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Source: *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Apr., 1994, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Apr., 1994), pp. 227-252

Published by: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture

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John Adams, Diplomat

John Ferling

AFTER the War of Independence, John Adams predicted immortality for George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. He never expected to be similarly ennobled, but there can be no doubt that he longed to be remembered as a notable American statesman.¹ After his forced retirement in 1801, he feared for his place in history. He knew that foes within his own Federalist Party, notably Alexander Hamilton, had maligned his presidency. In addition, he believed that the achievements of his service as a wartime diplomat had been discredited by allegations and insinuations made in the 1780s by Franklin and the French foreign minister, Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes. Adams devoted considerable energy during his long retirement to rehabilitating his reputation, telling his story in memoirs, countless essays, and a voluminous correspondence. As passions cooled, particularly after the War of 1812, he knew that his presidency was already being judged more fairly.² But he remained troubled over how posterity would assess his wartime diplomacy. His concerns were not misplaced, for during recent years some scholars have condemned much of his diplomatic activity between 1778–1781 as unwise, ruinous to himself, and of little benefit to the United States.³

John Ferling is a member of the Department of History at West Georgia College. He was assisted by a research grant provided by the Learning Resources Committee of West Georgia College. He wishes to thank Joseph J. Ellis, Gregg L. Lint, Donald R. Hickey, and William C. Stinchcombe for their helpful suggestions.

¹ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, Apr. 4, 1790, in Alexander Biddle, ed., *Old Family Letters: Copied from the Originals for Alexander Biddle*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1892), I, 55; Adams to Rush, July 23, 1806, Mar. 23, Apr. 12, 1809, in John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair, eds., *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805–1813* (San Marino, Calif., 1966), 61, 137, 143; Adams to Francis Adrian Vanderkemp, Feb. 5, 1805, Jan. 29, 1807, in Adams Family Papers, reel 118, microfilm ed., Massachusetts Historical Society (hereafter cited as AFP Microfilm); Adams to Timothy Pickering, Aug. 6, 1822, reel 124, *ibid.*

² On Adams's efforts to rehabilitate his reputation between 1801 and his death in 1826 see Page Smith, *John Adams*, 2 vols. (New York, 1962), II, 1067–1138; Donald H. Stewart and George P. Clark, "Misanthrope or Humanitarian? John Adams in Retirement," *New England Quarterly*, XXVIII (1955), 216–236; Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1976), 270–318; and John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1992), 417–454.

³ Shaw, *Character of Adams*, 106–163; James H. Hutson, *John Adams and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (Lexington, Ky., 1980), 33–74; Hutson, "The American Negotiators: The Diplomacy of Jealousy," in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Peace and the Peacemakers: The Treaty of 1783* (Charlottesville, Va., 1986), 52–69.

The William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Series, Vol. LI, No. 2, April 1994

The time has arrived for a reexamination of Adams's diplomacy. This essay reconsiders Adams by exploring his motives and behavior during the War of Independence through the prism of his comprehension of how to serve America's national interest. It seeks a better understanding of Adams and his relationship with Franklin and the French and also of the difficulty with which American Independence was ultimately achieved.

Adams had acquired a reputation for insight in foreign affairs while serving in the Continental Congress. Expressing what appears to have been the prevailing sentiment in Congress, James Duane observed in 1776 that Adams had "more fully considered and better digested the subject of foreign connections than any other man we have ever heard speak on the subject."⁴ In June of that year, when Congress created a committee to prepare "a plan of treaties to be proposed to foreign powers," Adams—together with John Dickinson, Benjamin Harrison, Robert Morris, and Franklin—served on the panel and prepared the draft of what became known as the Model Treaty, the most important document he authored during his congressional service. Later in 1776 Adams was appointed one of three congressmen to meet with Great Britain's peace commissioners. When Congress recalled Silas Deane, one of the envoys who had been sent to Paris to seek French recognition and assistance, Adams was named to replace him. He sailed a few weeks later and landed in Bordeaux in April 1778.⁵

On arrival, Adams discovered that the envoys, Deane, Franklin, and Arthur Lee, had negotiated treaties of alliance and commerce with France, so that his mission was useless. He also heard rumors of bitter animosity between Franklin and Lee. When Adams reached the French capital eight days later, Franklin confirmed everything he had heard in Bordeaux, in particular about Lee, whom Franklin thought a suspicious and querulous man with whom he could not work.⁶

Adams's first inclination on learning of the Franco-American accords was to return to the United States. Once he became aware of the discord between his colleagues, however, he realized that until only one minister represented the United States at Versailles, a third commissioner must of necessity be present; otherwise, the enmity between Franklin and Lee might prejudice the interests of the United States.⁷

⁴ Hutson, *Adams and Diplomacy*, 28; L. H. Butterfield et al., eds., *The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), III, 329 (hereafter cited as *Adams Diary and Autobiography*). On Adams's political career through 1777 see Shaw, *Character of Adams*, 76–105; Smith, *Adams*, I, 163–355; and Ferling, *Adams*, 39–182.

⁵ Worthington C. Ford, ed., *The Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789*, 34 vols. (Washington, D. C., 1904–1937), V, 431 (hereafter cited as *JCC*); *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, II, 271–293, III, 337–338, 414–431, IV, 1–33.

⁶ *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, II, 293, 296, 346–347, IV, 43, 66, 106; Esmond Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 295; Hutson, *Adams and Diplomacy*, 38.

⁷ *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, II, 346, IV, 43, 70.

Adams therefore resolved to remain in France until Congress sent instructions. He moved into quarters in the small garden apartment where Franklin lived in suburban Passy, a modest dwelling that was part of a grand estate owned by the French businessman Leray de Chaumont. Adams looked on this as an economy measure, for he had neither to pay rent nor to purchase furniture. He resided there from April 1778 to the following February.⁸ Adams's service during this period has been portrayed as inconsequential, and he has been ridiculed for wasting his time on "work [that] other men would have relegated to their clerks."⁹ In fact, Adams became the administrator of an operation that had gone unmanaged. He carefully examined the Silas Deane papers in the hope of comprehending his predecessor's transactions during the clandestine war. By seeing that fiscal affairs at last were "methodically conducted," as he put it, he may have saved the commissioners from the acute embarrassment of bankruptcy.¹⁰

In addition, Adams dispatched intelligence to Congress, reporting on English morale, Great Britain's diplomatic isolation in Europe, the state of the French economy, and Versailles's attachment to the American cause. He assessed French and British naval strength, correctly advised that Spain soon would enter the war against Britain, accurately informed Congress that America had little chance of obtaining loans elsewhere in Europe, and notified French naval commanders that a fleet of British warships was about to sail for North America. Also, Adams frequently acted in concert with Franklin and Lee.¹¹ Every few days, the commissioners were in contact with Antoine Gabriel de Sartine, comte d'Alby, France's minister of marine, regarding issues arising from the capture of British prizes, the care of enemy prisoners, difficulties confronting the American navy and privateers, and the execution of the treaties with France.¹² The commissioners corresponded with French officials and private citizens, and each dined often in the homes of important Parisians.¹³

Adams's activities provided experience for his subsequent diplomatic service. Moreover, his French steadily improved; although he began to study the language only in early 1778, by early 1779 he said he "could talk as fast as I

⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, 67–68; Adams to Lee, Oct. 10, 1778, in Robert J. Taylor et al., eds., *Papers of John Adams*, 8 vols. to date (Cambridge, Mass., 1977–), VII, 126; Lee to Adams, Oct. 12, 1778, *ibid.*, VII, 134–135 (hereafter cited as *Adams Papers*).

⁹ Hutson, *Adams and Diplomacy*, 37, 44; Shaw, *Character of Adams*, 120.

¹⁰ *Adams Papers*, IV, xxiv; *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, IV, 77.

¹¹ Adams to Elbridge Gerry, July 9, 1778, *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, IV, 149; Adams to William Heath, July 10, 1778, *ibid.*, 157; Adams to Patrick Henry, July 9, 1778, *ibid.*, 153–154; Adams to James Lovell, July 9, 1778, *ibid.*, 148; Adams and Benjamin Franklin to American State Officials, May 19, 1778, *ibid.*, 102; Adams to Richard Henry Lee, July 25, 1778, *ibid.*, 172; Adams to Samuel Adams, July 28, 1778, *Adams Papers*, VI, 327; Adams to President of Congress, Apr. 25, 1778, *ibid.*, 52.

¹² Commissioners to Sartine, May 14, June 3, 15, July 16, 1778, *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, IV, 99–100, 125–126, 136–137, 164; Commissioners to Sartine, May 16, July 22, Aug. 13, 18, 1778, *Adams Papers*, VI, 123, 309, 368, 376.

¹³ *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, II, 296–317.

pleased.”¹⁴ It has been suggested that Adams’s first mission to France was important for still another reason. This supposedly was the period when his envy and hatred of Franklin were sown.¹⁵

Adams and Franklin first met in Congress in 1775–1776. During their eighteen months of service in Philadelphia, Adams clearly admired Franklin. He referred to him as “a great and good Man” and concluded that “there is no abler or better American.” Franklin posed no threat to Adams: despite his extraordinary status, Franklin was “very reserved” and not “affected to take the lead”—as Adams characterized him—and played a secondary role even within the Pennsylvania delegation. Adams told his wife that he wished that delegation would follow Franklin instead of John Dickinson and Thomas Willing, men who used their “overgrown Fortunes” to dominate their colleagues. Franklin and Adams agreed on virtually every substantive issue, including Adams’s draft of the Model Treaty, which Franklin assisted by loaning Adams a volume containing old English treaties with France; Franklin ultimately lauded the Model Treaty. Franklin, Adams later wrote, had “judiciously selected” substantive items for his consideration by making “some marks with a Pencil against some Articles.” Adams placed considerable faith in his colleague’s understanding of diplomacy.¹⁶

Franklin left Congress late in 1776 to begin his diplomatic activities, and the men did not again meet until Adams arrived in Passy. Franklin later described the relationship that followed as one of “civility”; Adams said that he “lived in friendship” with Franklin. These declarations of amicability are borne out by contemporary sources. Not only did the two men live under the same roof for ten months (while Lee, who loathed Franklin, dwelled elsewhere), but Adams, a prolific correspondent, never once criticized Franklin in any letter penned during his first nine months in France. Adams, it is true, was often guarded in his correspondence lest the letters fall into enemy hands. But he was never reluctant to express his feelings in his diary, and his entries between April 1778 and February 1779 are devoid of criticism of Franklin apart from a note that Franklin’s French was poor. Almost a year after he began to work with Franklin, Adams acknowledged that the French government looked on Franklin as the most important of the three Americans. “And no Wonder,” he added. “His long and great Rep[utation] to which L[ee]’s and mine are in their

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 354.

