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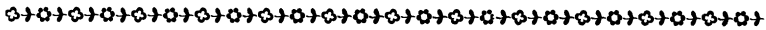
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Samuel Adams and Shays's Rebellion

WILLIAM PENCAK

SAMUEL ADAMS has long been celebrated as a hero in America's struggle for independence. In the late 1760s and early 1770s, when he served as moderator of Boston town meeting and clerk of the House of Representatives, his manoeuvres and manifestoes mobilized the people for resistance and ultimately contributed to the success of the American Revolution. By the 1780s, however, Adams appeared to be no more than an aging, has-been politician. His decline is first noticeable in 1780, when his erstwhile ally Governor John Hancock ousted him as secretary of state for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, whose constitution Sam, cousin John Adams, and James Bowdoin had just written. In 1787 he finished third in the race for lieutenant-governor, and in 1788 he launched an unsuccessful bid for Congress and reluctantly bowed to Boston's mechanics, whose public demonstration pressured their former leader into supporting the new Constitution of the United States. Only a rapprochement with Hancock in 1789 led to Adams's election as lieutenant-governor. And only upon Hancock's death in 1793 did Adams assume the executive chair, which he retained through three subsequent elections, after which he retired in 1797.¹

Despite his apparent eclipse in the 1780s, Adams's influence remained strong even then, but the positions he advo-

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¹See Matthew Secombe, "From Revolution to Republic: The Later Political Career of Samuel Adams, 1774-1803" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1978) for the best account of Adams's later career; see also Paul Goodman, *The Democratic-Republicans of Massachusetts: Politics in a Young Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 8, 20, 22, 26.

cated seemed directly to contradict those he had earlier espoused. As a Massachusetts state senator representing Boston, he played a key role in forming Governor James Bowdoin's hard-line policy to suppress Shays's Rebellion. Issuing a cry that left no room for doubt—"in monarchies the crime of treason and rebellion may admit of being pardoned or lightly punished, but the man who dares rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death"—the unrelenting Adams urged the vacillating Bowdoin to use military force against the rebels and to recommend harsh punishments to the courts.² Historians have had difficulty reconciling the two aspects of Adams—the champion of rebellion and, later, its enemy—but a marked consistency in his views is obvious if we examine the relevant documents, including an anonymous letter of 24 August 1786 printed in *The Independent Chronicle*.

The Massachusetts Council records of 7 September 1786 list Adams as the first senator with whom Governor Bowdoin consulted when the Shaysites closed the courts of Worcester and Hampshire Counties. Less than a week later, Adams moderated a Boston town meeting that drafted a "Circular Letter" to the state's towns denouncing the court closings as acts of treason and the conventions of the western farmers as unconstitutional. In February 1787, the Massachusetts Senate appointed Adams its sole spokesman—to be joined later by Caleb Strong and Seth Washburne of the House—to draw up the official "Proclamation of Rebellion." That same month, he headed a joint Congressional Committee that labeled Shays's published plea for a truce hypocritical.³

Adams's outrage against and role in suppressing the aggrieved Massachusetts farmers at first seems strange, consid-

²William V. Wells, *The Life and Public Service of Samuel Adams*, 3 vols. (1865; reprinted, Freeport, N.Y.: Book for Libraries Press, 1969), 3:246; J. R. Pole, *Political Representation in England and the Origins of the American Republic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), p. 191.

³Council Minutes, Massachusetts Archives, vol. 189, pp. 9, 105, 108, 117; *Massachusetts Centinel*, 13 September 1786.

