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THE POLITICAL IDEAS OF JOHN ADAMS.

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John Adams
(1735-1826)

"The body politic is formed by a voluntary association of individuals: it is a social compact, by which the whole people covenants with each citizen, and each citizen with the whole people, that all shall be governed by certain laws, for the common good. It is the duty of the people, therefore, in framing a Constitution of Government, to provide for an equitable mode of making laws, as well as for an impartial interpretation, and a faithful execution of them; that every man may, at all times, find his security in them. . . .

"In the government of this Commonwealth, the legislative department shall never exercise the executive and judicial powers, or either of them; the executive shall never exercise the legislative and judicial powers, or either of them; the judicial shall never exercise the legislative and executive powers, or either of them; to the end it may be a government of laws and not of men."

Constitution of Massachusetts, 1780.

(Written by Adams.)

I

John Adams, in his life and in his writings, exemplified the principles of representative government and American institutions: he is the man of affairs, the patriot and the sage. The figure of the man, which

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lingers perhaps faintly in the popular mind, is that figure which Webster has drawn in one of the most imaginative of speeches,—the picture of the Colossus on the floor in that memorable debate on the Declaration of Independence; he is the expositor of the times, the voice of America crying out for freedom and nationality. Yet, in the voluminous writings of Adams, scarcely a dozen lines may be found of what he said on that occasion, while he has left thousands of pages which record his other services to his country in helping make American independence a benefaction for the whole world.

Adams belongs to the heroic age of American statesmanship. His services in the old Congress are not surpassed in civic value by those of any of his peers and as representative of the infant nation in Holland, France and England, his services long since became a standard and gauge for ministers and ambassadors,—a unit of measure in diplomatic affairs. For ten years he won diplomatic victories for his country amidst obstacles before which old and established embassies had faltered. Not merely did he negotiate treaties which allied Holland and France, and ultimately Prussia, in bonds of peace with America, but he applied new principles of international law and opened a new era in commerce and the welfare of nations. The indebtedness to him is international. Without the support of armies, fleets, courts, alliances, or national traditions he, standing quite alone, met the foremost diplomats of European states, compelled their confidence and respect, persuaded them, almost against their wills, to enter into advantageous relations with the new Republic in the West, and began that democratization of Europe which has been going on, now, for more than a century.

Franklin had not labored alone, in Europe, to win allies to the cause. As a diplomat, John Adams, among

early American statesmen, is second only to Franklin, yet the two statesmen were so unlike that they may be said to have had only patriotism in common. John Adams was a Puritan of the Puritans and, like his kind, was admired and respected rather than loved. At least one is led to this conclusion by the testimony of his contemporaries. How many, of the many who have passed judgment on John Adams as an historical personage, have made themselves familiar with his writings? Yet no other equal source of knowledge of the first principles of American government remains. Adams was conscious of the magnitude of the events amidst which he moved and acted. His insight was penetrating and, despite his powerful prejudices, was usually correct. Posterity is discovering,—perhaps slowly,—that Adams rarely erred in judgment in a matter of public concern; his political sense was national; his courage unbounded, his devotion to duty the grand passion of his life. It is in the writings of John Adams one finds the most coherent account of the whole course of American affairs from the Stamp Act, in 1765, to the accession of Jefferson to the Presidency, thirty-five years later. And then follows all that notable correspondence and comment, between the two statesmen for a quarter of a century longer. Adams's long experience in Congress, and in the diplomatic service before his election as Vice-President and as President, led him, as it were unconsciously, by his voluminous reports and yet more voluminous correspondence, to touch on every principle of American government, and his profound and varied learning equipped him to expound where the ordinary public man would have merely, and doubtless inadequately, recorded. He had convictions concerning government; he was a statesman with ideas and a policy, and he was rarely inclined to yield first place. One may reject his theory of government and administration but cannot deny to

his writings extraordinary clearness, force, and interest. There is a striking likeness between his administration and that of Martin Van Buren,—though the two men are comparable only by their contrasting characteristics,—each inherited a policy from his predecessor; each came to the Presidency at the end of an era; each was bitterly attacked by the rising powers of a new time, and the one, not unlike the other, is remembered as the associate of a greater man: it is Washington *and* Adams; Jackson *and* Van Buren. But the parallel is brief and feeble and does not run to the root of affairs.

Adams remains the classic expositor of extreme Federalism,—a wing of early American politics to which Washington was accused, at times, of belonging. High Federalism has never enrolled the majority of Americans, but its essential, conserving ideas doubtless gave form and stability to the government during the administration of Washington and Adams, and its lofty conception of the functions of government were embodied in that statesman whom Adams appointed Chief-Justice of the United States,—John Marshall.

When John Adams returned to America,* to become Vice-President of the United States, no man living had done more than he to explain and to exploit the principles,—or, as he at the time entitled them,—the ‘Constitutions of Government’ of the United States. He was the chief apostle of the new doctrines, devotion to which was building up a new nation in the New World. It was inevitable that his writings should provoke both applause and condemnation. The closing years of the eighteenth century experienced many extremes in political theory. His formal works on ‘government,’ read now in the twentieth century, may strike one as merely academic comparisons of all ancient systems of

* He sailed for America April 20, 1788.

applied politics, and, as a final apology, not entrancing in style or exhaustive in content, for the theories and concepts of representative government developed and were formulated in America.

These political studies are now quite forgotten. Who, it may be asked, now reads John Adams's, *Works on Government*? Who concerns himself about his analyses of Republics, as Democratic, Aristocratic, or Monarchical? Who, the questioner may continue, takes the trouble to follow John Adams among the mazes of Thebes and Locris, of Rome or Crotona? Might we not also ask, Who giving his nights and his days to Addison, like the young Franklin, writes and re-writes his own effusions half a dozen times in order to attain the clarity and elegance of the *Spectator*? Who in the twentieth century projects himself into the thought of the eighteenth for any purpose, other than to become a purveyor of foot-notes and comments? Nevertheless, who would venture to deny the indebtedness of posterity to Addison or, if the questioner has respect for safety, would deny that posterity has gained no benefit from any and all efforts of men of yesterday,—however far away that day,—who examined the foundations of government and set their conclusions for the general welfare? The world knows its Montesquieu and its Machiavelli, its Grotius and its Harrington, its Locke and its Bentham: and the world also knows its humbler expounders of political institutions, of whom, among Americans, John Adams as yet holds quite the foremost place; for as yet, America has not given to the world a political philosopher of the first rank.

Since Adams wrote his treatises, the United States has become the mighty precedent in a form of civil practice called representative government, which its enthusiastic advocates make no hesitation in affirming is adapted to the whole world. John Adams wrote while yet that precedent was an experiment in its

initial stage. All Europe was astonished and delighted by the experiments of Franklin in electricity, nor were sciolists of that day lacking who believed that they saw in these experiments the key to all mysteries, the foundations of all philosophy, the ultimate laws of being and conduct.

Europe was swept by a so-called scientific revival, as witness the rise and progress of the physiocrats, Quesnay, of agile mind, seeking, and as they would have us believe, finding a universal exposition of the wants of man and the satisfaction of these wants in the natural constitution and order of human society; that government should accord with the nature of things, the world itself being governed by immutable physical and moral laws; that it is for man to discover and to obey them, for his own good, or, disobeying,—for his own evil. The end assigned to the exercise of his intellectual and physical powers is the appropriation of matter for the satisfaction of his wants, and the improvement of his condition, and the general accomplishment of this task conformably to the idea of the just, which is the correlative of the idea of the useful. Man forms an idea of justice and utility, both individual and social, through the notions of duty and right, which his own nature reveals to him, and which teach him that it is contrary to his good and the general welfare to seek his own advantage in a damage to others. This idea, entering the minds of individuals and peoples in proportion to the increase of enlightenment and the advance of civilization, naturally produces feelings of fraternity among men and peace among peoples. The chief manifestations of justice are liberty and property; that is to say, the right of each person to do that which shall in no way concern the general welfare and to use at his pleasure the things which he possesses, the acquirement of which has been conformable to the nature of things and to the general utility, since with-

out liberty and property there would have been no civilization. Liberty and property spring, then, from the nature of man and are rights so essential that laws or agreements among men should be limited to recognizing them, to formulating them, and to saving them. Governments have no mission other than to protect these two rights which, when things are correctly understood, embrace all the material and moral wants of society. To say that liberty and property are essential rights is to say that they are in harmony with the general interests of the species; that is, with them, land is made more fertile, and the industry of man, in its manifestations, is made more productive; the development of all his aptitudes—moral, intellectual, scientific, and artistic—is swifter. They are in the field of the good and beautiful, the just and the useful. Through them man best gathers the fruit of his own efforts and is not, at least, the victims of the arbitrary laws of his fellow men. So the savants of Europe taught, toward the close of the eighteenth century, and Adams could not escape the influence of these doctrines; they were much in the air of the New World. Their meaning and purpose seem to be formulated in the Constitution of Massachusetts of 1780,—“a child, (writes Adams) of which I was, right or wrong, the putative father,”—“to the end,” (says that constitution,) “that it may be a government of laws and not of men.”