¹⁵ Hutson, *Adams and Diplomacy*, 45–50; Shaw, *Character of Adams*, 109, 127.

¹⁶ Adams to Abigail Adams, July 23, 1775, in L. H. Butterfield et al., eds., *Adams Family Correspondence* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963–), I, 253; Adams to James Warren, Sept. 30, 1775, *Adams Papers*, III, 172; *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, III, 338. On the preparation of the Model Treaty, especially on Franklin’s role, see Gregg L. Lint, “John Adams on the Drafting of the Treaty Plan of 1776,” *Diplomatic History*, II (1978), 313–320, and Lint’s editorial note, “Plan of Treaties,” *Adams Papers*, IV, 260–265. Adams’s original draft of the Plan of Treaties, the committee’s report, and the Model Treaty ultimately adopted by Congress on Sept. 17, 1776, can also be found *ibid.*, 265–302. On Adams’s role see also William C. Stinchcombe, “John Adams and the Model Treaty,” in Lawrence S. Kaplan, ed., *The American Revolution and “A Candid World”* (Kent, Ohio, 1977), 69–81, and Lint, “The Law of Nations and the American Revolution,” *ibid.*, III, 111–133.

infancy, are [sic] enough to account for this."¹⁷ Furthermore, on several occasions during these months Adams urged Congress to name Franklin the sole minister to France. He frequently reported to Philadelphia on Franklin's extraordinary reputation with the French; to appoint anyone other than Franklin, Adams advised, would be harmful to the interests of the United States.¹⁸

These evidences of a cooperative spirit between Franklin and Adams should not obscure their discord over one substantive matter. Toward the end of 1778, the two disagreed over the question of urging France to make a greater military commitment. Their clash can be understood in relation to the changing course of the war and alterations in Adams's outlook.

Adams had come to France bubbling with optimism in the wake of America's victory at Saratoga in the fall of 1777. That triumph, coupled with France's entry into the war soon after Adams arrived in Passy, appeared to him to seal Great Britain's doom. Confident that France's action would prompt other European states to assume a belligerent posture toward Britain, Adams predicted that Lord North's government soon would fall and London would open peace talks.¹⁹

His optimism waned during 1778. That summer's solitary Franco-American cooperative endeavor—the campaign to drive the British from Rhode Island—ended in failure, and the North ministry kept its place and posture. Worse, Adams discovered that London planned to make greater use of its Native American allies and loyalist adherents to offset French strength. By early autumn he concluded that the allies were "a great Way" from victory and predicted that the British would not make peace "until they are either driven or starved out" of America.²⁰

In addition, in the late fall of 1778, for the first time, Adams expressed suspicions about French intentions. His outlook on France had been anything but consistent since the outbreak of the war. When he had prepared the draft Plan of Treaties just prior to Congress's vote on the Declaration of

¹⁷ Franklin to Vergennes, Aug. 3, 1780, in John Bigelow, ed., *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, 12 vols. (New York, 1904), VIII, 277; Adams to Samuel Adams, Aug. 7, 1778, *Adams Papers*, VI, 354; Adams to Franklin, Sept. 22, 26, 1778, *ibid.*, VII, 62, 79; Adams to Lovell, Jan. 3, 1779, *ibid.*, 336; *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, II, 347. During his initial mission abroad Adams even found Franklin's flirtations amusing; see Adams to Abigail Adams, Apr. 25, 1778, *Adams Family Correspondence*, III, 17. Franklin "confesses that he is wholly inattentive to the [French] grammar," according to *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, II, 302.

¹⁸ Adams to Samuel Adams, May 21, 1778, *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, IV, 106–108; Adams to Lee, Oct. 10, 1778, *Adams Papers*, VII, 126; Adams to Samuel Adams, Feb. 14, 1779, *ibid.*, 412; Adams to Lovell, Jan. 3, 1779, *ibid.*, 336.

¹⁹ Adams to Lovell, July 26, 1778, *Adams Papers*, VI, 318–319; Adams to Nathanael Greene, Mar. 9, 1777, *ibid.*, V, 105; Adams to Gerry, Nov. 19, 1777, *ibid.*, 331; Adams to Warren, Aug. 4, 1778, *ibid.*, VI, 348–349; Adams to Samuel Cooper, Aug. 12, 1778, *ibid.*, 368; Commissioners to President of Congress, Sept. 17, 1778, *ibid.*, VII, 43.

²⁰ Adams to Samuel Adams, Nov. 27, Dec. 7, 1778, *ibid.*, 234, 256; Adams to Gerry, Nov. 27, 1778, *ibid.*, 236; Adams to Lovell, Nov. 27, Dec. 19, 1778, *ibid.*, 236, 290; Adams to President of Congress, Sept. 20, Dec. 3, 8, 1778, *ibid.*, 57, 247, 268; Adams to Henry, Dec. 8, 1778, *ibid.*, 266; Adams to Ralph Izard, Sept. 25, 1778, *ibid.*, 73.

Independence, he had desired only a commercial connection with France; a military alliance, he feared, would drag the United States into Europe's wars. He did not expect France to insist on a military pact. Trade with the United States, he had said, would strengthen the United States militarily to hold its own against Britain's armed forces; with London distracted and weakened, Versailles could then better realize its foreign policy objectives in Europe. Thus, said Adams in 1776, Franco-American trade should be "ample Compensation to France for Acknowledging our Independence."²¹ When he learned early in 1778 that Franklin, Deane, and Lee had signed treaties of alliance and commerce with France, though he expressed some concern that America's military zeal might wane and that his countrymen might expect France to win the war for them, his optimism outweighed his pessimism, and he warmly embraced the alliance. Adams believed that the accord with France would shorten the war and silence those Americans who longed for reconciliation with Great Britain.²²

During his first months in France, Adams came to see the alliance as important not only for winning the war but also for the postwar security of the United States. "The longer I live in Europe and the more I consider our Affairs," he wrote in mid-1778, "the more important our Alliance with France appears to me." His assessment stemmed from his view of future Anglo-American relations. Since before Independence Adams had consistently rejected the notion that peace would bring a restoration of British-American friendship; instead, he foresaw an "incurable Animosity" between the two nations that would persist for generations. Conflict would arise from the bitterness sown by the war, from border disputes, contention over property claims, Britain's steady loss of immigrants to America, London's insatiable appetite for revenge, and commercial and fishing rivalries. He predicted that Anglo-American trade would languish after the war and that when it was resumed, it would be a fraction of the commerce that had existed during the colonial era. In short, he not only believed that Great Britain would be America's "natural enemy" for years to come, but, as he looked toward peace, he could not "see the Seed of War with any part of the World in [the] future but with Great Britain."²³ Adams concluded that the United States had "the Strongest Reasons to depend upon the Friendship and Alliance of France." He called the alliance a "natural Defence" against British rapacity, "our Bulwark," "a Rock upon which we may safely build," and "the only Foundation on which our Union can rest securely."²⁴

²¹ *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, II, 236, III, 337–338; Adams to Warren, Apr. 16, 1776, May 3 [?], 1777, *Adams Papers*, IV, 122, V, 174; Adams to John Winthrop, June 23, 1776, *ibid.*, IV, 331.

²² Adams to Henry Laurens, July 27, 1778, *Adams Papers*, VI, 323; Adams to Edmé Jacques Genet, July 12, 1778, *ibid.*, 286.

²³ Adams to Warren, Aug. 4, 1778, *Adams Papers*, VI, 348–349; Adams to Samuel Chase, July 1, 1776, *ibid.*, IV, 354; Adams to President of Congress, Aug. 4, 1779, *ibid.*, VIII, 111–112; Adams to Genet, May 17, 1780, in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: With a Life of the Author*, 10 vols. (Boston, 1850–1856), VII, 174–175 (hereafter cited as *Works of Adams*).

²⁴ Adams to Samuel Adams, July 28, 1778, *Adams Papers*, VI, 326; Adams to Warren, Aug.

Adams never looked on the alliance as being in the unilateral interest of the United States. He knew that it served the interests of France as well, and he understood that the objectives of the two nations might not always coincide. He had always understood this. In 1776, he had told Congress that reason and justice seldom determined the actions of nations: "it is interest alone which does it, and it is interest alone which can be trusted." He continued to believe that the alliance was crucial to French interests. Not only did it yield economic benefits, the British enmity compelled Versailles to embrace America. This mutual need for protection solidified the alliance. "The United States . . . will be for Ages, the natural Bulwark of France against the Hostile designs of England . . . and France is the natural Defence of the United States against the rapacious Spirit of Great Britain," Adams wrote.²⁵

Adams persisted in this belief, but as the course of the war changed in 1778 he took a more jaded view of the alliance. When he had believed that the alliance would bring a swift end to the war, he had radiated confidence in it. When his hopes for an early peace vanished during 1778, his concern grew that America's interests might be sacrificed in a protracted war. For the first time, he spoke of the alliance as "a delicate and dangerous Connection." He now expressed a fear that France had come to doubt America's military capability and economic stability; he discerned signs that France treated the United States as a client state, a second-class partner. French officials, he charged, would neither share intelligence on Britain's military plans nor consult on joint military operations. He warned that the French might seek to affect American foreign policy "by Attaching themselves to Persons, Parties, or Measures in America."²⁶

Adams responded in two ways to these concerns. First, he urged his countrymen to fight as if victory hinged solely on the performance of American arms. "Our Bayonets, under God must be our Defence," he told one correspondent. Americans must abandon their "Foppery . . . Avarice . . . Ambition . . . [and] Vanity" and rekindle the virtuous spirit that had prevailed at the outset of the war, he instructed another. To his old acquaintance Benjamin

4, 1778, *ibid.*, 347–348; Adams to President of Congress, Aug. 4, 1779, *ibid.*, VIII, 109, III.