ering he had just recently led the equally aggrieved Bostonians to Revolution. But his position reflected his exaggerated, even paranoid, worries for the security and reputation of the new republic and was consistent with the political ideology he had espoused since the late 1740s. During the 1780s, Adams saw in every political issue confronting the new nation a serious threat to its survival. In 1783, when Continental officers established the Order of the Cincinnati, Adams asked cousin John, "will not they, being an order of *military* men, too soon proceed to enforce their resolutions, not only to the lessening the dignity of the states in the eyes of Europe, but the putting an end to their free existence?" Stressing the prerequisites of independence, he urged "a punctual fulfillment" of Revolutionary debts. Correspondingly, to avoid the economic and cultural dependence that he maintained would end in political slavery, the young nation should be prudent in resuming trade with British merchants, lest the reintroduction of luxuries corrupt "those among us who are still hankering after the onions of Egypt." The expected return of exiled loyalists also gave Adams pause: "should we not guard ourselves against British intrigues and factions, her emissaries, under the guise of merchants, repentant refugees, schoolmasters, and other characters, unless care is taken may effect another revolution." And to Virginian Richard Henry Lee he gave an admonitory history lesson that summarized his worst fears for the confederated states: "the Commonwealth of England lasted twelve years and then the exiled King was restored with all the rage and madness of royalty:—a caution to the citizens of the United States."⁴

Given Adams's tendency to see the demise of the republic with each new issue, it is not surprising that he interpreted

⁴Samuel Adams, *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, ed. Harry A. Cushing, 4 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904–8), 4:296 (see also pp. 290 and 311) on the Order of the Cincinnati; Samuel to John Adams, 4 November 1783, 4:289 (see also p. 311) for debts; and for British influence, see Samuel Adams to Arthur Lee, 21 November 1782, 4:275, and to Richard Henry Lee, 23 December 1784, 4:309 (see also p. 323).

the protests of Massachusetts' western farmers as treasonous. In the spring of 1784, when remarking on the conventions that had been held that year and two years earlier to demand a mitigation of taxes, farm foreclosures, and lawsuits for debt, Adams bypassed the westerners' grievances to criticize their methods: "Bodies of men, under any denomination whatever, who convene themselves for the purpose of deliberating upon and adopting measures which are cognizable by legislatures only will, if continued, bring legislatures to contempt and dissolution." Far from representing quasi-legitimate protests against hardship, in the tradition of colonial crowds, the conventioners, Adams feared, were harbingers of social and political chaos. Much as his loyalist foes had done with the revolutionaries two decades earlier, Adams attributed the unrest to "designing men . . . imposing upon credulous though well-meaning persons" to instigate "discord and animosity," and he urged condemnation of the protesters to curb the spread of their ideas to the general public. In his arguments against the farmers' conventions, Adams advanced a theory he would later use to brand Shays's Rebellion as treasonable and subversive of the state's constitution:

County Conventions and popular committees served an excellent purpose when they were first in practice. No one therefore needs to regret the share he may then have had in them. But . . . that as we now have constitutional and regular governments and all our men in authority depend upon the annual and free elections of the people, we are safe without them. To say the least, they are become useless. . . . If the public affairs are illy conducted, if dishonest or incapable men have crept unawares into government, it is happy for us, that under our American constitutions the remedy is at hand, and in the power of the great body of the people. Due circumspection and wisdom at the next elections will set all right, without the need of any self-created conventions or societies of men whatever.⁵

⁵Samuel Adams to Noah Webster, 30 April 1784, *Writings*, 4:305.

Thus, Adams proclaimed, for republics to survive, divisive, "self-created" political organizations could not be allowed to exist, and only individual appeals to the legislature or personal efforts to elect different representatives were appropriate expressions of dissent in the still precarious republican experiment. Throughout his political life Adams remained adamant on this point; he used it to oppose both the farmers' conventions of 1784 and Shays's Rebellion in 1786, and he would use it a decade later to denounce the rebels in Pennsylvania's Whiskey Rebellion. Addressing the General Court in 1795, Adams rejoiced that "our Constitution provides a safe and easy method to redress any real grievances. . . . What excuse can there be for forcible opposition to the laws" when "if any law shall prove oppressive in its operation, the future deliberations of a freely elected representation will afford a constitutional remedy?"⁶ By assuming a rigid stance from the day the Revolution ended until his death, Adams supported a concept of representation that ignored the possibility that a majority would oppress a minority, that individuals might not have equal access to representation, or that representatives might not always act in the people's best interests. For Adams, the Revolution had solved the problem of representation once and for all.

