sovereignty in government should never reside exclusively in one body." There must be a balance of power between the several branches of government. And because all men are governed by their interests and their passions, "a simple and perfect democracy never yet existed among men."

As the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence approached, wrote C. Bradley Thompson, "the ninety-one-year old Adams was asked to provide a toast for the upcoming celebration in Quincy. He offered as his final public utterance this solemn toast: 'INDEPENDENCE FOREVER.' These last words stand as a signature for his life and principles. At a time in our national history when most Americans cynically assume that their political leaders are dishonest, corrupt, and self-serving, we might do well to recall the example of John Adams and restore to posterity the respect and admiration that he so richly deserves."

Whether one agrees with Adams's ideas or not, it is a refreshing experience to read about a man of strong convictions who had the strength of character to speak out frankly. Today's crop of political "leaders" are either unable or unwilling to disclose their beliefs until the latest polls have been analyzed by their campaign managers.

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