²⁵ [Thomas Jefferson], "Notes on Proceedings in the Continental Congress," June 7–Aug. 1, 1776, in Julian P. Boyd et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 25 vols. to date (Princeton, N. J., 1950–), I, 325. Adams to Vergennes, Mar. 30, May 12, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 140, 165; Adams to Samuel Adams, July 28, 1778, *ibid.*, VI, 326.

²⁶ Adams to Samuel Adams, Nov. 27, 1778, Feb. 14, 1779, *Adams Papers*, VII, 234, VIII, 413; Adams to Gerry, Dec. 5, 1778, *ibid.*, VII, 248; Adams to Roger Sherman, Dec. 6, 1778, *ibid.*, 254. Adams's reference to French politicking in Congress was intuitive, for he was ill informed with regard to the machinations of Conrad Alexandre Gérard, the French minister in Philadelphia. Even Adams would have been shocked had he discovered the full extent of Gérard's activities. The French minister became enmeshed in the Lee-Deane embroglio, had a hand in the recall of Arthur Lee and the removal of Thomas Paine as the secretary to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, and reported to Vergennes that Adams was pro-British and bent on the destruction of the Franco-American alliance. For an account of Gérard's activities see Stinchcombe, *The American Revolution and the French Alliance* (Syracuse, N. Y., 1969), 37–47.

Rush, Adams was explicit: "You must kill, Starve or take them all" in order to bring Great Britain to the peace table. Simultaneously, he sought a second course to bring a swift end to the war. He undertook to persuade Franklin and Lee to press France for a greater naval commitment in American waters.²⁷

At Adams's behest, the commissioners had already urged Vergennes to commit the French navy to convoy American merchant vessels, consign frigates to defend ships of the largest French mercantile firms in the American trade, and attack the British whaling fleet. Adams now wished France to dispatch as many as a dozen additional heavy warships to America. A commitment of this magnitude, he believed, would establish French hegemony in the naval war in America. Lee supported Adams; Franklin balked. Doctor Franklin thought it inappropriate to act so soon after the poor performance by the French fleet off Rhode Island, and he reasoned that even the mildest appeal would be taken at Versailles as an implicit criticism of France's previous conduct. Franklin also feared that pressure of the sort envisioned by Adams might dash the opportunity to secure a badly needed loan from France.²⁸

With Lee's support Adams prevailed, although he moderated the tone of the original draft to appease Franklin. Early in 1779, the commissioners urged France to send to America "a powerfull Fleet sufficient to secure a naval Superiority." Vergennes was not moved. He hoped instead, he said, for a joint Franco-Spanish invasion of England.²⁹

It was under the pressure of concern about the course of the war that Adams's attitude toward Franklin began to change. In December 1778, Adams did what he had never done before: he questioned Franklin's efficacy as a diplomat. He did not then or later suggest that Franklin had deliberately failed to advance America's interests, but he did allege several serious shortcomings

²⁷ Adams to Thomas Cushing, Dec. 8, 1778, *Adams Papers*, VII, 263; Adams to Warren, Feb. 25, 1779, *ibid.*, 429; Adams to Benjamin Rush, Dec. 6, 1778, *ibid.*, 254.

²⁸ Commissioners to Vergennes, Apr. 19, 1778, *ibid.*, VI, 42; Commissioners to Sartine, May 16, 1778, *ibid.*, 123; Franklin and Adams to Sartine, Oct. 30, 1778, *ibid.*, VII, 177-178; Commissioners to President of Congress, Nov. 7, 1778, *ibid.*, 197-198. Also see *ibid.*, 262n. Because the earliest draft of the memorial to Vergennes urging a greater French naval commitment is in the hand of Lee, some confusion exists over the origin of the commissioners' action. Adams's subsequent claim of responsibility for initiating the appeal is supported by the evidence. Adams later wrote that early in the fall of 1778 he raised the issue with several Frenchmen who were close to Vergennes. Encouraged by their response, he presented the matter to Lee and Franklin. "Mr. Lee entered into it with Zeal, Dr. F. with Moderation," Adams recollected a few months later. Adams then asked Lee to draft the memorial. Lee complied, but, believing that his colleague's draft was too brief, Adams prepared a longer document. Both Lee and Franklin objected to the length of Adams's draft. The three then edited the final document, with Franklin penciling in several revisions. The final version was therefore a joint effort, and it is unlikely that the memorial would have been sent had Franklin strenuously objected to its contents. See *ibid.*, 292-293, 303-305; Adams to Genet, Oct. 31, 1778, *ibid.*, 184-185; and Adams to Gerry, Sept. 11, 1779, *ibid.*, VIII, 141-142.

²⁹ Genet to Adams, Oct. 29, 1778, *ibid.*, VII, 174; Adams to marquis de Lafayette, Feb. 21, 1779, *ibid.*, 421; Commissioners to Vergennes, [Dec. 20-Jan. 9], 1778-1779, *ibid.*, 294-309, quotation on 305.

in his performance. In letters to Samuel Adams and James Lovell, and for the first time in his diary, Adams raised points that he would subsequently expand in his *Autobiography*. He portrayed Franklin as a hedonist whose indolence and debauchery adversely affected the day-to-day conduct of business; not only was Franklin inattentive to detail, but he was often too busy or too tired to complete his assignments, and he had little time for his colleagues. In addition, Adams questioned Franklin's style of diplomacy. His colleague, he charged, shied from confrontation; he "loves his Ease, hates to offend." Left to himself, Adams went on, Franklin might not sufficiently press America's case; he might not demand that France do all it could to help its ally. Adams, who had once admired Franklin's understanding of diplomacy, now voiced apprehension that the United States might someday have "Reason to repent" leaving Franklin in charge of its affairs in France. "He may be a Philosopher, for what I know, but he is not a sufficient Statesman."³⁰

Adams's attack may have been tainted by envy born of his new-found conviction that Franklin did not merit the acclaim he had received as a diplomat. Adams wrestled with vanity and ambition throughout his life, and from an early age he privately acknowledged his longing for recognition. Nor can there be the slightest doubt that he was overshadowed by Franklin. The latter was esteemed in France, whereas Adams, by his own assessment, was "a Man of no Consequence—A Cypher." Envious as he may have been, Adams did not yet detest Franklin. Early in 1779 he sprang to Franklin's defense when acquaintances called him an atheist or questioned his abilities. He characterized Franklin as an "honest" and "devoted" public servant, argued that he had "great merit" as a philosopher, writer, and scientist, and allowed that he "certainly was a Great Genius."³¹

In February 1779, two months after changes in Adams's attitude began to appear, official word of Franklin's appointment as United States minister to France reached Passy. The communiqué said nothing of Adams. He waited

³⁰ Adams to Samuel Adams, Dec. 7, 1778, *ibid.*, 256; Adams to Lovell, Feb. 20, 1779, *ibid.*, 420; Adams to Thomas McKean, Sept. 20, 1779, *ibid.*, VIII, 162; *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, II, 367, 391, IV, 118–120. For an excellent appraisal of Franklin's style see Gerald Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin and American Foreign Policy* (Chicago, 1954), 154–166. Franklin was the first to admit his incompetence in certain areas. He told Adams: "I find myself too little acquainted with Mercantile Business to be a Match for these People, which makes me more and more desire to see Consuls appointed in the Ports, who might take it off my Hands." On the eve of Adams's return to America in 1779, Franklin asked him to urge Congress to remove commercial responsibilities from his duties. Thus, when Adams brought the matter to the attention of Congress—he told Congress that because of Franklin's lack of experience in business endeavors too many commercial decisions were made by "busy People who insinuate themselves into his Confidence"—his actions were hardly treacherous. See Franklin to Adams, June 5, 1779, *Adams Papers*, VIII, 73, and Adams to McKean, Sept. 20, 1779, *ibid.*, 162.

³¹ *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, II, 302, 347, 351–352, 367, 391–392; Adams to Samuel Adams, May 21, 1778, *ibid.*, IV, 106–108. On Adams's youthful ambition and desire for greatness see *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, I, 7, 8, 23; Adams to Jonathan Sewall, Feb. 1760, *Adams Papers*, I, 41–42; and Ferling, *Adams*, 18–38.

several weeks for orders, and when none came he presumed that Congress simply expected him to return home. Displaced, Adams put his affairs in order and left Paris in a foul mood. He had not expected to be named minister but had hoped that he might be sent to Holland, Austria, Prussia, or even Tuscany. Having hazarded the ocean crossing, endured a twelve-month separation from his wife and three children, and served in an honest and trustworthy manner, he believed he deserved better from his country. Working himself into a rage, he stormed that he had been treated badly by Congress. He wondered who had been responsible. As he waited first at Nantes and then at Lorient for the vessel that would carry him home, his anger rose, and so did his suspicion. He then wondered whether Franklin had sought to prevent his sailing, lest he "should tell some dangerous Truths" in Philadelphia.³² But this was a fleeting thought. In fact, during his several weeks' wait on the French coast, Adams assisted Franklin in handling problems that arose regarding American prisoners and seamen.³³

Adams landed in Boston early in August. He was home only two months when Congress asked him to return to Europe as minister plenipotentiary to negotiate treaties of peace and commerce with Britain. Adams accepted immediately, recrossed the Atlantic, and, after a hard journey, reached Paris in February 1780.³⁴

Adams began his second mission more convinced than ever that a greater French commitment was necessary to win the war. Even before leaving France in 1779, he had privately urged Versailles to dispatch a larger navy and to commit a 5,000-man army as well.³⁵ His call for troops likely was prompted by discouraging news from the war front, perhaps by news of the British seizure of Savannah just after Christmas in 1778. Signs of danger he observed during his brief stay in Massachusetts increased his concern.