While Adams's main preoccupation in the early 1780s was that the Confederation might, to its peril, succumb to the many threats pressing in upon it, he was also concerned that the new nation wear its liberty well, that its citizens show both contemporaries and future generations what good use could be made of the precious commodity. "The World has given us an exalted character, and thus laid on us a heavy tax," he wrote Richard Henry Lee, referring to the republic's historical destiny rather than its financial woes. And when speaking of Congress in 1784, Adams "prayed God they may be His honored instrument in exalting to the highest pitch of human happiness that people who have tes-

⁶Samuel Adams to the Legislature of Massachusetts, 16 January 1795, *Writings*, 4:373.

tified to the oppressed world, that by patience, fortitude, and perseverance the iron rod can be wrested from the arms of a tyrant, and that all nations may be free, if they will magnanimously contend for their liberty." Adams's letters of the 1780s continually express his desire that "we may stand as a nation in a respectable character," or ask, "How should we appear in the eyes of the virtuous and wise?" "Better it would have been for us" declared Adams in a letter to Horatio Gates in 1783, "to have fallen in our highly famed struggle for our rights, or even to have remained in our ignoble state of bondage hoping for better times, than now to become a contemptible nation."⁷

For Adams, then, Shays's Rebellion was not a struggle of debtors and creditors, or of east and west, or even of law and order. It was the crucible in which would be decided forever the fate of the world's only contemporary experiment in free government. A victory by the rebels would not only bring an end to the republic but brand with ignominy the men who had so foolishly thrown it away. That Adams's hard-line policies were adopted, however reluctantly, by the General Court in 1787—after four months of threats, moderate concessions, and efforts to arrest ringleaders—illustrates his success in defining the issues for his fellow legislators and citizens. For a few critical months in 1787, Adams was able to represent the farmers' uprising as a serious and treasonable offense against the new nation rather than a limited protest by long-suffering citizens.

Governor Bowdoin's first proclamation against the court closings, issued 2 September 1786, mirrored both Adams's thought and his close relationship with the governor. Bowdoin lost no time in denouncing the insurgents' "treasonable proceedings," which "must tend to subvert all law and government, dissolve our excellent Constitution, and introduce universal riot, anarchy, and confusion." Not surprisingly, Adams's political theories, life-long propensity to see the

⁷Samuel Adams to Richard Henry Lee, 23 December 1784, *Writings*, 4:309–10; to Noah Webster, 30 April 1784, 4:305–6; to Horatio Gates, 2 May 1783, 4:285.

State of Nature lurking behind any disorder, and worries about the new nation's and Massachusetts' reputation and destiny all found voice within the governor's proclamation:

I most solemnly call upon the good subjects of the Commonwealth, as they value the blessings of freedom, sovereignty, and independence, which at the expense of so much blood and treasure they have purchased; as they regard their faith, which, in the sight of God and the world, they pledged to one another and the other people of the United States, when they adopted the present happy Constitution, the form of government which now so happily subsists among them; as they would not become contemptible in the eyes of other nations in the view of whom they have risen to glory and empire.⁸

The characteristic references to "eyes" and "views" in this passage suggests that Adams's contributions to the document may have been direct. There is no doubt, however, that he wrote the "Circular Letter" which soon followed. Shortly after Bowdoin's pronouncement, Adams was authorized to write the letter by a Boston town meeting that he himself had asked to be called and had moderated. The term "Circular Letter" harked back to a 1768 document, which Adams may also have written, urging the colonies to stand fast against British oppressors who had brought soldiers into Boston and dissolved the General Court. By invoking such charged events, Adams undoubtedly hoped to impress upon Massachusetts communities that they now faced a crisis of comparable urgency.

The Circular Letter fully elaborated Adams's political views on the conditions required for republics to survive. With the end of British rule, Massachusetts "had it in our election to remain in a State of Nature, or to order for ourselves such form of government as we chose." A government having been established in which "all authority is from the people," the law of the people must then be obeyed. To seek redress of grievances, one must appeal to the legislature, for

⁸Massachusetts Archives, vol. 189, pp. 3-4.