But Adams's concept of the purpose and functions of government are more completely expressed elsewhere in that constitution, as in its provision,—the earliest of the kind on record, for universal education at the expense of the State,—the celebrated provision for public schools, grammar schools, the University at Cambridge, private societies and public institutions, the promotion of the arts and sciences, commerce, trades, manufactures, and a natural history of the country, and “to countenance and inculcate the prin-

principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings, sincerity, good humor, and all social affections and generous sentiments among the people." Whatever may be read into other constitutions of government among men, this was the first to include such purposes and to express them in such language. "I was somewhat apprehensive, (writes Adams, some thirty years later,) "that criticism and objections would be made to the section, and particularly that the "natural history", and "the good humor", would be stricken out; but the whole was received very kindly and passed the convention unanimously without amendment." He at the same time remarks that with one exception, the chief offices of the state had been filled by persons not noted among their fellow-citizens for any superior acquisitions of learning or culture, and that a considerable number had not gone through the higher grades of education in Massachusetts at all,—an assertion doubtless true as yet not merely throughout America but throughout the world. If this be confession of failure to realize the true ends of government, one may find consolation in the reflection that, tested by fullness of realization, not education alone, but every effort of man for betterment, whatsoever the sphere of activity, that Christianity itself, has failed. And there remains the larger consolation that man is ever on the way to civilization.

John Adams discloses an enormous capacity for business, a genius for work, a patience in analysis and examination of conditions, an accuracy of statement, a forcefulness in expression and a persuasion of justice. Accustomed to doing his own thinking, he easily, —one may say he temperamentally—fell into the habit of doing much of the thinking for those about him. Early in life he discovered with how little wisdom the world is run. The varied, the accumulative, the

accumulated learning of Adams; his vast and acknowledged services to his country; his integrity, his courage,—all his virtues,—and they shone bright in that naughty world through which he moved,—would have shone with less fading lustre had he possessed what the world calls—tact. But nature seldom bestows on one man all the graces; she denied the same rare quality to Adams's chief political enemy,—Alexander Hamilton; she showered the gift on Franklin and Jefferson,—yet, with seeming caprice, their whole lives denying them notable qualities which she so generously bestowed on Hamilton and Adams. Had Adams possessed the tact of Abraham Lincoln, the two statesmen would be considered by the world as more alike than any other two in American history. But it is idle,—not to say wrong, to condemn a man, even a very great man, for not having what he lacks by nature; rather should we render homage for the services he performs with that which he has. Time brings statesmen into the true perspective, and time shows ever more clearly the true statesmanship of Adams. Of what that statesmanship was he never for a moment leaves the world in doubt: the sovereignty, the freedom, the independence, the welfare of his country: “Independence Forever!”, as he tersely expressed it, almost with his last breath,—the words of the toast which he proposed for the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the great Declaration,—the anniversary which was to be the day of his death.

Time has proved that John Adams was seldom wrong and that his detractors, during his lifetime, were seldom right. His was from first to last a noble consistency which the years were to illumine and to explain to mankind. He saw his country in possibility as posterity sees it in fact: the power of the New World; and he saw in its fundamental principles of government the hope of mankind; and if it was not vouchsafed to him

to see with vision unimpaired, compelling cause for "a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people", he saw, quite as clearly as did Lincoln that "a majority held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people", and that "whoever rejects it, does, of necessity, fly to anarchy or to despotism."

It is well, in these days of unrest, to know the thoughts of our great statesmen, to drink afresh at the fountains of their inspiration, to look forth upon the world through their eyes, to attempt to measure again the meaning, the possibilities of civil and religious liberty. These possibilities, heavy with fate for us all, are in peril of becoming trite, not to say of abandonment, in the eyes of modern America; for the children cannot understand the fathers, nor feel their sufferings and anxieties. And to him to whom the possibilities of American life are mere darkness and void, the next scene is 'the deluge.' It is a program of reason, led by whitehanded hope, which we must follow. There are principles of action which we must obey. No government ever yet devised by man is automatic; it is vocational service, endless, universal, beneficent,—upon which we were entered by the patriots who long ago gave shape and form to our institutions. We must know from whence we came would we understand where we are, and have worthy conceptions of whither we are going. If we would see quite through the deeds of men we must fathom their motives and reach the very bed-rock of their theories of the state.

Europe has twice found America,—first when Columbus came to the New World; and again when Franklin and Adams came to the Old World. It was a remarkable experience, this introduction of the United States to the older nations; the time seems far, far

removed from the present, when wealth and power have come to dwell with us, and shallow minds in America look with contempt on Europe, and shallow minds in Europe look with contempt on America. Some one was to be the expounder of America to Europe,—and he was John Adams. Not Franklin, you ask? No, not Franklin, of whom John Adams himself pronounced the loftiest panegyric yet uttered. Franklin was “a citizen of the world”; Adams, of America. Franklin had lived contentedly under any government which disturbed not his large activities and even suffered him, as he would say, “to do good”. Not so Adams. To the horizon of his activities a republic was essential; a government of laws and not of men; a political system founded on truly conceived and duly guarded functions of activity,—threefold,—executive, legislative, judicial, each moving along its appointed course, all co-ordinated as a civil system, harmonious as the vast universe of which it forms an essential, however slight, a part.

This splendid political mechanics formed no part of Franklin’s understanding of government, but formed the essential part of that of John Adams. It formed Washington’s political world,—it was that conception, and it remains that conception of government which is based upon law. It is essentially the contractual theory of the state. “The body politic”, so the constitution of Massachusetts declares, “is formed by a voluntary association of individuals: it is a social compact, by which the whole people covenants with each citizen, and each citizen with the whole people, that all shall be governed by certain laws, for the common good”.

This is the fundamental in John Adams’s political creed.* Rousseau and Adams were contemporaries for

* While I was living in Geneva, Switzerland, Professor Charles Borjeaud, well known to American scholars, told me of a tradition, at the University of Geneva, that Burlamaqui’s interpretation of “Natural right” had been conveyed to Harvard College by some disciple of

more than forty years. It does not appear that they ever met or were in correspondence. Nor does Adams disclose in his writings discipleship of the great agitator. Yet the passage in the constitution of Massachusetts, basing all on the "social compact", a passage written possibly in the very year of Rousseau's death and embodied in the fundamental law of the Commonwealth within two years of that event, seems a startling echo of Rousseau's utterance of the 'social pact': "To find a form of association which may defend and protect against the community the person and property of every associate, and by means of which each, coalescing with all, may nevertheless obey only himself, and remain as free as before",—such is the fundamental problem of which the social contract furnishes the solution". Running through John Adams's voluminous exposition of government, Rousseau's solution may be found; nor is that solution limited to these writings; it may be found set forth in all the American constitutions of government of the eighteenth century, and in their successors of the nineteenth down to an entirely new group of constitutions, beginning in 1889–90, notably among new western States, in which the doctrine of the social contract is either omitted, or subordinated to an economic interpretation which quite eliminates the original theory. Nor, meanwhile, have powerful minds been lacking who have repudiated the social contract theory of the state as false to all social facts and conditions.

Burlamaqui, and that John Adams, then a student at Harvard, had imbibed the notion from this disciple (possibly an instructor). President Lowell has been kind enough to have a search made into the matter with result of no revelation as to special instructor or course of study in Adams's time which would seem to support the tradition. An examination of the Constitution of Massachusetts (1780) written by Adams discloses the doctrine of "social compact," and possibly of "natural rights." Whatever the source of Adams's ideas on the subject, the constitution which took form under his hand reflects the dominant political concept of the eighteenth century.