Inflation was rampant, labor was scarce, the number of farm animals had shrunk, men were away at war and unable to tend their farms, and food was sometimes scarce. In addition, shortages of coats and blankets hampered recruiting, while economic instability, according to the Massachusetts government, had "shut up our Graneries, discouraged Husbandry and Commerce & starved our Sea Ports."³⁶ Nor was the news from the front comforting. The only major Franco-American military initiative during 1779—an attempt to retake Savannah—ended in failure, as did a French effort to control the

³² Adams to Abigail Adams, Dec. 30, 1778, Jan. 18, Feb. 13, 20, 28, 1779, *Adams Family Correspondence*, III, 142, 149, 169, 175, 181; Adams to President of Congress, Feb. 27, 1779, *Adams Papers*, VII, 430; Adams to Lee, June 9, 1779, *ibid.*, VIII, 82; *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, II, 369.

³³ Adams to Franklin, Mar. 24, 31, Apr. 13, May 14, 1779, *Adams Papers*, VIII, 14–15, 19–20, 32–34, 61–62. See also Taylor, "Introduction," *ibid.*, VII, xvii.

³⁴ Adams's voyage is recounted in *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, II, 402–404, IV, 191–194. His journey from Ferrol to Paris is chronicled *ibid.*, II, 415–435, IV, 213–240.

³⁵ Adams to Lafayette, Feb. 21, 1779, *Adams Papers*, VII, 421; *ibid.*, VIII, 11n.

³⁶ Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York, 1976), 140–143; "Instructions to Elbridge Gerry and Samuel Osgood from the State of Massachusetts," Jan. [?], 1780, Elbridge Gerry Papers, MHS.

English Channel, preparatory to an invasion of England. Adams seemed almost surprised to find that morale in New England remained high, but he knew it would be difficult to sustain enthusiasm in a stalemated war. While in Massachusetts he told friends what had to be done. France and Spain (which had entered the war that spring) must be persuaded that the struggle was to be won in North America. Forget Gibraltar, forget Ireland, forget the invasion of Great Britain! Only the destruction of the British army in America and the defeat of the British navy in American waters would bring London to make peace.³⁷

Adams's apprehension receded on his return to Paris, when he learned that the French had decided to pursue the war with renewed vigor. Naval reinforcements were being sent to America, along with an army of 5,500 men.³⁸ Adams was overjoyed. He envisioned cooperative ventures between the French navy and the Franco-American armies. He believed that the display of French resolve would stimulate the maritime powers in Europe to act against Britain. He was hopeful that Spain might soon open trade with the United States. He did not think peace was imminent, but he was confident that the coming campaign would be more successful than its predecessor. Victories were within sight, he thought, and they would lead to negotiations with Britain, the object of his mission.³⁹ During the early months of 1780, Adams's optimism reached its highest point since the victory at Saratoga thirty months earlier.

Even so, his second mission began on a discordant note. Three days after he reached the French capital, he met with Vergennes to request consent to inform the British ministry of his powers to engage in peace negotiations. He likely took this step because he believed that the dispatch of French troops to America had created deep divisions in British public opinion that he wished to exploit in order to strengthen the peace faction and perhaps topple the ministry. What Adams perceived as a bold positive step frightened Vergennes, who feared that the proposal would lead Whitehall to conclude that the allies were desperate for peace. He instructed Adams to publish a statement merely indicating that he had been sent to conduct "the future pacification." Adams complied.⁴⁰ Next, Adams requested a French passport for travel to the Netherlands to seek a loan for the United States. Vergennes refused the request, offering what Adams thought was an unconvincing excuse.⁴¹

³⁷ Adams to Benjamin Rush, Sept. 19, 1779, *Adams Papers*, VIII, 153.

³⁸ Adams to Jenings, Feb. 25, 1780, *ibid.*, 364; Adams to Samuel Adams, Feb. 23, *ibid.*, 353; Adams to Cooper, Feb. 23, 1780, *ibid.*, 355; Adams to Tristram Dalton, Feb. 23, 1780, *ibid.*, 356.

³⁹ Adams to William Carmichael, Apr. 8, May 12, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 144–146; Adams to Genet, Apr. 29, 1780, *ibid.*, 155–157; Adams to Genet, May 9, 1780, *ibid.*, 160–161.

⁴⁰ Adams to Vergennes, Feb. 12, 19, 1780, *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, IV, 243–245, 250–251; Vergennes to Adams, Feb. 15, 1780, *ibid.*, 245; Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (Bloomington, Ind., 1935), 176–177; Adams to President of Congress, Feb. 20, 27, 1780, *Adams Papers*, VIII, 346, 372; Adams to Lovell, Jan. 29, 1780, reel 96, AFP Microfilm; Adams to Jenings, Apr. 26, 1780, reel 351, *ibid.*

⁴¹ *Adams Papers*, VIII, 334n; Adams to Gerry, Oct. 18, 1779, *ibid.*, 213; Hutson,

During the spring of 1780, Adams grew steadily more pessimistic about the war. Though Rochambeau and his army sailed for North America, French naval reinforcements went to the West Indies, not to the United States. Adams immediately—and correctly—predicted that generals Washington and Rochambeau, now certain to be without a naval arm, would remain idle for still another summer. He railed that this would be the third campaign since the conclusion of the French alliance and that, like each time before, it would be indecisive.⁴²

Adams's anxiety was exacerbated by bad news from the European theater and from home. In January a British fleet under Admiral George Rodney scored a spectacular victory over the Spanish fleet blockading Gibraltar; alarm spread in Paris over whether Spain would remain a belligerent. By mid-spring, moreover, Adams knew that a large British invasion force under Sir Henry Clinton had landed near Charleston, South Carolina; he spoke of the "great danger" to America should the city be lost. Within a few weeks his worst fears were confirmed. The British took Charleston; with it they captured 5,000 American soldiers (including 2,000 Continental regulars) and 300 pieces of artillery—"a dreadful Wound," Adams wrote, adding that the defeat had "totally annihilated" American prestige in some European capitals.⁴³ Through informants Adams also learned that Clinton's success in Charleston had stimulated confidence in London that the British victory heralded the "sure reduction of all the southern Colonies, & gives . . . a death blow to the rebellion." A London source told Adams that the war party once again had become the majority party. A dejected Adams sent home the news that Britain's recent victory had led the ministry "to think of nothing but unconditional submission" by America. A "speedy peace," he added, "is not at present . . . in view."⁴⁴ The ebullience he had radiated in February disappeared by late spring.

Adams and Diplomacy, 66; Ford, ed., *JCC*, XV, 1196–1198, 1210–1211. Congress named Laurens as its representative to raise a Dutch loan on Oct. 26, 1779; when Laurens was compelled to postpone his departure for the Netherlands, Congress placed Dutch affairs temporarily in Adams's hands on June 15, 1780. See *ibid.*, XVII, 534–537.

⁴² Adams to President of Congress, Mar. 12, Apr. 18, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 131–132, 149–151; Adams to Vergennes, July 13, 1780, *ibid.*, 219–220; Adams to Franklin, Oct. 14, 1780, *ibid.*, 316; Adams to John Jay, reel 96, AFP Microfilm; Adams to Genet, June 1, 1780, *ibid.*

⁴³ Jonathan R. Dull, *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study of Arms and Diplomacy, 1774–1787* (Princeton, N. J., 1975), 178–181; Adams to Genet, May 9, 1780, reel 96, AFP Microfilm; Adams to James Wilson, June 24, 1780, *ibid.*; Adams to Joshua Johnson, July 1, 1780, *ibid.*; Adams to Jennings, July 4, 1780, *ibid.*; Adams to Lee, Dec. 6, 1780, reel 102, *ibid.* "Totally annihilated" is in the first of two Adams to Lee letters entered in the Letterbook under Dec. 6, 1780. On the course of the war throughout 1780 and early 1781 see Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763–1789* (New York, 1971), 352–376, and Marshall Smelser, *The Winning of Independence* (Chicago, 1972), 268–296.

⁴⁴ Thomas Digges to Adams, June 29, 1780, reel 352, AFP Microfilm; Adams to President of Congress, July 23, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 235; Adams to William Lee, July 20, 1780, *ibid.*, 232.

Allied inaction and British success raised anew the specter of the collapse of morale in America and France. Adams knew that victory in a long, stalemated war would go to the side with the greatest staying power. For the first time, doubtless recollecting the hardships he had found in Massachusetts in 1779, he worried about America's ability to persevere. He expressed concern that the power of "artful" men in America who had supported the war only for the purpose of reconciliation with Great Britain might increase. His fears mounted when he heard from Arthur Lee, then in New England, of "much discontent" in the Continental Army and of America's perilous economic condition: Lee warned that the new nation might be compelled by "inevitable necessity to an accommodation" short of Independence.⁴⁵

Adams wrote home urging greater sacrifices. The British army must be expelled from North America before the ministry would make peace, he told Congress. He admonished his countrymen to resurrect the virtues that had prevailed in the first months of the war and to wage the war with vigor and spirit. "Fighting is the thing. Fighting will do the business. Defeats will prove the way to victories. Patience! Patience!" He emphasized that the naval arm was most crucial, and he urged that more privateers be dispatched, for he believed that the destruction of Britain's commerce was the surest way to revive the peace movement in England.⁴⁶

These ideas took shape alongside a revival of Adams's anxieties concerning America's partnership with France. While he never wavered in his embrace of the alliance, for the first time he told Congress that he believed the French had begun to tire of the war. The conflict "has been attended with too much loss and danger to France." He did not believe that France would forsake the United States, for abandonment would likely force America back into the arms of Britain, but by the spring of 1780 he worried that France might press the United States to accept a truce. An armistice, Adams counseled, would be disastrous: "We are in a safer way at war. . . . If we go out of it we may be lost." He understood that once either France or his own weary, troubled nation stopped fighting, it would be extremely difficult for either to renew hostilities. Moreover, after a suitable interval Great Britain might attack an isolated America. It was Adams's consistent position that America must not only seek to revive the military spirit that had existed before Saratoga but must fight as it had then—as if it had no ally.⁴⁷

Adams's suspicions concerning French war weariness were justified. At the very moment that he expressed his apprehension, Vergennes privately

⁴⁵ Adams to Cooper, Feb. 28, 1780, *Adams Papers*, VIII, 374–375; Lee to Adams, Sept. 10, 28, 1780, Letterbook copy, reel 352, AFP Microfilm.