“let the majority be ever so much in the wrong, is there any [other] remedy within the reach of nature, compliant with the ideas of society and government? To say the majority shall not govern, is saying, either that we will reduce ourselves to a State of Nature, or reject the ideas of civil liberty, and establish despotism and a state of warfare.”⁹

The image of a State of Nature was an Adams trademark. In 1747, when he and some friends established *The Independent Advertiser* to protest naval impressments and Governor William Shirley’s war policies, Adams regarded *any* usurpation of popular rights by the British or provincial government as a breach of the fundamental Lockean compact which guaranteed man’s “life, liberties, and estates” and therefore justified resistance, if not rebellion. The twenty-five-year-old Adams insisted that the people “have an undoubted right to use the powers belonging to that State [of Nature]”—that is to say, self-defense. A quarter-century later, in “A State of the Rights of the Colonists,” Adams argued that “All men have a right to remain in a State of Nature as long as they please; and in case of intolerable oppression, civil or religious, to leave the society they belong to.” In the 1780s, Adams still appealed to the State of Nature; however, instead of being the last resort to which oppressive government forced aggrieved subjects, it had become the chaos and anarchy into which depraved rebels thrust a just republic.¹⁰

Adams’s “Circular Letter” not only stressed the perils of a State of Nature but offered a standard Adams solution to common problems. Insisting that the farmers had only themselves to blame, he asserted that they had spent beyond their means, incurred debts, and lived luxuriously. He recommended “industry and frugality.” He also condemned “the vast quantity of goods imported, [and] the too great

⁹*Massachusetts Centinel*, 13 September 1786.

¹⁰*The Independent Advertiser*, 8 February 1747; [Samuel Adams], “A State of the Rights of the Colonists” (1772), *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Town Records, 1770 Through 1777* (Boston: City of Boston, 1887), p. 95.

profusion of money” as the real causes of the state’s distresses, little realizing that money and luxurious wares seldom made their way to the impoverished farmers in Worcester and Hampshire Counties. The real issues did not center on personal difficulties but on the Commonwealth, indeed on its very survival. The state, as a member of a larger polity, faced “the very important question—shall we exist as a nation upon the earth?” The letter then concluded with a peroration comparing political traitors to the murderers of Christ.¹¹

The anonymous letter from “A Citizen,” which appeared in *The Independent Chronicle* in late August and thus anticipated the “Circular Letter,” is almost certainly by Adams. It carries the “Circular Letter” one step further, arguing that a revolutionary republic that failed to support its new institutions would not merely fall into a State of Nature but would be continually threatened by fresh revolutions. “Who will answer to the honest but deluded men, who are now blindly promoting such conventions for the security of their property,” the letter questioned, “and the future enjoyment of their personal rights, should another revolution result from these assaults?” Once basic rights had been secured, only adherence to majority rule could check the perpetual threat of revolution. And, only “virtue,” or love of country, could provide majorities the compassion to rule wisely and minorities the common cause to which their own interests must be subordinated: “Let men of principle who love their country and regard the happiness of society, unite with men of property, of wisdom, of influence, to counteract the nefarious conduct of the desperate and unprincipled,” pleaded “A Citizen.” The letter then predicted that not only the rich but people throughout the Commonwealth would “rouse from a lethargy fraught with the most certain destruction to save their country.” If they did not put down the insurgency, their failure would amount to “a declaration that government is dissolved and the Constitution at an

¹¹*Massachusetts Centinel*, 13 September 1786.

end.” The author then warned of the tyranny arising from anarchy and evoked the spectre of future generations betrayed by their putative benefactors: “Generations now unborn shall feel more powerfully the effects of our inactivity, while sweating under the impositions of some daring rascal, who disdaining the bond of society, shall erect a tyranny on the tomb of our confederation.”¹²