Expounders of government abound, at present, who proclaim Adams's basic conception of politics as unscientific, unfounded in human experience, and preventive of the natural operation of civil forces in society. Adams himself is directly assailed as a false interpreter of civic elements, and his advocacy of the tripartite division of government; of the separation of powers,—as legislative, executive and judicial,—and, in a word,—his merely legal concept of government, have been vigorously denied as having any just foundation. This means that whatsoever concept of government may prevail in any age may not prevail in a later. And yet, it is common knowledge that the compact theory of government, as expounded by John Adams, is the working basis of the entire American system. The law of contract includes quite all the activities, the conduct, the interests of men,—and the state is commonly conceived as the supreme power which in final resort compels performance of the contract. Adams was not a mere legalist but he viewed the world as a world governed by law. His mind was juridical in its processes. He could not conceive of government as other than of law. Hence the advocacy he made of the 'social compact' as a working device. Never,—so it appears,—did Washington enter upon an analysis of civil principles: he took the world as he believed he found it,—authority, on the one hand, obedience on the other: security of life, liberty and property the supreme end. Adams went deeper into the principles of government,—into the laws of political well-being, the metes and bounds of the state as a voluntary association of individuals covenanting under the social compact.

It would be highly interesting could there be traced in John Adams the immediate influence of Burlamaqui's teachings on and in America. It is known that Adams, at Harvard, heard lectures on the principles of

natural law, from the lips of a disciple of Burlamaqui, and the teachings of the master are well known. The influence of Geneva at Harvard shows itself throughout Adams's political convictions,—and that influence meant the supremacy of the social contract. One needs but turn to the pages of *Principes du Droit Naturel* to discover much of John Adams's interpretation of what Rousseau calls "the fundamental problem". The teachings of Burlamaqui at Geneva and at Leyden, carried over to Harvard, helped,—somewhat curiously,—later, in the person of John Adams,—to make clearer to France and Holland, and Europe generally, the principles on which American institutions were declared to rest. Undoubtedly Adams's *Defense of the American Constitutions* as based upon and exemplifying the theory of the social compact was the more willingly received and the more influential throughout Europe because it added new and persuasive examples of the validity of the theory. That which revolutionary Europe was teaching, the new Republic in far-away America was establishing as its fundamental conception of politics. Europe was eager to receive what John Adams was as eager to give.

This service of educating Europe concerning America engaged John Adams for ten years when, the service done, he returned to America. The period remains the most productive period of his life. It was necessary that Europe be so taught, and no expositor could have surpassed Adams in the fidelity and efficiency of the service. Franklin was the man, the individual, exemplifying in himself the choice, the rare, perhaps the rarest product of the New World. But a nation cannot be judged, for all purposes, even by its most famed individuals. Institutions must excel as well as individuals. Society must exist as well as the man. What Franklin sought to do, consciously or unconsciously, as an individual, in defense of the claims of America,

Adams sought to do consciously, in defense of America as a nation, as the embodiment of civil institutions. It is true that Franklin first published abroad the texts of the American State Constitutions, and these outlines of American civil ideas undoubtedly carried instruction, if they did not work conviction. But Adams went further: he would compare all liberal governments, of all time, and demonstrate to Europe the superior claims of America to the decent respect of the whole world. The services differ in degree rather than in kind. Neither of these men could have done the other's work. Adams's books on comparative government are forgotten. The field is a favorite with all writers on politics. Madison entered it a short way when he compiled a brief *View* of republican governments before he took his seat in the Philadelphia Convention of 1787. In our own day it continues to be the practice, whenever a state would frame a new constitution, for the delegates to assign to some group of men the task of collecting, and possibly of collating, the fundamental laws of all the states throughout their history; and New York, in 1894, went even further, by collecting and printing for the use of the delegates, all the constitutions at the time in force in foreign nations. The purpose of such a labor was the precise purpose of John Adams during his long residence in Europe as American minister,—to collect the serious records of civil experience, in order to secure the essential ends of government. The fruits of this service of Adams were immediate and important: commercial treaties between America, France, Holland, Prussia, and England,—and not least,—perhaps most important of all,—a contribution to that movement which culminated directly in the French Revolution, and,—as the seething elements of the time subsided,—an aid to democracy in Europe,—a transformation still going on.

Called to the vice-presidency,—a small office for a

great statesman,—an office which may be described as a contingent political estate in expectancy, for four years John Adams complimented and supplemented and aided in rounding out and completing the work which Washington sought to do. It was a period creative of precedents, when Fortune was scattering germens of discontent which later, and soon, should grow into counter-revolution in a thousand forms. Called to the presidency,—a great office for a great statesman,—an office which may be described as a political estate of unknown metes and bounds, and of unknown resources, the storm broke; an era of beginnings came to an end, a counter-revolution ushered in, seemingly without ceremony, the reign of democracy. What hope for fame,—or even for remembrance, for the man who should be President amidst such changes as occurred between the administrations of Washington and those of Jefferson! And yet, it is clear to posterity that the one moment when John Adams could be elected President of the United States was the moment of his election, and there was no reasonable hope that Opportunity would thus cross his path twice. To the curious the times and the man seem to come again when another Vice-President followed a President of immense popularity and served amidst a political revolution, every process of which was preparing his own downfall. But it is impossible, as it has been said, to make a figure of speech walk on all fours. Jackson was not Washington, though he may have persuaded himself that he was the savior of his country; Van Buren was not John Adams, though he too served as legislator, as minister, as Vice-President, and as President. Nor was the ‘reign of Andrew Jackson’, as the more radical Whigs denominated his administrations, a transcript of what the Jacobins were pleased to call the ‘reign of King George’. Times change. Men may not lose their reason: they only think

differently. The America of Jackson's time was another America, interpreting fundamentals of government wholly different from that interpretation set forth by Washington and John Adams. Yet, though Adams was caught up by the very torrent of change such as at times sweeps over republics and seems to overwhelm and destroy the ancient landmarks, the waters at last receded and it was discovered that the foundations of the state which Adams had helped lay were not moved.

To the political overthrow of Adams, Alexander Hamilton was chief contributor, and the fatally brilliant impolicy of that contribution remains one of the astonishing events of the time. So overpowering has been the influence of Hamilton's genius, historians, as yet, seem hardly to dare record the unwisdom (to use a mild term) of his course. Hildreth, the great Federalist historian, does not hesitate to condemn Adams and to laud Hamilton, and this early interpretation of their conduct seems to be a sufficient precedent for most later writers. Even had Hamilton never written, or had he never privately printed his attack on Adams; had Burr never obtained the fatal, secret sheets and published them, Jefferson must soon have come into the presidency and democracy have instituted its new régime. But Hamilton, by his hostile attitude toward the official chief of the Federalist party, by his acts both secret and public, seriously, possibly irreparably, damaged his claim to enrollment as a great political leader. It is the old story of party schism, jealousy, rage, dissolution. Charles Francis Adams remarks that the breach of faith in the Cabinet which made Hamilton's pamphlet possible, is the solitary instance of its kind in American history; and yet, as Duane, most scandalous of the numerous tribe who libelled Adams, wrote later,—“This pamphlet has done more mischief to the parties concerned than all the labors

of the "*Aurora*". That pamphlet sowed the dragon's teeth. That pamphlet was the political death of Adams, killed the Federalist party, and was the immediate cause of the untimely death of Hamilton himself.

The dramatic course of events during these times has attracted the student of public affairs both at home and abroad. No other portion of our national history has been more variously recounted nor so frequently. And in the story John Adams usually seems but an after-piece to Washington,—a political echo, a scrap and remnant which decency demands should receive at least passing notice. Radical Jeffersonians have gone so far as to assert that John Adams (as Henry Clay said of President Polk) like a parenthetical expression, could be wholly omitted without injuring the sense. Back to Quincy goes the last Federalist President; back to his quiet estate, thenceforth to live in seclusion and retirement, never again accepting office; no longer vexed by the defeasance wrought by false friends, nor held prisoner in the cheerless anterooms of secretly hostile embassies. It was a quiet life to which he came after a long, a trying, a dangerous voyage. And there amidst his fields, which yielded him independence, the principle of his life became the fruitful philosophy of old age. No other American statesman has attained the length of years and few the honors of John Adams.