⁴⁶ Adams to President of Congress, Sept. 16, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 258; Adams to Digges, Oct. 14, 1780, *ibid.*, 315; Adams to Samuel Adams, Sept. 20, 1780, reel 102, AFP Microfilm; Adams to Charles William Dumas, Sept. 6, 1780, *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Adams to President of Congress, Apr. 18, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 151–152; Adams to Henry Knox, Feb. 28, 1780, *Adams Papers*, VIII, 375; Adams to Samuel Adams, Feb. 28, 1780, *ibid.*, 374; Adams to William Carmichael, Apr. 8, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 146.

informed his monarch that “we have need of peace.” When the projected Franco-Spanish invasion of England failed, Vergennes knew that his country faced a struggle of attrition, the very kind that had proven disastrous for France during the Seven Years’ War. During the spring, about the time he forbade Adams to approach London, he secretly acknowledged that France’s financial condition had grown “truly alarming.” He was also coming under pressure to end the war from the queen, from Jacques Necker, director general of finances, who feared insolvency, from the head of the French cabinet, and from the secretary of state for the navy. Vergennes also knew that Spain had been engaged in supposedly secret negotiations with London since early in the year, and he was informed by his ambassador in Madrid that Spain was capable of only one more campaign. Moreover, he had become certain—as Adams had said—that America’s military capabilities had collapsed and that France would have to bear an even heavier load. Through Lafayette, Vergennes had scolded Washington on “the inactivity of that American Army who before the alliance had distinguished themselves by their spirit of enterprise.” Yet Washington’s army of 15,000 men, which according to the French minister to the United States consumed in three months as many livres as a French army of 60,000 in Europe would have required, continued to sit outside New York City. After his minister also reported both a “cooling of all martial ardor among the [American] people” and the economic plight of the new nation, Vergennes confided to a friend that he felt “only a feeble confidence in the energy of the United States.”⁴⁸

Adams was unaware of the sentiments expressed behind closed doors at Versailles, although he knew Vergennes was not pleased. He also knew that certain of America’s postwar ambitions had run afoul of its ally’s objectives. He was aware, for instance, that Vergennes, ostensibly to make peace talks more attractive to London and to induce Spain to enter the war, had applied pressure to the American Congress to reduce its territorial ambitions in Canada and the West and to renounce claims to the Newfoundland fisheries.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Edward S. Corwin, *French Policy and the American Alliance of 1778* (Princeton, N. J., 1916), 284; Richard B. Morris, *The Peacemakers: The Great Powers and American Independence* (New York, 1965), 90; Orville T. Murphy, *Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes: French Diplomacy in the Age of Revolution, 1719–1787* (Albany, N. Y., 1982), 324, 331, 389, 397; Murphy, “The View from Versailles: Charles Gravier Comte de Vergennes’s Perceptions of the American Revolution,” in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Diplomacy and Revolution: The Franco-American Alliance of 1778* (Charlottesville, Va., 1981), 133, 135–136, 138, 140–142; Dull, *French Navy and American Independence*, 197. For details on French military expenditures see Lee Kennett, *The French Forces in America, 1780–1783* (Westport, Conn., 1977), 64–75.

⁴⁹ On Sept. 29, 1779, Congress sent Adams instructions concerning what it regarded as the desirable objects that he should seek in the eventual peace treaty. After a year’s residence in France, and as the author of the Model Treaty, he would have had little difficulty in determining how France had used its influence to limit America’s objectives. The instructions to Adams are in Ford, ed., *JCC*, XIV, 957–960. See also Adams to Samuel Huntington, Apr. 18, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 151; W. J. Eccles, “The French Alliance and the American Victory,” in Ferling, ed., *The World Turned Upside Down: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (Westport, Conn., 1988),

By the summer of 1780, Adams concluded that France would remain at war only so long as needed to attain British recognition of American Independence. France would not fight to secure America's territorial and economic objectives. Indeed, a weak postwar United States would best serve the ends of France, for America would be the more reliant on its European ally. More than ever, Adams was convinced that the object of Vergennes's policy was "to make me [and the United States] his dependant." Smarting because he had been prevented from seeking a Dutch loan and been confined to Paris "wholly against my will, by the Count de Vergennes himself," Adams concluded that the design of France was to "Keep us poor. Depress Us. Keep Us weak. Make Us feel our Obligations. Impress our Minds with a Sense of Gratitude."⁵⁰

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that within a few months of his return to France, Adams, as never before, feared for the success of the Revolution. To the worries aroused by what he regarded as France's myopic military policies and the steady drumbeat of bad news from home, he added anxiety about French intentions. His apprehension intensified when he learned that the Russian czarina, Catherine II, had brought Sweden and Denmark into a League of Armed Neutrality to protect the shipping of the three neutral nations. Vergennes and the American Congress welcomed the development, believing that Great Britain would be the principal loser. Adams saw matters differently. The catalyst for the league had been Spain's seizure of several Danish, Dutch, and Russian vessels in January and February. This act prompted Adams to fret that pressure from the league might cause Spain to reconsider its belligerency and that if Spain dropped out of the war, Britain might regain naval supremacy. Even more troubling was the fact that Russia was known to favor a truce, followed by mediation by the several European nations; Russia did not formally propose a truce until December 1780, but Europe buzzed that spring with rumors of Catherine's intentions.⁵¹

Adams feared, correctly, that Vergennes would welcome a Russian mediation proposal.⁵² In a mediated settlement the major territorial issues might be

161–162; Morris, *Peacemakers*, 219–220; Lint, "Preparing for Peace: The Objectives of the United States, France, and Spain in the War of the American Revolution," in Hoffman and Albert, eds., *Peace and the Peacemakers*, 36–38; and Stinchcombe, *American Revolution and the French Alliance*, 63–65.

⁵⁰ Adams to Abigail Adams, Dec. 18, 1780, *Adams Family Correspondence*, IV, 35; *Boston Patriot*, May 18, 1811, reprinted in *Works of Adams*, I, 655; *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, II, 446. Adams's assessment was not without merit. Lint writes that France not only "wished to limit American objectives in order to bring them into line with her own" but "wished . . . to assure American dependence on French support"; Lint, "Preparing for Peace," 33, 36.

⁵¹ Morris, *Peacemakers*, 60, 165; Adams to Jenings, Nov. 7, 1780, reel 102, AFP Microfilm; Adams to Dana, Mar. 15, 1781, *ibid*.

⁵² Joint mediation offered Vergennes "a dignified alternative to self-abasement" inherent in simply quitting the war and abandoning his ally, according to Morris, *Peacemakers*, 92. Stinchcombe reaches substantially the same conclusion; Vergennes "desperately sought a method to end the conflict on honorable terms for France, if not

resolved on the basis of *uti possidetis* (each belligerent retaining that which it possessed at the moment of the armistice). If mediation occurred at this juncture, the United States would be denied Canada, Nova Scotia, the fisheries, upper Maine, its western claims, Georgia, the Carolinas, and portions of New York. Adams also understood the danger his country faced should its fate be left to a European conference dominated by an ally that wished to end the war and monarchical neutrals that could hardly be expected to sympathize with revolutionary republicans. Thus it was not surprising that he declared: "I do not dread a continuance of war; I should dread a truce ten times more."⁵³

He chose this moment of extraordinary peril to reopen for Vergennes's consideration the issues of French military strategy and his desire to inform Great Britain officially that he, John Adams, possessed the power to enter into peace negotiations. Why did Adams press these matters? It has been argued that he acted out of envy of Franklin, that he longed for the adulation that his colleague enjoyed; driven by egotism, by jealousy toward Franklin, who was far better known and loved by the French, Adams, the "sport of passions," gambled that he could sway Vergennes, eclipse his rival, and emerge as the hero of American statesmanship.⁵⁴ This interpretation is based on two misconceptions. Although by mid-1780 Adams questioned the basis for Franklin's repute in France, suspected his abilities, and thought him too deferential toward Vergennes, he did not yet loathe Franklin. Moreover, Adams, and Adams alone, possessed the power to negotiate the peace treaty; he had no reason to be afraid, and there is no evidence that he feared, that Franklin would overshadow him in the eventual negotiations.

Several factors induced Adams to press his ideas on Vergennes. He had been in communication with Vergennes throughout the spring, passing along revelations from his sources in London, news on conditions in the United States, and information that he culled from British and American newspapers.⁵⁵ Vergennes seldom responded to this intelligence. On June 16, however, he summoned Adams to Versailles to discuss a monetary policy recently enacted by Congress; a few days later he wrote Adams about the same subject.⁵⁶

Vergennes's letter reached Adams just as word arrived in Paris of recent rioting in London. The Gordon Riots rocked the city between June 2 and 11, resulting in enormous property damage and alarm in Britain's ruling elite. The disturbances occurred immediately following a bruising House of Commons debate on a resolution to limit the monarch's powers and—by implication, at least in the minds of some members of Parliament—to end the war in America. Adams concluded that the timing could not be better to announce

for the United States" (*American Revolution and the French Alliance*, 154).

⁵³ Morris, *Peacemakers*, 149–150, 188; Adams to Dumas, Oct. 4, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 263–264.

⁵⁴ Hutson, *Adams and Diplomacy*, 37.

⁵⁵ Adams to Vergennes, Apr. 25, May 12, 19, June 16, July 2, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 154, 164–166, 176–177, 187, 214; Vergennes to Adams, June 21, 1780, *ibid.*, 192.

⁵⁶ *Boston Patriot*, May 15, 1811, reprinted in *Works of Adams*, I, 649–651; Vergennes to Adams, June 21, 1780, *ibid.*, VII, 192.

the presence of an American peace negotiator, for the news might enhance the strength of the English reformers and peace advocates.⁵⁷ Furthermore, at virtually this same moment Adams heard from Elbridge Gerry, a trusted friend in Massachusetts, that Washington and Rochambeau were unlikely to take the offensive until France augmented its naval commitment. Finally, Adams had long believed that Vergennes could have—and should have—been pushed to adopt more aggressive military measures, policies planned with the allies. Adams doubtless recollected how he had brought Lee and Franklin in 1778 to press on Vergennes the need to send a greater fleet to America; although Vergennes declined, in the six months that followed—as Adams knew—France had in fact doubled the number of its ships of the line posted in the Caribbean. Perhaps this lesson led Adams in mid-1780 to tell Congress that “if our affairs had been urged with . . . skill and industry” and according to a “well-digested plan,” the United States would already “have been blessed with peace.”⁵⁸ Adams was convinced that a desperate moment had arrived; in July 1780 he believed that the fate of the Revolution hung in the balance.