Adams’s efforts against Shays’s Rebellion culminated in his chairmanship of the three-person General Court committee that wrote the “Proclamation of Rebellion” in February 1787. To clinch the case that the Shaysites had fomented “a wicked unnatural rebellion,” the Court stressed that it had passed “lenient and merciful” laws “to quiet the minds of the disaffected” during the five months before the Battle of Springfield in late January. In the interim, Adams claimed, “every complaint of grievance was attended to, with disposition to grant all that relief which could be afforded consistent with equal justice and the dignity of government,” but men who had remained with Shays later testified that the state’s concessions were either “too little, too late” or, indeed, a mockery. The threats, efforts to arrest ringleaders, and concessions of the state government had all failed to cause the rebels to lay down their arms and receive pardons.¹³ The legislature was thus forced to pursue its last resort against a group that, “in forming committees to form their adherents into regular military camps, properly officered, thereby to establish within the Commonwealth, a standing force, beyond the control of, and for the express purpose of appearing in arms against the Constitutional government of this state,” signaled its “settled determination to subvert the Constitution and put an end to the government of the Commonwealth.”¹⁴

¹²*The Independent Chronicle*, 24 August 1786.

¹³Massachusetts Archives, vol. 189, p. 105. The best account of the rebellion’s development is Robert Feer’s “Shays’ Rebellion” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1959).

¹⁴Massachusetts Archives, vol. 189, p. 105.

Although Adams enjoyed a brief political triumph in early 1787 as a result of the easy success of the military campaign to dispense with the Shaysites, both he and Bowdoin were strongly repudiated at the polls that May. Even with the rebels disfranchised, John Hancock returned to power and Adams's political fortunes soured. During the next two years Adams lost elections for lieutenant-governor of Massachusetts and for the United States Congress. Massachusetts had recovered its glory and preserved the republic but not by punishing the traitors harshly and insisting that minorities bow unequivocally to majority rule. As George Richards Minot, author of the rebellion's first history noted, "the manner in which these difficulties were suppressed does much honor to government." "The lenity of government," in which only a few looters were executed and most rebels suffered only temporary disfranchisement, he claimed, "must attach every man to a Constitution . . . which governs its subjects without oppression and reclaims them without severity." Shays's Rebellion was quickly transformed into a symbol of how Massachusetts, by conciliating rather than crushing dissenters, could prevent protest from deteriorating into anarchy and enable a republic to survive despite the conflicting interests of its citizens. Adams's harsh vision of adherence to majority rule gave way to an appreciation of the legitimacy of competing interests and their right to organize constituencies *within* a republican state in a manner that would not necessarily threaten the government itself.¹⁵

Although Adams never came to terms with the legitimacy of organized dissent, neither did most of "the Old Revolutionaries" who fought the partisan battles of the 1790s.¹⁶ But after the rebellions in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania,

¹⁵George Richards Minot, *The History of the Insurrections in Massachusetts in the Year 1786 and the Rebellion Consequent Thereon* (Boston, 1788), p. 192.

¹⁶The phrase "Old Revolutionaries" is Pauline Maier's, who discusses Adams along with others of his generation, in *The Old Revolutionaries, Political Lives in the Age of Samuel Adams* (New York: Knopf, 1980).

and after the fierce struggles between Federalists and Jeffersonians, that the nation had survived without major bloodshed or political upheaval may have eased the old curmudgeon's mind. In the last extant letter of his life, save one, the anxiety seems to have given way to optimism, as he asks Thomas Jefferson,

Is there not, my friend, reason to believe, that the principles of Democratic Republicanism are already better understood than they were before; and that by the continued efforts of men of science and virtue, they will extend more and more till the turbulent and destructive spirit of war shall cease?—The proud oppressors over the earth shall be totally broken down and those classes of men who have hitherto been the victims of their rage and cruelty shall perpetually enjoy perfect peace and safety until time shall be no more.¹⁷

In these words we once again hear Adams the revolutionary predicting the triumph of republican governments throughout the world rather than the fearful Adams of the 1780s who doubted even the immediate survival of the new republic.

¹⁷Samuel Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 18 November 1801, *Writings*, 4:411. For Adams's role as a party leader, see Goodman, *Democratic-Republicans*, pp. 51, 56, 61, 71, 82, 96.

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