A few years after the retirement of Adams, Jefferson also retired to his estate at Monticello, and all rivalries forgotten, the venerable statesmen entered into that remarkable correspondence which remains one of the delightful chapters in our annals. The heat and turmoil of life are over and these two minds, rich in memories and experience, courageous in thought and spirit, correspond familiarly on great themes and record conclusions which yet provoke debate. The death of Adams and Jefferson on the fiftieth anniversary of the day of American independence was an extraor-

dinary coincidence which, in the memory of all Americans has associated their names even more closely than their long and splendid services to their country.

Interesting as must always be the large and bold outline of a statesman's life, it is to the particular acts in his career one must look in order to understand the principles to which he was devoted,—the service for which he stands. John Adams was in middle life when the Revolution transformed Colonies to States and thirteen communities into a new nation. Consistency is the word and the one word which can be applied to his entire conduct as a public man. Convinced of the truth of "the social compact", years before the affair at Concord, he stood in waiting, as it were, to apply political principles to events in America, whether social, political or economic. He embodied the newest teachings of the age,—all those teachings which are latent in the social compact theory, and quickly discerned in the *Writs of Assistance* and the *Stamp Act* a violation of that compact which could have but one result,—American independence. Born eloquent, he became as did no other American the voice of liberty, the expounder of independence and nationality. It was the most perilous position any American could take, and from such peril he never shrank. And he was more than mere "legal advisor" to a body of conspirators and revolutionists. He not merely appealed to first principles, he demonstrated their just empire over the conduct of a whole people. Himself a man of 'firm resolve and unfaltering trust', he demanded a like devotion in others. "Politics", (so he wrote to Mrs. Adams,) "are an ideal path among red-hot ploughshares. Who then would be a politician, for the pleasure of running about barefoot among them; yet somebody must." Parliamentary taxation had no other meaning to him than trespass upon colonial rights, and

once that trespass was halted, there could be no retreat for those who halted it.

Thus he arrived early at the idea of union,—American union, and boldly founded the idea on ‘natural right’. It must be admitted that this pragmatic conception of human relations fails to satisfy many political thinkers,—but it must also be admitted that it was this conception which possessed the minds of the statesman who brought the American Revolution to a successful close. The several States easily, perhaps naturally, considered themselves as free, sovereign and independent nations,—a conception of tremendous vitality and fated to test by the most fearful ideal of civil war, whether a nation “conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” can endure. No American contemporary of Adams surpassed him as a man of profound speculation, for he had the eye of the seer, the vision of the prophet. Yet at no time throughout his long life was he a mere visionary. Even when supporting and securing the adoption of the most visionary of all American state papers, the Declaration of Independence,—and Jefferson assures us that Adams was the ‘Colossus’ in that debate,—there is not a trace of the dreamer, the wild enthusiast.

It was a very sober business thus to defy an empire in hope of winning national independence. Amidst portentous changes, the public business was done decently and in good order. So Dr. Gordon, an energetic contemporary, the first of many to write the history of the Revolution, describes Adams as having “the clearest head and the finest heart in Congress.” This clarity of understanding explains, in no mean way, Adams’s reasonable urgency upon the several Colonies to transform themselves into States,—or, as he expressed the change,— “to take up civil government”. Nor did he lack a foremost part in that transformation,

the author, as he became by the will of his colleagues, of the constitution of Massachusetts, the oldest written constitution of government now in force in the world, and in many respects, the mold and type of all which have followed it. This instrument, it is true, breathes the political philosophy of the eighteenth century. All rests upon "the social compact". It is the lawyer's view of human relations, but it is the view according to which quite all our interests and relations are construed. He who would epitomize government in America will make use with John Marshall, of two words in our supreme law,—the "obligation of a contract". Adams's conception of the fundamentals of the social compact was of the "passions" and "interests" of men,—a conception years afterward elaborated by Hamilton and his associates in the *Federalist*. Once these basic elements were identified with government in America, Adams believed that both the States and the Nation were secure. And it may justly be said that John Adams had formulated these fundamentals of government before Alexander Hamilton was born. Yet in the early days of the Revolution Adams was not recognized by the people as the leader of the movement. So imperfect were the means of interchange of ideas at that time, doubt may well be expressed whether any man, save Washington, stood out in the American mind as the leader, and he, chiefly, because at the head of the army. The South had Patrick Henry, the Pinckneys, Rutledge, the Lees, and Jefferson; the Middle States had Franklin, Morris, Dickinson, Clinton, Schuyler, and Hamilton; New England had Sherman, Samuel Adams, Hancock, Robert Treat, Paine, and John Adams; the Continent had Washington. It was a scattered fire, this attack on "British tyranny". Time has tried all these names by the fiercest of tests and accords to a few of them an understanding of principles, an advocacy of them, a service to the country,

which sets John Adams apart, with others, as founders of our institutions.

For ten years, the period of his ministry abroad, beginning with the year 1778, John Adams's public services are not surpassed by those of any other man. He always looked back upon these years as the great years of his life. It was a bold mission,—to assume among the nations of the earth an equal rank, and this America did in John Adams. He told Europe that with Burgoyne's surrender the war should have ceased, and that after the embarrassing event only the King's 'stubbornness' kept up the struggle. It was a startling declaration to all monarchists. It meant,—if true,—the spread of democracy over Europe. And no form of government contemplates its own destruction with pleasure. But a new order of the ages had begun, nor did Adams for an instant cease proclaiming the change. The service he rendered cannot be misunderstood. America must not only be 'free and independent', but 'neutral'. Now nothing is clearer than that France loved us in lively expectation of favors to come and with calm resolution that America, subservient, should aid her in prostrating the British Empire. It was a grand game of the "passions" and "interests" played by the first nations of Europe.

Adams understood the game and patiently played it according to the rules. But with him "neutrality", "independence", "national sovereignty" were the words. He, and they who saw as he saw, saved America from becoming a mere province of France,—a mere appanage of Europe. He never shirked responsibility. Very clearly did he see that the interests of France were not always the interests of the United States. In his troubled intercourse with ministers of state he learned that first rule of diplomacy: Advance your own country at the cost of others. For America it was a hard rule to follow, in lack of arms and men. Choiseul,

de Vergennes, Maurepas, Turgot, Necker, bred to politics and the successful pursuit of the labyrinths of diplomacy, resented the brusque, the direct, the simple demands of Adams. With Franklin they would deal but not with Adams. And here may the world easily discover the essential difference between the two great Americans. "Honesty", (so Franklin would say,) "is the best policy"; "Honesty", (so Adams would say,) "is the best principle". It was the policy of all Europe to exploit America, not for America but for Europe. Louis XVI had no love for America. "My trade", said Joseph of Austria to his sister, the unfortunate French queen, "my trade is to rule". Turgot plainly saw that the Revolution, if successful, would transform America into nations wholly independent of Europe. So the true policy for France was to exhaust the Colonies; to exhaust England; to bring America into a state of perpetual purveyorship to France. Nor did Louis hesitate to declare,—possibly as a hint to Franklin and Adams,—that the "promise of Republics" may not be trusted like the "honor of monarchs". Adams went deeper than his most Christian Majesty and asserted that the hopes of the Republic in the West were the hopes of mankind.

Like Franklin Adams defended a paper currency and chiefly on the ground that such a currency is worth whatever the people of the nation that utters it may assign to it. If it depreciated, it was because (so they claimed) the insidious love of gain led buyer and seller to place self-interest above the public welfare. Franklin put the whole matter pithily when he claimed that a depreciating currency "pays itself off". Count de Vergennes insisted that however low the American paper might fall, the French should be preferred creditors. Adams replied, in one of the longest and, if we accept his premises, one of the ablest of letters. The reply doubtless satisfied Adams but it cannot sat-

isfy a modern sound-money man. The real question was of the use or abuse of credit. To what length that resource may be utilized remains doubtless measurable by the brutal facts of nationality. No nation is richer than its credit but the laws of credit remain to be fully explored.