Encouraged by Vergennes’s initiative in contacting him, not Franklin, on the fiscal issue, Adams seized the opportunity and dispatched several letters to the foreign minister. Adams offered intelligence demonstrating that the North ministry had already begun to plan its campaign for the following year with intent to enlarge the army in America. He insisted that Britain would not consider peace until its armies had been decisively defeated in America. He added that the allied armies could seize the offensive only with ample French naval support. He asserted that allied activity would fatally weaken the war faction in London; he stressed that a public announcement of his peace commission would strengthen the foes of the war in England. He went on to argue that either the allied seizure of New York City or the defeat of the British army in the South would compel Britain to make peace, although neither objective could be accomplished unless the allied armies acted in concert with the French navy. Adams stressed his commitment to the French alliance, which he termed a “rock of defense” for the United States. “I shall make no separate peace. . . . Our alliance with France is an honor and a security which have ever been near to my heart,” he reiterated. But Adams issued a warning. Even though his countrymen had “great confidence in the sincerity of France,”

⁵⁷ Alan Valentine, *Lord North*, 2 vols. (Norman, Okla., 1967), II, 208–218; Ian R. Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvill, and Reform: The Parliamentary Reform Movement in British Politics, 1760–1785* (London, 1962), 75–101; Adams to Jefferson, June 29, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 211. Adams understood that the cause of the riots was unrelated to the war, but he predicted that “it will cost two millions Sterling, to indemnify the Sufferers. this must be added to all the other Expences of the War.” See Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, June 23, 1780, *Warren-Adams Letters: Being Chiefly a Correspondence among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren*, 2 vols., MHS, *Collections* (Boston, 1917, 1923), II, 206.

⁵⁸ Gerry to Adams, May 5, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 188; Adams to Huntington, June 29, 1780, *ibid.*, 208–210; Dull, *French Navy and American Independence*, 112, 159–160.

should they ever conclude that Versailles was not doing all it could to win the war the result would be most “melancholy,” because it would strengthen those who longed for reconciliation with Britain.⁵⁹

Following Adams’s letter of July 27, Vergennes broke off the dialogue. He flayed Adams for “the animadversion which you have thought it your duty to make,” brusquely adding that henceforth he would deal solely with Franklin. In fact, Vergennes was now inclined to go much further. His first thought was to urge Congress to recall Adams and vest Franklin with responsibility as the American peace negotiator. Ultimately, however, Vergennes directed his minister in Philadelphia, chevalier de La Luzerne, to persuade Congress to require Adams to act according to the “advice and opinion” of the French foreign minister.⁶⁰ Vergennes used Franklin to make La Luzerne’s task less difficult. He passed on Adams’s correspondence to Franklin with the request that it be transmitted to Congress. Franklin not only complied; he apologized to Vergennes for Adams’s “Indiscretion” and told Congress that “Mr. Adams has given Offence to the Court here.” Franklin also claimed that Adams’s conduct had fostered the notion “lately showing itself in Paris” that the United States sought reconciliation with Britain.⁶¹

Vergennes disliked Adams, but more than personality factors dictated his course. Since 1779 Vergennes had been led by obviously erroneous reports sent by the first French minister to the United States, Conrad Alexandre Gérard, to believe that Adams, together with such influential congressmen as Samuel Adams and Richard Henry Lee, was secretly pro-British. In addition, by 1780 Vergennes knew that Adams had fathomed the postwar aims of France. He also understood that Adams was a fiercely independent man who would accept nothing less than the peace terms he had been instructed by Congress to secure, even if that meant pursuing this war into a dark, distant future.⁶² To Vergennes, who hoped to end the war quickly on terms satisfactory to France, Adams was more than a nuisance. He constituted a danger. The problem was how to bring him under control.

Vergennes had already stopped Adams from going to the Netherlands. Although he never divulged his motives to Adams, it now is clear that he

⁵⁹ Adams to Vergennes, May 12, July 13, 17, 21, 26, 27, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 165, 218–227, 228–230, 233, 241–243, I, 322–327.

⁶⁰ Vergennes to Adams, July 29, 1780, *ibid.*, VII, 243. Congress’s instructions were that Adams was “to undertake nothing in the negotiations for peace or truce without their [France’s] knowledge and concurrence; and ultimately to govern yourself by their advice and opinion.” See Ford, ed., *JCC*, XX, 651. For Vergennes’s directions to La Luzerne and the envoy’s subsequent activities see Stinchcombe, *American Revolution and the French Alliance*, 155–158.

⁶¹ Franklin to Vergennes, Aug. 3, 1780, in A. H. Smyth, ed. *Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, 10 vols. (New York, 1905–1907), VIII, 123–124; Franklin to President of Congress, Aug. 9, 1780, *ibid.*, 126–128. Franklin’s comment that some in Paris believed that America sought reconciliation with Great Britain is quoted in Stourzh, *Franklin and American Foreign Policy*, 157.

⁶² Stinchcombe, *American Revolution and the French Alliance*, 155; Hutson, *Adams and Diplomacy*, 57.

feared that Adams might succeed at The Hague; he worried that Dutch economic assistance to the United States would spark an Anglo-Dutch war denying France much needed naval stores and munitions.⁶³ Franklin, too, had sought to discourage Adams, for quite a different reason. Franklin feared that importuning assistance in European capitals would strengthen the impression that the United States was weak and desperate. In 1778–1779 Adams had agreed with Franklin, but the military, economic, and diplomatic perils of 1780 altered his thinking. Not only did the United States require assistance, but more than ever Adams now believed that it was essential that “something . . . be done to render us less dependent on France.” Vergennes blocked Adams’s Dutch enterprise from February until July, then relented. Adams said later that Vergennes finally issued his passport “to get rid of me,” though in reality the foreign minister could ill afford interminably to frustrate Congress’s desire—voted nine months earlier—to dispatch an emissary to Holland to raise a loan.⁶⁴

Adams left Paris for Amsterdam on July 27. He returned to France only once during the next twenty-seven months: in mid-summer 1781 Vergennes summoned him for consultation on an Austrian-Russian mediation proposal, which London ultimately rebuffed. He remained in Paris for barely two weeks and did not return until peace negotiations with Great Britain officially commenced in the autumn of 1782.

Sometime during the summer of 1781, a year or more after he departed for Holland, Adams learned from his wife and friends in America that Franklin had criticized his conduct in pressing Vergennes to arrange greater cooperation between the Franco-American armed forces. Congressman Lovell informed Abigail Adams of Franklin’s “most unkind and stabbing” communiqué to Congress. She in turn told her husband that he had been maligned in Congress by “a set of wicked unprincipled debauched wretches”; one of his assailants, she added, was “the old Deceiver” Franklin. At the same moment that he learned of Franklin’s conduct, Adams heard from Lovell that Vergennes had sought to have him removed as the United States peace commissioner. Soon after, a letter to Adams from Franklin arrived in Amsterdam bearing word that Congress had created a commission to negotiate the peace settlement with Great Britain. Adams would no longer be the sole American plenipotentiary; he was to be joined by John Jay, Henry Laurens, Thomas

⁶³ Murphy, *Charles Gravier*, 280–288. Vergennes preferred that Congress seek aid from the Spanish court, for to raise a loan in Madrid would require United States’ territorial concessions on its southwestern boundary to Spain. Vergennes hoped not only for a strong postwar Spanish ally but that a United States surrounded by Spain to the south and west and Great Britain to the north and west would of necessity remain dependent on France. See Eccles, “French Alliance,” 159–160, and William Emmett O’Donnell, *The Chevalier De La Luzerne: French Minister to the United States, 1779–1784* (Bruges, Belg., 1938), 106–107, 160–161.

⁶⁴ Hutson, *Adams and Diplomacy*, 73; Franklin to Huntington, Aug. 9, 1780, Smyth, ed., *Writings of Franklin*, VIII, 128; *Boston Patriot*, May 15, 1811, reprinted in *Works of Adams*, I, 654.

Jefferson, and Franklin.⁶⁵ Vergennes had won. Through La Luzerne, he had broadcast his abhorrence of Adams. Congress had listened. Many southern and mid-Atlantic congressmen had come to believe it unwise to vest their interests solely in the hands of a New Englander. Fear was at work as well. America's gloomy military and economic prospects induced Congress to vest Vergennes—who had pledged his “unequivocal assurances” to fight until Independence was recognized—with power to control the American peace commissioners. The envoys were instructed by Congress to “undertake nothing in the negotiations for peace or truce without their [France's] knowledge and concurrence; and ultimately to govern yourselves by their advice and opinion.”⁶⁶

It was only then that Adams turned his full fury on Franklin. The notion that he had been obsessed by hatred for Franklin from the moment he arrived in Passy in 1778 is inaccurate. Even in the wake of his exchange with Vergennes in mid-1780, Adams made no mention of Franklin in his diary, although it was characteristic of him to excoriate his enemies repeatedly in the privacy of his journal; nor does his correspondence before late 1781 contain attacks on Franklin. The response of his wife, who was aware of his private sentiments, is also revealing. Abigail Adams's first reaction on learning of

⁶⁵ Lovell to Abigail Adams, July 13, 1781, *Adams Family Correspondence*, IV, 173; Abigail Adams to Adams, Oct. 21, 1781, *ibid.*, 230; Richard Cranch to Adams, July 16, 1781, *ibid.*, 179; Lovell to Adams, June 21, 1781, in Paul H. Smith et al., eds., *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789*, 20 vols. to date (Washington, D. C., 1976–), XVII, 339–340. In Oct. 1780 Franklin informed Adams that he had forwarded the Adams-Vergennes correspondence of May–July to Congress, although he did not mention that he had included remarks that were critical of his fellow diplomat. On receipt of Franklin's letter, Adams immediately sent his copies of his correspondence with Vergennes to the Congress. See Franklin to Adams, Oct. 8, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 317, and Adams to Franklin, Nov. 30, 1780, *ibid.*, 337.