II

Adams was first of American ministers to discriminate between diplomatic and consular functions and to urge upon Congress the recognition of them. His mind turned to industrial rather than to mere political independence for his country, recognizing clearly the basic character of labor. In his day Europe was the manufacturing world and America the producer of raw materials. Accepting this condition, he urged commercial treaties upon Europe, ever arguing to embassies and chancelleries the mutual advantages accruing from amicable relations between their own country and the United States. Possibly his emphasis of economic values may be explained by his belief that property is the basis of government. Right or wrong as this theory may be, Adams never departed from it. The last public act of his life, of moment, was to accept the presidency of the Massachusetts Convention of 1820, met to amend the instrument he had framed, forty years earlier. He had not changed his convictions and now, after the ripened experience of four score years, he advocated the property basis. Nor was he alone; Webster supported him in one of the most famed of his speeches. Here lie the very root and cause of difference between Adams and Jefferson as statesmen,—their irreconcilable interpretations of the foundations on which the state rest: property, or men. Adams, during his ministerial career, saw in America a “balance to Europe”; yet it was not an America essentially agricultural, for the provision in the Massachusetts constitution concerning

manufactures,—which he wrote,—and which he records with surprise was quite unanimously approved, pointed the way America was going. The “balance” which the New World should maintain was one which could not be measured by pounds of iron or fathoms of cloth. It was an intellectual, a moral, a spiritual balance and above all, a political, for he saw in America all that future of population, prosperity and peace which time has granted. This notion of large things helps explain his prophecy of the domination of the English language because of America,—that the time would come when that language would most closely approach the service of a vehicle of understanding the world over: a prophecy which has been quite fulfilled in our own day.

His diplomatic victory was won in Holland. Confederated as were the States of Holland in his time, a treaty of any kind between them and America seemed impossible of realization and yet such a treaty Adams secured. And more than a treaty of recognition of nationality, or one of mere commercial exchange: he secured a large loan which carried the United States through what has come to be known as the “critical period”,—the years from the ratification of the Articles of Confederation to the adoption of the Constitution. And Adams accomplished this extraordinary result in the very teeth of French opposition, and alone. Dr. Franklin expressed slight confidence in the success of the effort; England, at the time dominant in Holland, interposed in a warlike way. But Holland came to the aid of America, quite saved the day, and remained close to the head of the list of European powers who gave us aid and comfort in the days of small things. This help we owe to John Adams. He considered it the triumph of his life. The unsurpassed service has been almost forgotten by his countrymen. It was the victory of “watchful waiting”, of persistent, personal activity.

France early became weary of her alliance with the United States, weary of the war, and desirous of withdrawing. Necker, Minister of Finance, saw the pit opening at his feet and, alarmed, sought, in fidelity to his master, to stop all aid. It was a critical moment. Franklin proved stronger than the great Genevese. Adams calmly advised de Vergennes to strengthen the French navy in American waters as the only means of defeating England. Nor did Adams ever cease his efforts to protect America by a powerful navy. His insistence on the superiority of a navy when President was no small cause of the opposition of Hamilton who insisted on the superiority of an army. But Adams was right in his counsel to the French minister,—however impolitic the counsel,—for without the fleet of de Grasse, Yorktown could not have been taken or the war brought to so speedy a close. Adams saw clearly that Great Britain was mistress of the seas; he knew well the meaning of sea power in history, and quite at the first opportunity he moved straight to the point of insistence on the bulwark of American protection.

“The events of the war” wrote Lincoln, in his Message to Congress, in 1863, “give an increased interest and importance to the navy, which will probably extend beyond the war itself”. This was Adams’s position eighty years earlier. While Adams was worrying over possible Dutch loans, and actual bills of exchange which Congress showered down upon him to honor, Franklin calmly advised acceptance of the bills, but Adams hesitated because he saw no possible resource from which to meet them. He appealed to Franklin. That genial soul, unmoved by the very front of catastrophe replied: “I shall use my best endeavors to procure money for their honorable discharge against they become due, if you should not, in the meantime, be provided. And if those endeavors fail, I shall be ready to break, run away, or go to prison with you, as it shall please God.”

It may well be doubted whether Adams smiled, as we do now, at the reply. The awful seriousness of the situation quite overcame his spirits and doubtless he bethought him of what he had formally reported to Congress on "the artificial character of Dr. Franklin". Adams was a Puritan; Franklin, a man of the world. Franklin at this time managed to get the needed money from de Vergennes, and so neither Puritan nor man of the world had to run away or go to prison. "In the arts of indirection, the mere management and maneuvering of politics or diplomacy, (John Adams) never had the smallest skill; but in the faculty of combining means with judgment and energy so as to attain the public end he had in view, down to the close of his public life, he showed himself a master. It is this quality which marks (his) career as a statesman through all its various phases with the stamp of greatness". With the millions borrowed from Holland, through Adams's "judgment and energy", Congress was enabled to meet its obligations, and never again was our national credit to fall to so low an ebb.

Amidst these anxious events Adams never for a moment ceased insisting on full recognition abroad of American sovereignty and American neutrality. England, long before Yorktown, would have been pleased to stop the war; France, to bring about a peace, at the expense of this sovereignty. The full significance of Adams's conception of America can be had and had alone from a true understanding of the Confederation, the several States, the American people, and the vast problem of Union. England would make separate treaties with the several States, in confidence that sooner or later some or all of them would return to the empire. France cared little for America and less for England; a treaty should restore France to primacy in the New World. The United States, as Adams tells us, was but a pawn on the board. Would England admit

America to a level as to rights of fishery off the Grand Banks, and the Labrador? Adams insisted on the equality of right,—not because of the ancient custom of the New England fisherman's taking fish near the Banks, or as a pecuniary resource to the United States,—but simply as a question of sovereignty. The United States, a sovereign; England, a sovereign: equality of right; this was his belief. No treaty could issue from inequality of the high contracting parties. To this conviction he clung, and it became the ruling principle of the preliminary and of the final treaty with England.

That final treaty of peace, signed by England, France and the United States, January 21, 1783, marked the triumph of Adams's principles. Possibly the United States might have gained more but with John Adams as Commissioner it would never accept less. When, shortly after promulgation of the treaty, Adams, the first minister of the United States to England, was presented to King George, the sovereign, it is said, not without emotion, addressed a few words to him, carrying friendly sentiments, notably friendly when we consider the character of the King and his stubborn unwillingness to lose his colonies. To the royal words, expressing hope of American attachment to British interests, Adams replied, "I have no attachment but for my own country," to which the King answered: "An honest man will never have any other". Two honest men had met and spoken without reserve. Yet, a little later, we learn that at the royal levee, the King turned his back on the two American Commissioners,—Adams and Jefferson. And quite all England straightway did as did the King.

To no man of the times were the incapacity of the Congress and the inefficiency of the Confederacy clearer than to Adams. He knew as could few Americans that national weakness means national decay. From the moment of his conviction of the necessity

of a better government for America his advocacy of a more perfect union was ceaseless. His theory of government cannot be misunderstood, however it may be criticized. He indulged in no vain speculations. To him, the imperfections of man's nature made plain the necessity of authority and power. "He finds the human race impelled by their passions as often as guided by their reason, sometimes led to good actions by scarcely corresponding motives, and sometimes to bad ones rather from inability to resist temptation than from natural propensity to evil. This is the cornerstone of his system."* A right classification of 'powers' then is the procedure necessary to arrive at practical results. The *interests* of men give rise to distinctions between the rich and the poor, and are measured practically by property. The *passions* of men give rise to ambition for place and hunger for fame, and are measured, at least in governmental matters, by office. The multitude represent numbers and poverty; the rich, represent education and property; the official body represent the aspirations of rich and poor. Here then exists a means of checks and balances; of distribution of powers; of limitations and restrictions which may be made the basis of government. Let power therefore be distributed in three parts,—legislative, executive and judicial, but impose upon the executive such restrictions as shall strip it of danger to legislative or judicial, and have each department perform no functions other than those which appertain to itself. Thus a complete separation of the three powers, such as Adams set forth in the Constitution of Massachusetts, a nice balancing of each and all; a limitation against possible abuses, so that the mechanical operation (as it were) of the functions of the state should

* *Life of John Adams*, by Charles Francis Adams, in *Life and Works of John Adams*, I., 426.

both effect the ends of government,—“a government of laws and not of men” and, at the same time, neutralize whatsoever evil forces are beyond elimination because of “the imperfection of man’s nature”. This is John Adams’s theory of government,—a theory found in Jean Jacques Rousseau, and in many lesser men of the eighteenth century.