⁶⁶ Stinchcombe, *American Revolution and the French Alliance*, 155–169, quotation on 157; Ford, ed., *JCC*, XX, 651; Jack N. Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics: An Interpretive History of the Continental Congress* (New York, 1979), 255–274. In Aug., soon after learning that he had been deprived of his high and singular status, Adams fell seriously ill. Two scholars have argued that he suffered a nervous breakdown. See Shaw, *Character of Adams*, 151, and Hutson, *Adams and Diplomacy*, 98. Adams's Dutch physicians believed that he was suffering from malaria, not an uncommon malady in Amsterdam; only a few weeks earlier, Adams's 11-year-old son, Charles, who had accompanied his father to Europe, had been stricken with a malady also diagnosed as malaria. During the next two years Adams complained that his 1781 illness had left him with enduring lameness, chills, lethargy, weakness, skin disorders, tumors or boils, and some memory loss. Adams's catalogue of lingering ills should cause historians to treat the nervous breakdown theory with extreme caution. On Adams's illness and its long-term effects see Adams to Abigail Adams, Oct. 9, Dec. 2, 1781, *Adams Family Correspondence*, IV, 224, 249; John Thaxter to Adams, Apr. 20, 1782, *ibid.*, 312; Adams to President of Congress, Oct. 15, 1781, *Works of Adams*, VII, 471; Adams to Jennings, Dec. 26, 1781, reel 102, AFP Microfilm; Adams to Dana, Mar. 18, Apr. 28, 1782, reels 102, 107, *ibid.*; Adams to Dumas, Oct. 16, 1781, reel 102, *ibid.*; Adams to Abigail Adams, Apr. 16, May 20, 1783, reel 360, *ibid.*; and Adams to James Warren, Apr. 9, 1783, *Warren-Adams Letters*, II, 206.

Franklin's letter to Congress was one of surprise; she had "always supposed him [Franklin] Friendly to my [husband]." ⁶⁷

When Lovell transmitted Franklin's letter, he told Adams that "the truth in this case lies not at the bottom of a deep well." ⁶⁸ Adams saw matters in the same light. For the first time he came to believe that Vergennes and Franklin had acted in concert to "demolish me," to "crush me." He was convinced that Vergennes wished to rid himself of a truly independent American envoy and that Franklin had acted in the hope of monopolizing American diplomacy. He spoke now of Franklin's treachery, deceit, and malevolence. Franklin, he alleged, was "a willing auxiliary" of Vergennes; Franklin's tactics, he added, had "ever been to Sweep Europe clear of every Minister, that he might have a clear unrivaled Stage." Franklin, he said, had conspired to "get possession of [my] commission for peace." ⁶⁹ So deep was Adams's bitterness that when he returned to Paris in October 1782 to join the peace negotiations he agreed to visit Franklin only after a friend persuaded him that he must do so to prevent the British from learning of divisions among the negotiators. Adams never forgave Franklin. Within hours of learning of his demise in 1790, Adams told a friend that he could "reconcile [Franklin's] conduct in public affairs neither to the character of an honest man, nor to that of a man of sense." ⁷⁰

In the difficult months that followed Adams's move to the Netherlands in mid-1780, events appeared to sustain his assessment of the military situation. The news from home worsened. General Horatio Gates suffered a humiliating defeat at Camden in August. The next few weeks brought word of Benedict Arnold's treason, of mutinies in the Continental Army, of the inactivity of Rochambeau and Washington throughout the summer. Moreover, just as Adams had predicted, the French fleet under chevalier de Ternay sat anchored at Newport. Adams's close friends, Gerry, Richard Cranch, and Benjamin Rush sent pessimistic tidings from home. William Tudor, his former law clerk, reported that "the People are grumbling" and went on to say that should "the next campaign end as despicably as the present has, I dread the Effect."

⁶⁷ Abigail Adams to Lovell, June 30, 1781, *Adams Family Correspondence*, IV, 165. Franklin conceded that his relationship with Adams had been good. In the summer of 1781 he wrote that he did "not know of more than two . . . Enemies that I enjoy, viz. Lee and Izard." See Franklin to Francis Hopkinson, Sept. 12, 1781, Smyth, ed., *Writings of Franklin*, VIII, 306.

⁶⁸ *Boston Patriot*, May 15, 1811, reprinted in *Works of Adams*, I, 649. This quotation is Adams's summary of Lovell's comment that it "is needless to turn Well diggers" to fathom the actions of Vergennes and Franklin in mid-1781. "[Y]ou will be at very little Loss to come at the Clue of this Labyrinth," and in cipher he added "Gravier" (Vergennes). See Lovell to Adams, June 21, 1781, in Smith et al., eds., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, XVII, 339-340.

⁶⁹ *Boston Patriot*, May 11, 15, 1811, reprinted in *Works of Adams*, I, 651; Adams to Lee, Oct. 10, 1782, reel 107, AFP Microfilm; Adams to Henry Jackson, Nov. 17, 1782, reel 110, *ibid.*; Adams to Abigail Adams, Apr. 16, 1783, reel 360, *ibid.*; *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, III, 37-38.

⁷⁰ Herbert E. Klingelhofer, ed., "Matthew Ridley's Diary During the Peace Negotiations of 1782," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XX (1963), 123; Adams to John Trumbull, Apr. 25, 1790, reel 115, AFP Microfilm.

William Lee wrote from Philadelphia about the diminution of congressional authority. Lovell wrote early in 1781: "we are bankrupt with a mutinous army."⁷¹

The "Times are pregnant," Adams remarked at the outset of 1781. He knew that the crisis had arrived. Despite the crushing events of 1780 he remained optimistic. In December 1780 the British government issued an order-in-council that was tantamount to a declaration of war against Holland, and the Royal Navy commenced seizing Dutch ships. Adams immediately resonated with hope that others might enter the war to protect their Dutch trade. "Russia, Sweden, Holland, France, Spain, and America, all at war against England at once!" he exulted. Moreover, for all the woes that plagued the allies, he reminded correspondents that the North ministry likewise faced mounting economic problems. He placed hope in reform and peace movements in England. He was also buoyed by news of partisan resistance in the South. Following the debacle at Charleston, Congressman William Churchill Houston told him that the loss of the city had only aroused the American citizenry to fight harder. Word of the American victory at King's Mountain, which reached him in January 1781, seemed to confirm Houston's judgment. Adams had always doubted Britain's ability to subdue a rebellion on a continent as vast as North America. He certainly did not believe that the small army under Lord Cornwallis could conquer much territory. In fact, he observed that Cornwallis had fewer men than Burgoyne at Saratoga.⁷² But he never wavered in his belief that the key to victory was coordinated action of the French navy and the armies of Washington and Rochambeau. Although the prospects appeared slim for such a combination in 1781, Adams presciently told a correspondent, "I fancy the British Troops will have enough of them, before long . . . Cornwallis's Fortune, is to be made next."⁷³

On or about November 26, 1781, the word that Adams had awaited reached Amsterdam. Washington and Rochambeau, with a French fleet under comte de Grasse, had achieved a decisive victory at Yorktown. Adams's military advice had been proven correct. He quietly rejoiced in this "most masterly" Franco-American endeavor, allowing himself a barely perceptible boast: "Our allies have this year adopted a system which . . . I have longed prayed for."⁷⁴

⁷¹ Digges to Adams, Oct. 10, Nov. 8, 17, Dec. 12, 1781, reel 353, AFP Microfilm; Gerry to Adams, Jan. 10, 1781, reel 354, *ibid.*; Cranch to Adams, Jan. 18, 1782, *ibid.*; Rush to Adams, Jan. 21, 1781, *ibid.*; Tudor to Adams, Feb. 5, 1781, *ibid.*; Lee to Adams, Dec., 17, 1780, reel 353, *ibid.*; Lovell to Adams, Jan. 2, 1781, Smith et al., eds., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, XVI, 537. On the naval war see Dull, *French Navy and American Independence*, 191.

⁷² Adams to Jenings, Jan. 3, 20, Apr. 27, 1781, reel 354, AFP Microfilm; Adams to Cooper, Dec. 9, 1780, reel 102, *ibid.*; Adams to Dumas, Jan. 25, 1781, *Works of Adams*, VII, 361; Adams to Francis Dana, Jan. 18, 1781, *ibid.*, 354; Adams to President of Congress, Dec. 31, 1780, *ibid.*, 348-349; Houston to Adams, July 11, 1780, Smith et al., eds., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, XV, 430.

⁷³ Adams to Franklin, Oct. 14, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 316; Adams to Jenings, Apr. 27, 1781, reel 354, AFP Microfilm.

⁷⁴ Adams to Jay, Nov. 26, 28, 1781, *Works of Adams*, VII, 484, 486; Adams to Dana,

Within a few weeks of the news from Virginia, Great Britain opened unofficial peace talks with Franklin at Passy. On April 19, 1782, Holland recognized the United States. In the autumn, Adams negotiated a loan and commercial treaty with the Netherlands; in October he traveled to France to join Franklin and Jay in the negotiations that resulted in the preliminary peace treaty with Great Britain, signed on November 30.⁷⁵

John Adams, diplomat, was not flawless. His paramount shortcoming, as numerous scholars have indicated, was his indiscretion.⁷⁶ He needed, at times, a measure of Franklin's taciturnity. This was especially true during his exchanges with Vergennes in mid-1780. The foreign minister, he later wrote, "fell into a passion, and wrote me a passionate and ungentlemanly reply. I was piqued" and responded with "a gently tingling rejoinder." Characteristically, decades later Adams still believed that he had acted properly. To have failed to champion the interests of his country, Adams wrote in 1811, would have constituted a breach of duty.⁷⁷

If Adams had his foibles, the same can be said of every major American envoy during the Revolution. Arthur Lee, emotional, cantankerous, and brash, did not work well with others.⁷⁸ Ralph Izard, appointed commissioner to Tuscany, was, as Adams remarked, "ruined by Prejudices and by Passions."⁷⁹ John Jay, described by a contemporary as "obstinate" and "dogmatical," was vain, unbending, and given to a malign suspiciousness.⁸⁰ Silas Deane fatally mixed his public responsibilities with his private business pursuits.⁸¹ Benjamin Franklin and his colleagues blundered so often and so egregiously in 1777 that they aroused the ire of Vergennes and at times discredited the American cause.⁸² Nor was Franklin's subsequent service unblemished. He did not take

Dec. 14, 1781, *ibid.*, 493.

⁷⁵ On Adams's activities in 1782 see Smith, *Adams*, I, 503–526, 533–535; Hutson, *Adams and Diplomacy*, 102–116; and Ferling, *Adams*, 237–246. On the negotiations that led to preliminary treaty see Morris, *Peacemakers*, 248–410.

⁷⁶ Dull describes Adams as "blustering" and given to "gaucheries" in *Franklin the Diplomat: The French Mission*, American Philosophical Society, *Transactions*, LXXII, pt. 1 (Philadelphia, 1982), 68, 69, and suggests that he "acted as if good manners were a sign of weakness" in "Benjamin Franklin and the Nature of American Diplomacy," *International History Review*, V (1983), 355. Morris writes that Adams "never learned to conceal his inner feelings. He was outspoken to the point of being downright quarrelsome." The same author notes his "habit of letting his tongue get the better of his judgment" (*Peacemakers*, 191–192). Corwin refers to Adams's "unfortunate personal qualities," especially a "most egregious lack of tact" (*French Policy and the American Alliance*, 295, 276). Finally, Bemis portrays Adams as "brusque" and possessed of an "irascible temper" (*Diplomacy of the American Revolution*, 104, 176).

⁷⁷ *Boston Patriot*, May 15, 1811, reprinted in *Works of Adams*, I, 655.

⁷⁸ Louis W. Potts, *Arthur Lee: Virtuous Revolutionary* (Baton Rouge, La., 1981), 135, 145, 199, 225. Potts argues that Lee was paranoid in the medical sense.

⁷⁹ *Adams Diary and Autobiography*, II, 346.

⁸⁰ Hutson, "American Negotiators," 62–64; Morris, *Peacemakers*, 248, quotation on 300.

⁸¹ Stinchcombe, *American Revolution and the French Alliance*, 39.

⁸² Dull writes that "the history of the American mission [in 1777] was an account of

adequate precautions to secure his office from spies, was artless—"schoolboyish" in the estimation of one scholar—in the pursuit of his own intelligence operations, used his influence to secure an important post for an inept and inefficient grandson, and seldom apprised Congress of affairs in Europe. Moreover, Franklin aroused the enmity of virtually every American diplomat with whom he served. Lee, Izard, Francis Dana, and Adams grew to loathe Franklin, whom Izard called "one of the most unprincipled Men upon Earth." His shortcomings were noted by his opposite numbers as well. Vergennes, for instance, thought Franklin displayed "an apathy incompatible with the affairs with which he is charged," while a British intelligence official reported on his "usual apathy." By late 1780 many in Congress, noting Franklin's apparent lethargy and presumed servility to the French court, wished to recall him, although political realities precluded such a course. Instead, Congress appointed John Laurens special envoy to request a new French loan, a task it doubted Franklin could accomplish.⁸³

Yet these envoys were not a shameful lot. There was no school for diplomats, and before the American Revolution few means existed by which an American could acquire practical training in the art of diplomacy. Thus each of America's diplomats was inexperienced, and none more so than Adams when he arrived in France in 1778. Franklin, Lee, and Deane had business backgrounds that provided training in negotiations, and Franklin had served several colonies as an agent to England before 1774. Adams had been a successful lawyer in competitive Boston and an effective congressman; these qualities, which had served him in provincial courtrooms and congressional corridors and included a tendency toward disputation, better than average oratorical skills, and an infinite capacity for work, did not guarantee success in diplomacy.⁸⁴

Even so, during his first mission to France in 1778–1779 Adams successfully managed the affairs of America's badly divided diplomatic team and provided Congress with keen analyses of European events. In addition, the commissioners, following his lead, adopted a more assertive stance toward the French government. Furthermore, Adams's service in Holland, as well as his presence in negotiating the peace treaty with Britain in 1782, resulted in the achievement of Congress's objectives. The notion that Adams was a flawed diplomat is based almost entirely on his confrontation with Vergennes in the summer of 1780.⁸⁵

failure and ineptness"; *Franklin the Diplomat*, 19–26.

⁸³ Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia*, 288–289, 294; Stourzh, *Franklin and American Foreign Policy*, 133, 153; Dull, *Franklin the Diplomat*, 65; Stinchcombe, *American Revolution and the French Alliance*, 140; *Boston Patriot*, May 15, 1811, reprinted in *Works of Adams*, I,

⁸⁴ On Adams's legal career see the introductory essay in Kinvin Wroth and Hillier B. Zobel, eds., *Legal Papers of John Adams*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), I, lii–xciv, and Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York, 1989), 82–109. On Adams in Congress see Smith, *Adams*, I, 163–348; Shaw, *Character of Adams*, 76–105; and Ferling, *Adams*, 105–182.

⁸⁵ Adams ultimately acknowledged his error in this incident. Writing 31 years later,

In most respects Adams conducted his affairs in France according to the set of rules followed by successful eighteenth-century diplomats. Although he wrote propaganda pieces for the French government's secretly run periodical, *Affaires de l'Angleterre et de l'Amérique*, and for the *Mercur de France*, published by the foreign bureau, he never sought to arouse public opinion to sway the French government. In addition, Adams neither courted Vergennes's political rivals nor sought to influence him by manipulating his subordinates. Distasteful as he found them, he abided by Vergennes's directives not to divulge to London the purpose of his mission. He failed to establish a relationship of trust with Vergennes, but, given the foreign minister's misguided suspicion that Adams disliked the alliance, such a feat was beyond his grasp, even had he been blessed with the sweetest disposition.⁸⁶

Adams possessed strengths that served him well as a diplomat. He could be daring at the same moment that he acted according to convention. He urged that American envoys be sent to Europe's capitals to seek aid, a course that Franklin denounced as an undignified "suiting for Alliances." Yet on occasion Adams's plan succeeded. He secured a loan from Holland, and Arthur Lee obtained gunpowder, clothing, and nearly 200,000 livres from Spain.⁸⁷ More important, Adams brought to diplomacy an ingrained skepticism born of his understanding of human nature. He divined the differences in French and American interests, and he understood the folly of placing perfect trust in one's ally as well as of failing to urge a course of action to secure the objectives of the nation he represented. From 1776, when he drafted the Model Treaty, to the gloomy, menacing months of 1780–1781, he repeatedly demonstrated his awareness of the dangers that could ensue from dependency on France and the opportunities that would flow from independent action.

Adams was keenly aware of the difficulties confronting the Continental Army, the woeful economic state of the new nation, and the temperament of the American citizenry and its Congress. By 1780, he knew that the success of the Revolution was imperiled. Furthermore, he not only understood the character of the war but also grasped the connection between military and diplomatic policy. He knew how to win the war, and with remarkable precision between 1778 and 1781 he laid out the formula for victory that the allied armies and the French navy would successfully employ at Yorktown. Indeed, in his final letter to Vergennes in July 1780—the communication that led the foreign minister to terminate their relationship—Adams urged France to send a fleet from the West Indies to join with the armies of Washington and Rochambeau. "This is the true plan which is finally to humble the English," he had proph-

he said that he should have merely dispatched Vergennes's correspondence to Congress. See *Boston Patriot*, May 15, 1811, reprinted in *Works of Adams*, I, 655.

⁸⁶ See Dull, "Franklin and the Nature of American Diplomacy," 353–355, on correct diplomatic procedures. According to Stinchcombe, Vergennes "found [Adams] personally repugnant and had long suspected [him] of being disloyal to the alliance" (*American Revolution and the French Alliance*, 155).

⁸⁷ Franklin to Lee, Mar. 21, 1777, Smyth, ed., *Writings of Franklin*, VII, 35; Dull, *Franklin the Diplomat*, 14.

sied. Vergennes listened neither then nor later. As late as March 1781 the foreign minister continued to dream of an invasion of England, and when that proved impossible he fastened on the idea of assisting Spain in a summer campaign in Jamaica. Fortunately for the United States, both Washington and La Luzerne appealed for naval superiority and emphasized the fragile military situation in the South; the French council of state thereupon agreed to send part of de Grasse's fleet north.⁸⁸ What occurred thereafter confirmed a remark that Adams had made earlier in the war. His diplomacy would succeed and America's interests would be safeguarded only if the allies were victorious on the battlefield; America's soldiers, he said, were the nation's best diplomats.⁸⁹

Adams was among the most prescient and far-sighted Americans of his day with regard to the long-term national interest of the United States. His grasp of the nature of the war, the realities of the alliance, and the national interest of his country dictated the diplomacy he pursued. Whether as provincial activist, congressman, or diplomat, Adams's objectives remained constant. He spoke of them never better, or more succinctly, than in a letter to the president of Congress soon after he arrived in Paris in 1780: "Let Us remember what is due to ourselves and to our Posterity. . . . Let Us above all things avoid as much as possible Entangling ourselves with their Wars or Politicks. Our Business with them and theirs with Us, is Commerce, not Politicks, much less War. America has been the Sport of European Wars and Politicks long enough."⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Adams to Vergennes, July 27, 1780, *Works of Adams*, VII, 242; Dull, *French Navy and American Independence*, 216-228, 238-239; George Washington to John Laurens, Jan. 15, 1781, in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed. *The Writings of George Washington*, 39 vols. (Washington, D. C., 1931-1944), XXI, 108.

⁸⁹ Adams to Knox, Sept. 19, 1779, *Adams Papers*, VIII, 152.

⁹⁰ Adams to President of Congress, Apr. 18, 1780, reel 98, AFP Microfilm. The words "as much as possible" are interlined in the ms. This quotation is from the second and much longer of two letters from Adams to the President of Congress under this date.