Filled with this idea, Adams gave to the world his *Defence of American Constitutions* and his voluminous expositions of government. Here the ruling premise is of power limited; of people protected from themselves. Adams’s conviction of the validity of his political principles was never shaken by any conference which he had with the ruling minds of Europe. Writing to John Jay, at the time Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Adams describes Pitt, with whom he had had several interviews, and who, at the time, was Prime Minister. “Mr. Pitt is very young. He has discovered abilities and firmness upon some occasions; but I have never seen in him any evidence of greater talents than I have seen in members of Congress, and in other scenes of life in America, at his age. I have not yet seen any decided proofs of principle, or patriotism, or virtue; on the contrary, there are many symptoms of the want of these qualities, without which no statesman ever yet appeared uniformly great, or wrought out any memorable salvation for any country.”*

The great, the vital question had meanwhile arisen in America, the question Washington and others were asking,—“Are we a nation?” John Adams was preparing to return home. On his arrival he found the whole country stirred over the question of ratifying the Constitution which the Federal Convention at Philadelphia had prepared. Of his sympathy with ratification Adams made no concealment. He con-

* Adams to Jay, December 3, 1785.

stantly urged the more perfect union as he had been urging it for many years. Perhaps no equally trustworthy interpretation of the causes which led to the adoption of that Constitution, as they would appear to the mind of John Adams can be given other than that given by his distinguished grandson, Charles Francis Adams:

“Exhausted by the war and the derangement of all useful industry, the forms which executed justice soon became equally hateful with those who had labored to impose a tyranny. It was the upheaving of the poorest classes to throw off all law of debtor and creditor, which brought about the successful effort to organize the federal government anew, as a bridle upon their license. They never favored it beforehand, nor cordially approved it afterwards, during their day and generation. The Federal Convention was the work of the commercial people in the seaport towns, of the planters of the slave-holding States, of the officers of the revolutionary army, and the property holders everywhere. And these parties could never have been strong enough of themselves to procure the general adoption of the instrument which they matured, had it not been that the open insurrection in Massachusetts, and the assemblages threatening to shut up the courts of justice in other States, had thrown the intermediate body of quiet citizens of every shade of opinion, in panic, all on their side. It was under the effect of this panic, that the delegates had been elected, and that they acted. The federal constitution was the offspring of compromises made under these circumstances.” *

Adams was chosen Vice-President as a geographical solution of the necessity of filling the office. The South had the presidency, in Washington; at the North there

* *Life of John Adams, supra*, 441-2.

were several greatly distinguished men, but of these available, Hancock and Samuel Adams had aligned themselves with the opponents of the new Constitution, and no northern man had rendered greater services to the country than John Adams, long an advocate of more power in the federal government and a vigorous supporter of the 'new plan.' There was the unconscious respect for the older, if not the better soldier, in Adams's case, so that none of the younger men,—Madison, Hamilton, or Morris, appears to have been considered, the exception being John Jay who received nine votes, against thirty-four for Adams; the ten who stood below him receiving in the aggregate but one more vote than he. The office cannot be said to offer much to such a man as Adams but, as the coming years were to record, it was to take unto itself no small significance because of his performance of what he believed to be its functions. Little need is there to attempt to say more of Adams than what he has said authoritatively of himself, when he assumed the duties of his new office:

“I congratulate the people of America on the formation of a national constitution, and the fair prospect of a consistent administration of a government of laws”.

From the inception of the new government issues sprang up which went to the root of the whole matter,—and that, comprehensively,—the existence of the Union and the efficiency of its administration. Washington attempted the impossible task of harmonizing rival schools of political thought when he called Hamilton and Jefferson into his Cabinet. The ideas for which these two statesmen stood, and still stand, are irreconcilable. Hamilton undertook to draw “order out of the chaos of the finances”, and succeeded. In doing this he drew to his support all men of property throughout the country; they never deserted him, and

they to this day have formed the powerful party which, under one name or another, has supported his theories of the organization and administration of government in America. To the financial plans of Hamilton Adams threw his support, and at a moment when had that support been given to Jefferson, it might, as has been said, "have turned the scale." Adams was "never a calculating politician", indeed, he cannot be described, truly, as a politician at all, for he was totally lacking in that art, or grace, or power, or uncanny insight which marks the politician,—which distinguishes men of the class of Amos Kendall and William L. Marcy, on the one hand, or such men as Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, on the other.

John Adams lacked the initial grace of the politician,—tact, and as with lesser men, that which he had not cost him more than that which he had. He came into the Vice-Presidency when America stood at the parting of the ways. The President,—Washington,—had notions of the importance of ceremony in the conduct of his office. That he consulted the House; that he consulted the Senate; that he consulted the Vice-President; that he consulted his Cabinet; that he consulted his friends as to what that ceremony should be are matters, long since, of every school-boy's reading. John Adams had long resided near the court of France, which seemed to exist for ceremony; he had known the exacting and burdensome mode of their High Mightinesses in Holland,—and it will be remembered that the American Congress went on record that Washington, the President should be addressed, officially, as "His High Mightiness". Adams's counsel appears to have gone no farther than to declare the European rule,—“sovereign to sovereign; minister to minister”; but this solution of the ominous problem recognized,—so the Anti-Federalists quickly pointed out,—that all men are not created equal: and so another attack on John

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Adams. Every straw was in the way; every wind blew ill. The Vice-President, though presiding officer, *ex officio*, of the Senate is not a senator, and has no vote except in case of a tie. There were twelve States in the Union in Adams's vice-presidency, and twenty-four Senators in the Senate when all were present. But all were rarely, if ever, present, and the vote during the first Congress was twenty times a tie.

John Adams was thus called upon by his casting vote to settle large issues,—as the President's power of removal; the policy of neutrality, and the nation's part and place in the trade of the world. He stood with Washington and for all for which Washington stood. What of opposition to Washington's policy developed among the Democratic Societies throughout the country, concentrated upon Adams: he became the victim of that counter-revolution, led by that prince of revolutionists, Thomas Jefferson. To us who come long after these troublous, these almost anarchistic times, it is impossible, doubtless, to weigh all the evidence as it was then weighed. To Adams, the French Revolution was a 'moral earthquake'. "I know," (wrote Adams to Dr. Price, in comment on his expostulation,) "I know that encyclopedists and economists, Diderot and D'Alembert, Voltaire and Rousseau, have contributed to this great event more than Sidney, Locke, or Hoadley, perhaps more than the American Revolution; and I own to you, I know not what to make of a republic of thirty million atheists. . . . Too many French, after the example of too many Americans, pant for equality of persons and property. The impracticability of this God Almighty has decreed, and the advocates for liberty who attempt it will surely suffer for it." And what was the other side? Thomas Paine's, *Rights of Man*, then recently published in England, an advocacy of political principles for which Paine was flung into prison in two countries; but Paine

explains, himself, in his speech before the Convention of July: "I was not persecuted by the *people* either of England or France. The proceedings in both countries were the effects of the *despotism* existing in their respective governments. But even if my persecution had originated in the people at large, my principles and conduct would still have remained the same."

John Adams's attitude toward these 'principles' is sufficiently clear from his letter, a few years later, to John Marshall, at the time Secretary of State: commenting on the proposal submitted by another to "introduce into this country a company of schoolmasters, painters, poets, &c., all of them disciples of Mr. Thomas Paine, . . . I had rather countenance the introduction of Ariel and Caliban, with a troop of spirits the most mischievous from fairy land". To Adams, the whole country seemed sinking into Jacobism and anarchy; to Jefferson, rising into Democracy and liberty. Between men of minds so diverse there is a great gulf fixed. That America would be a Republic, neither may have had a doubt; but to Adams it must be,—if long to exist,—a conservative, not a democratic Republic.

Meanwhile both Jefferson and Hamilton had retired to private life. It was a day when men confessed themselves old at forty and were wont at that advanced age to talk of 'seeking the beneficent shades of retirement'. As the French say, 'It was the habit.' In our day no man is too old to hold office; none too old to play the politician. It is not the game, but the players that change. John Adams became President by three votes. Jefferson came to second place with sixty-eight. It was a sign of the times. Ample evidence reaches us of infidelity to party, or Adams had received a heavier vote. The whole story seems to be told when we say that the Federalist party had Adams on its hands and could not throw him off,—with decency. Yet there were lead-

ers among the party who gladly would have thrown him off. It was the alternative which made cowards of them all. Hamilton sets out the compulsion of the hour: by electing Adams, that other candidate,—Jefferson,—“of whose unfitness” he writes “all sincere Federalists are convinced”, would be excluded; in 1796, the Federalist cry was ‘anything to beat Jefferson’; and he was beaten by three votes; but he was elected Vice-President.

That Adams committed a blunder by retaining Washington’s Cabinet will hardly be denied. Not one of its members was deeply attached to him, personally or politically. Though having a Cabinet he was a President without one. Slight was the confidence and, seemingly, merely formal was the intercourse between Cabinet and President throughout his administration. John Adams had never worked in close harmony with political associates. He was incapable of intimate friendships; his judgments were his own, and it does not appear that he ever consulted his colleagues until first having made up his own mind, nor that he ever modified his conclusions when he had taken counsel. Wise or foolish, this was John Adams.

The office of cabinet minister in America is one of uncertain tenure, being wholly at the will of the President, but the office is more than a mere clerkship to an executive department. Indeed, the office, for the time being, is much as the President makes it. John Adams undoubtedly reduced it to lowest terms,—a treatment which intensified schism in the party and weakened him as President. Yet granting all this, and no wavering from principle, it was a question of administration. And here do we reach the place of John Adams as a statesman: a man whose political principles are of nationality, neutrality, American sovereignty, American primacy in trade and commerce, government founded on property rather than on persons; a govern-

ment of laws and not of men. To effect the ends harmonious with these principles, he advocates an efficient navy as essential to the adequate protection of the country. An "adequate naval force" is "an important object of national policy". A "navy adapted to defensive war" is a "necessity", a "wise and true economy for our future tranquillity, for the safety of our shores, and for the protection of our property committed to the ocean".*

He was the first of our Presidents to advocate a sufficient navy, an advocacy emphasized by most of his successors. In this emphasis of the importance of a navy, Adams antagonized Hamilton, who urged the superiority of an army. It was but one of their innumerable differences of opinion of best means for securing the same end. The large problems of Adams's administration were essentially the problems which confronted Washington: nationality, neutrality, public tranquillity, taxation, the honor and dignity of the country in the eyes of the world. These were administrative problems, once the "more perfect Union" had been formed. To the solution of these problems John Adams brought a lively conception of all the principles for which Washington had stood, and no greater tact than Washington himself had shown. The untimely death of Washington prevented consummation of plans, laid by some of the leading Federalists,—Hamilton among them,—to elect him President again. A passage in Hamilton's letter of condolence to Mrs. Washington tells the whole story: "He was essential to my plans". The death of the great man again left Adams on the hands of the Federalists. Jealousies, rivalries, schism were rife. We do not lack evidence of the schemes afoot at the time to bear the hated burden,

* Messages to Congress, May 16, 1797; December 14, 1798; November 22, 1800.

to bring the Federalists through their trials successfully and, not least, to compel Adams to follow the leaders of the wing of the party to which he did not belong. The leader of leaders, the "King of the Feds.," was Hamilton.

The undoing of Adams by Hamilton has passed into history. It does not make a chapter, in our annals, of pleasant reading. Great political leaders of later times have turned against the President,—the official head of their party; Henry Clay turned against John Tyler,—and, as he and his followers believed, with cause. Party schism has again and again brought the opposition into power; it brought Lincoln, it brought Wilson to the presidency. It has ever brought the opposition to first place: and Hamilton, in breaking with John Adams, in secretly organizing powerful opposition to him, brought into the presidency the one man whom he himself described as, "a candidate, of whose unfitness all sincere Federalists are convinced."

The story of this schism; the fatal *Letter*, which Hamilton wrote for private circulation among his followers, which Burr managed to lay hands on and sent flying through the world, the letter "Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq.," has long been read of all men. "Mr. Adams", (so runs this letter,) "does not possess the talents adapted to the administration of government, and there are great and intrinsic defects in his character, which unfit him for the office of chief magistrate." He is "infected with visionary notions", and is "far less able in the practice than in the theory of politics." "He is a man of an imagination sublimated and eccentric; propitious neither to the regular display of sound judgment, nor to steady perseverance in a systematic plan of conduct . . . ; to this defect are added the unfortunate foibles of a vanity without bounds, and a jealousy capable of discolored every object." It had been "an essential

point of caution to take care that accident, or an intrigue of the opposers of government, should not raise Mr. Adams, instead of General Washington, to the first place. This every friend of government would have considered a disastrous event." Adams had complained of unfair treatment at time, had displayed the "extreme egotism of (his) temper". Knowing all this,—continues Hamilton,—"men of principal influence in the Federal party began to entertain serious doubts about his fitness" to succeed Washington, but in their "desire of preserving harmony in the party" "indulged their hopes rather than listened to their fears" and supported him for the chief magistracy. "Well-informed men knew that the event of the election was extremely problematical; and while the friends of Mr. Jefferson predicted his success with sanguine confidence, his opposers feared that he might have at least an equal chance with any Federal candidate. To exclude him, was deemed, by the Federalists, a primary object." It was "far less important" whether Adams or Pinckney was successful than that "Mr. Jefferson should not be the person." And the election of Pinckney was Hamilton's desire. To Hamilton the crown of offense in John Adams was his "disgusting egotism"; his "dis-tempered jealousy"; the "ungovernable indiscretion of (his) temper, joined to some doubts of the correctness of his maxims of administration. . . . He (in-conversation) "repeatedly made excursions into the field of foreign politics, which alarmed the friends of the prevailing system." The unforgivable errors in administration were the appointment of the commission to France; the ignominious treatment of the Cabinet and refusal to take its advice; the President's temporizing with insurrection and rebellion in Pennsylvania and his pardoning the offenders after they had been found guilty in the courts and, not least, the President's criticism of Hamilton himself; hostility

towards him and steady refusal to follow his political program. "Yet", (concludes this remarkable letter,) "with this opinion of Mr. Adams, I have finally resolved not to advise withholding from him a single vote. The body of Federalists, for want of sufficient knowledge of facts, are not convinced of the expediency of relinquishing him." Whatever the Federalist electors might do, they should "encrease the probability of excluding a third candidate, of whose unfitness all sincere Federalists are convinced". And the letter concludes in emphasis "of the great importance of cultivating harmony among the supporters of the government; on whose firm union hereafter will probably depend the preservation of order, tranquillity, liberty, property; the security of every social and domestic blessing".*

This indictment of Adams by Hamilton, lacking nothing in detail, may be set over against Jefferson's indictment of both Hamilton and Adams. "Hamilton," records Jefferson in his stealthy *Anas*, "Hamilton was not only a monarchist, but for a monarchy bottomed on corruption", and he relates the conversation, at his own table, on the British constitution, on which Mr. Adams observed, "purge that constitution of its corruption, and give to its popular branch equality of representation, and it would be the most perfect constitution ever devised by the wit of man". Hamilton paused and said, "purge it of its corruption, and give to its popular branch equality of representation, and it would become an *impracticable* government; as it stands at present, with all its supposed defects, it is the most perfect government which ever existed." And this was assuredly the exact line which separated the political creeds of

* Letter from Alexander Hamilton, Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq., President of the United States. Written in the Year 1800. New Edition, with Preface. Boston: Printed by E. G. House, No. 5, Court Street. 1809. 56 pp.

these two men. The one was for two hereditary branches, one an honest elective; the other, for an hereditary King, with a House of Lords and Commons corrupted to his will, and standing between him and the people. And of Adams particularly Jefferson adds: "Mr. Adams had originally been a republican. The glare of royalty and nobility, during his mission to England, had made him believe their fascination a necessary ingredient in government; and Shay's rebellion, not sufficiently understood where he then was, seemed to prove that the absence of want and oppression was not a sufficient guarantee of order. His book on the American Constitutions having made known his political bias, he was taken up by the monarchical Federalists in his absence, and on his return to the United States, he was by them made to believe that the general disposition of our citizens was favorable to monarchy. He here wrote his *Davila*, as a supplement to a former work, and his election to the Presidency confirmed him in his errors. Innumerable addresses too, artfully and industriously poured in upon him, deceived him into a confidence that he was on the pinnacle of popularity, when the gulf was yawning at his feet, which was to swallow up him and his deceivers. General Washington was withdrawn, these *energumeni* of royalism, kept in check hitherto by the dread of his honesty, his firmness, his patriotism, and the authority of his name, now mounted on the car of State and free from control, like Phaeton on that of the sun, drove headlong and wild, looking neither to right nor left, nor regarding anything but the objects they were driving at; until, displaying these fully, the eyes of the nation were opened, and a general disbandment of them from the public councils took place." *

Adams himself records that, meeting Colonel Lyman,

* *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Lipscomb, Editor, I, 278, 279, 280.

“one of the most amiable men in Congress”, in the street, in Philadelphia, he inquired the news. “Hamilton”, replied Lyman, “has divided the Federalists, and proposed to them to give you the go-by and bring in Pinckney. By this step he has divided the Federalists, and given great offense to the honestest part of them. I am glad of it, for it will be the ruin of his faction”. My answer was, “Colonel Lyman, it will be, as you say, the ruin of his faction; but it will also be the ruin of honest men than any of them.” And he proceeds to speak of his own hobby as a navy; Hamilton’s, an army. That Hamilton “had fled from his own unpopularity” and “from national hatred to the bar at New York, to acquire the character of an unambitious man”, planning no less than to be “commander-in-chief” of the administration, general advisor to the whole country. Indeed, Adams accuses Hamilton of the same faults as those imputed to himself by Hamilton. No less an authority than Charles Francis Adams records that his grandfather was subject to asperity of temper “in much greater degree” than was Washington, “and with less power of self-control;” but he also cites Cabot’s letter to Hamilton,—and Cabot was one of Hamilton’s closer friends,—in which he tells Hamilton that he is accused of egotism and vanity in as dangerous a quality and to as great an extent as John Adams himself.

Certain it is that no letter ever written by a public man bore more tragical fruit, or precipitated heavier woes. Adams defeated; Jefferson and Burr brought by equal vote into the House of Representatives for the presidency; the challenge; the duel on the Heights of Wehawken; Hamilton’s untimely death, Burr an out-cast on the face of the earth, the Federalist party eliminated from American politics. Adams’s prophecy thus soon proved true. To Jefferson and his followers, and to all who see in Jeffersonian democracy the

strength and salvation of America, the fall of John Adams was only a step toward the realization of the rights of man.

For more than a hundred years historians and writers of every degree have commented on men and affairs of the time of John Adams. The fairest judgment as yet pronounced comes from an English historian of the American Revolution. "The critical faculty (so writes Trevelyan,) was abnormally strong in John Adams, and he had only too keen an eye for the short-comings of other people. He continued, till very near the end of an immensely prolonged life, to comment with extraordinary force and zest upon the weaknesses and failings of those eminent men who twenty years back, and thirty years back, had been his fellow laborers in the cause of American freedom. But whatever he might say or write in private, he never knowingly allowed his public conduct to be influenced by considerations of personal rivalry. Patriotism, pure and unalloyed, was at all times in his career the essential motive of his political action; and, whenever he was called upon to take a practical decision on a matter affecting the welfare of his country, his finer qualities invariably carried the day. On New Year's Day, 1781, John Adams received from the President of Congress his nomination as Minister Plenipotentiary to the United Provinces. The situation, from the point of view of America, needed a master-hand to cope with it; and there was an American now in Europe who was equal to the task. He at once crossed the frontier, and laid before the Dutch Government a memorial soliciting recognition as the representative of a self-governing and independent nation. The practical and straightforward Bostonian, accustomed in his own country to direct dealing with intelligent and self-respecting people of all classes of society, was determined to get into close personal con-

tact with the public opinion of Holland. His course of action in this respect was shocking to the somewhat hide-bound official hierarchy of Europe; and even the Compté de Vergennes warned him that an appeal to popular feeling on the part of an ambassador was a proceeding unheard of in diplomacy. But John Adams knew well what he was about; and nowhere else, and at no time in his career, was he ever more busily and successfully occupied than during those fifteen months which he almost continuously passed in Holland. It was a country where he felt himself at home. The air of industry and prosperity, the neatness and cleanliness, the doors and shutters of brightly painted wood, and the avenues of young trees in the village streets, reminded him of much that he had left behind in New England; and he saw no cause why, in his political transactions with Dutchmen, he should not use processes which he had always employed when doing public business with his fellow-citizens in America." It was this transaction, which not only established his reputation in Europe, but which he regarded as the supreme triumph of his life. "Congress (continues Trevelyan,) was kept minutely informed about the aspect of European affairs by Benjamin Franklin and John Adams,—as acute observers, and sound advisors, as ever represented their country at a foreign capital." "The greatest names among the founders of the Republic were, beyond all question, those of Washington, Franklin, and John Adams." *

John Adams was the first and the last Puritan President. He was the first, and probably the last President to live to see his son become President. He came to the presidency with a larger experience in international affairs than any of his successors have known. Of American statesmen he alone wrote treatises on

* *George the Third and Charles James Fox*, II., 47, 49, 51, 57, 171, 305.

government, and these, though a temporary contribution to political science, set forth American concepts of government to the edification of the whole world. Hamilton set him down as incapable in the administration of government; Jefferson recorded his as a monarchist; Trevelyan, more than a hundred years after his retirement from the presidency, portrays him as easily among the great diplomatists of the world. To most Americans he has become a respectable name which survives a day of vast beginnings. All the evidence accords him a foremost place among Americans who believe that government should be a government of laws and not of men.

(Selected Adams Bibliography)

I. DOCUMENTARY.

The Life And Works of John Adams, 10 Vols. (1850–1856), written, compiled, and edited by Charles Francis Adams, remains the printed source; the unpublished official correspondence of John Adams, in the archives of the Government, together with state papers and cognate matter, is very great. His most important state papers are reprinted in James D. Richardson's, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, I. His *Works* (*supra*) contain his *Controversial Papers*, *Works on Government*, *Defense of the Constitutions of the United States of America*, *Discourses on Davila*, &c. Taken in their entirety, Adams's various writings remain the best introduction, for the English reader, to a comparative study of ancient and modern republics as interpreted by any American statesman. Wharton's, *Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence*, 6 Vols., and John Bassett Moore's, *Digests of International Law*, 6 Vols., and of *International Arbitration*, 7 Vols., John and Abigail Adams's, *Familiar Letters During the Revolution* (Boston, 1875).

II. BIOGRAPHICAL.

The *Life of John Adams* (Vol. I. of the *Life and Works*, *supra*), is the most exhaustive and the best exposition of his public services. John T. Morse's, *John Adams*, in the *American Statesmen Series*, a brief, and somewhat unsatisfactory sketch, which should be read in connection with the ampler, if not juster, study by Charles Francis Adams. Mellen Chamberlain's, *John Adams, the Statesman of the Revolution; with other Essays and Addresses* (Boston, 1898). Sir George Otto Trevelyan's, *George Third and Charles James Fox*, II., 'John Adams in Europe.'

III. HISTORICAL.

The general histories cited under the bibliography of Adams's colleagues and contemporaries recount, more or less in detail, the public services of John Adams. None of them is, however, specially favorable to Adams. One may read the censorious Hildreth, the unfriendly Schouler, or in McMaster, the popular judgment of America concerning Adams during his life. Adams's career during the Revolution, as minister to France, Holland, and England is recorded by Bancroft, in his *History of the United States* (various editions), by Hildreth (with some commendation) III., and Adams's Administration (with Hamiltonian leanings) IV., V.; in Winsor's, *Narrative and Critical History*, VI, VII; in Frothingham's, *Rise of the Republic* (for Adams's earlier career); in George Elliot Howard's, *The American Revolution*; in A. C. McLaughlin's, *The Confederation and the Constitution*, the last three works are critical studies, equipped with the modern apparatus, bibliography, maps, &c &c., of highest value to the reader. John Spencer Bassett's, *The Federalist System*, alike critical, gives the reader immediate entrance into the issues of Adam's Administration, and a critical study of his political principles. Edward Channing's, *History of the United States*, II. III. *passim*. A. D. Morse's, *The Politics of John Adams*, *American Historical Review*, IV. 292, and C. M. Walsh's, *The Political Science of John Adams: A Study in the Theory of Mixed Government and the Bicameral Theory* (1915), analyze his principles minutely. Wharton's, *State Trials of the United States During the Administrations of Washington and Adams*, the Debates in Congress (1797-1801), either in the *Annals*, or in Benton's, *Abridgement*; Pickering and Upham's, *Life and Times of Timothy Pickering*; Gibb's, *Memoirs of the Federal Administrations*, and the *American State Papers*. Webster's imaginary *Speech of John Adams* in favor of the Declaration of Independence, Webster's *Works* I; much concerning Adams may be found scattered through the writings of Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton and Webster. Alexander Johnston in *Lalor's Cyclopaedia* gives critical (though brief) accounts of all the issues that arose during Adam's Administration. Later historians disclose a kindlier spirit towards John Adams than those contemporary or early writers.